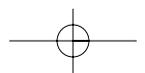
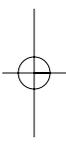
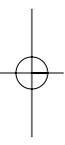


THE EDGE OF REASON



THE EDGE OF REASON



MELINDA SNODGRASS



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK

New York

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

THE EDGE OF REASON

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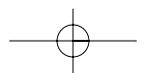
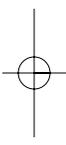
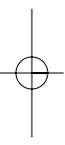
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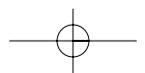
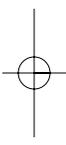
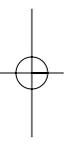
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*For Carl D. Keim, who always believed in me,
and therefore made everything possible*



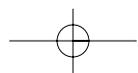
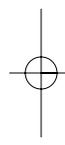
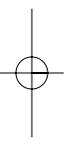


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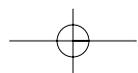
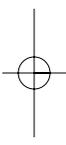
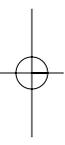
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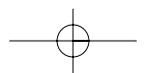
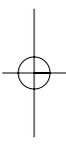
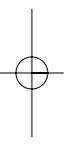




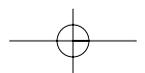
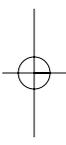
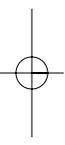
From the sleep of reason monsters are born.

Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes





THE EDGE OF REASON



Chapter

ONE

IN her misery Rhiana Davinovitch decided she wanted to die. She had been running for three hours now. Her hunters were slow, which meant she kept well ahead, but unlike her human muscles and tendons, they never tired. Eventually they would wear her down and she would die. That time had just about arrived.

Rhiana drew in a shuddering breath across a throat made tight and sore from exhaustion and raked the hair out of her eyes. Despite the chill of the mid-November night, her hair was moist and slick against fingertips aching with cold.

For the first time in an hour she looked up from the sidewalk, where her gaze had been desperately focused, as she tried to place each foot carefully in front of the other without tripping or falling, or without losing the steady rhythm of her half-walk half-run.

She was surprised to find herself in the uptown business plaza set between Albuquerque's two main shopping malls. She stood in the

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median of Uptown Boulevard, which ran between the Morgan Stanley office on the north and the City Center and Uptown Center buildings on the south.

She had escaped from the trailer in the South Valley in the early evening. They had been keeping her, hoping she'd finish the work, but after her escape they seemed to have decided that silencing her was more important. So they'd summoned the hunters. She'd tried hitchhiking, but no one would stop. Once she reached the populated areas of Albuquerque she had hammered on doors, but no one had answered. She realized that the creatures who hunted her had trapped her in a field of darkness and fear that no human would enter. No one could help her.

She reckoned she had covered somewhere between fifteen and seventeen miles. She could go no further. Without volition her hand went into the pocket of her coat. The metal of the pennies was sharply cold against her skin. If she could feed she might be able to fight, but there were no people nearby for her to use. A wave of cold brushed against the exposed skin of her face and hands. She glanced up at the bare branches of the trees. They stretched motionless toward the cloud-filled sky. Rhiana looked to the west and watched as one streetlight after another blinked out. The exterior lights on the Uptown City building faded and died.

They were coming.

Officer Richard Oort had been following the winding trail of darkness from Rio Bravo in Albuquerque's South Valley. He kept checking with PNM, New Mexico's electric and gas company, who kept assuring him the power was on and running even as he sat in darkness. He was doing that now from his position in the parking lot of the Morgan Stanley building.

"I'm telling you there's a power outage." The plastic of the hand-held mike smelled faintly of hamburgers. Richard wrinkled his nose against the stale odor and pulled the mike away from his face.

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The voice of the dispatcher came crackling back over the car's radio. "Our computers don't show a problem."

"Well, I've got a news flash for your computers. I'm now up on Louisiana and it's black as sin. No streetlights, no traffic lights, no lights in any of the buildings. . . ." He broke off and peered through the breath-frosted front window of his parked car. It didn't seem possible, but he said it anyway.

"Even my headlights are fading."

"You never . . ." Static obliterated the word. ". . . that before," said the dispatcher.

"It hasn't happened before," Richard replied.

"Having . . . say . . . again."

The headlights failed, the engine coughed and the car shuddered as it died. Richard tried the key and nothing happened.

The hinges on the car door creaked as he pushed it open. He stepped out and took a three-sixty look. His breath puffed in white streamers. It seemed that every streetlight within a five-block radius was out.

He picked up his mobile radio from the car seat and keyed APD dispatch. "Hi, Dolores, I'm leaving the vehicle and taking a look around."

A burst of static made him jerk the radio away from his ear. Faintly he heard Dolores ask, "What . . . there?"

He made a guess at what she'd said. "I don't know. Right now there's nothing here but dark. Look, if I don't check back within ten minutes send some backup."

There was another sharp burst of static obliterating her first words. He barely heard her "Be careful."

He slipped the radio into its Velcro holder on his vest. The microphone crackled on his left shoulder. Thrusting his nightstick through the loop on his belt, he grabbed the flashlight and headed off down the sidewalk. The weight of the belt festooned with cuffs, stick and pistol left him feeling awkward.

He flashed the beam from the flashlight from side to side.

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Spindly trees encased in concrete seemed to jump toward him as the light caught them. The landscaping was professional modern, sand grass and chamisa thrusting through the gravel-filled verges between the sidewalks and the tree coffins.

As he walked a carpet of dry leaves whispered around his shoes and crackled underfoot, releasing a rich musty smell that raised childhood memories of lit fireplaces and warm cider. The light of his flashlight danced and glittered in the windows. Everything seemed fine at the Morgan Stanley building and at the small strip mall which held the bank, offices and a couple of low-end restaurants. They were cheap and convenient which meant he'd eaten in both of them.

He stopped so the crunch of the leaves wouldn't be the predominant sound. To the south he heard the occasional whine of tires and rumble of the motor of a car traveling on I-40. Otherwise there was the leaden quiet that precedes a snowstorm. He crossed the street toward the twin buildings which housed the APS Service Center.

An icy wind came sighing down from Tijeras Canyon. He pulled his coat closer around his body and crossed the street. The beam from his heavy black cop's flashlight washed across the empty parking lot. He walked toward the buildings. The click of his metal toe taps echoed off the glass, steel and concrete looming in front of him. He blinked, trying to focus, and realized that the light from the flashlight was dying.

"Well, drat." A sharp slap of the body of the light against his gloved palm produced no result. The light continued to fade with each step he took toward the building. A few moments later it died.

It was inexplicable, a feeling more than a conscious thought, but Richard found himself thumbing up the holster guard and loosening the Browning high-power pistol where it rested at his side. Immediately he felt like a fool. He had only fired the weapon at the range. Never drawn it in the three years he had served on the force. His rational mind argued with primal fear, but he couldn't quite lift his hand from the pistol's grip.

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A sharp cry of pain came from deep between the buildings. Richard jerked upright and keyed the radio. It was as dead as the flashlight. He drew his gun as he ran down the incline between the two buildings.

Now he could hear harsh breaths, and the sound of blows connecting with flesh. His eyes adjusted to the gloom, and he saw three hulking figures surrounding a smaller figure who was fighting hard, throwing kicks and punches that seemed to have no effect on the attackers.

He dropped into the approved two-handed-grip horse stance and drew down on the assailants. "Police! Back off!" There was no reaction from the three attackers. For an instant he dithered. Nothing in the manual or his experience had prepared him for this.

He raised the pistol over his head and snapped off a shot into the air. The report, trapped between the two tall buildings, was deafening, and the muzzle flash allowed him to get a look at the focus of the attack.

It was a girl. Late teens at the most. Long hair swirled darkly about her face. Sweat glistened on her skin, and her features were twisted with pain and terror. A pocket on her leather coat was torn loose. All he could tell about her attackers was that they were enormous and dressed in something dark and formfitting. They were as unimpressed with the gunshot as they had been with his shrill command.

The girl ducked under a ponderous roundhouse blow from one of her attackers. There was no more time for warnings. Richard's palms were wet with sweat and he was grateful he had the gloves to help steady his hold on the Browning. He was breathing in sharp, shallow pants. He forced himself to hold his breath, took careful aim at the back of one of the muggers and double-tapped two rounds. The first bullet fired but the muzzle flash was substantially reduced and the kick against his palm much gentler than it should have been.

Richard's attention was distracted from his target to his pistol because the second round wasn't firing. Richard had a sense it was

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lodged in the chamber of the pistol, and he tossed the gun away before it could explode in his face. He looked down the alley to see the results of his one shot and felt the breath stop in the back of his throat because the man was continuing the attack as if he hadn't been hit.

There was a hollow sense in his gut warning him that this was eerie and scary and he ought to run the other way, but he couldn't abandon her. It was like twisting ice-covered rope to force the muscles in his legs to move. He managed to break into a staggering run and headed toward the girl.

"Hang on, I'm coming," Richard yelled. His voice sounded stretched and thin and more soprano than tenor.

"HELP!" She screamed. "Help me! Help . . . me. . . ." She gasped down a breath, and ducked beneath the encircling arms.

Richard felt something under the soles of his shoes, and he realized the ground was littered with pennies.

The eye finds patterns and the mind supplies the expected description. Since he couldn't see the bulk of clothes his mind had provided the explanation of a formfitting jumpsuit. It wasn't until Richard launched himself onto the back of one of the attackers that his brain finally accepted the reality . . . *they weren't wearing clothes*. But now he was on the guy's back, and his brain had a whole new series of sensations to process.

There were odd bumps under Richard's knees, and he found himself sliding as if the man were greased. He gripped tighter with his right hand, and punched hard at the man's temple with his left. His fist sunk three inches into the man's head, and something oozed between his fingers.

He yelled in disgust, his legs lost the battle to hang on, and he slid to the ground. Lightning shot up his spine as his tailbone connected hard with the pavement.

One of the other attackers came lumbering around to face Richard. "Oh, God!" he whimpered, because what faced him wasn't a man. It was a monster.

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It was constructed of mud and sticks with a featureless blank where its face should have been. It leaned over, slow and ponderous, and reached for Richard. Ice had again encased his muscles and his mind. The only thing filling his head was a little voice frantically yammering the Lord's Prayer, except he couldn't remember any of the words past "Our Father, who art in Heaven." Another voice replaced the panicked, stammered prayer.

"When you're down you gotta roll clear so you gotta chance to get to your feet. Now roll, you motherfuckers."

The gravel voice of Sergeant Jerry Hernandez echoed through his head. Richard rolled frantically away, as a fist the size of a coal scuttle smashed into the asphalt next to his head. The monster got a grip on the back of Richard's coat. There was intense pressure in his armpits before the fabric gave way. He was left wearing the arms while the creature threw aside the body of the coat.

Change went skipping and dancing on the asphalt. The girl flung herself across Richard. Her knee hit him in the diaphragm, and he gulped like a fish as the air went out of him. At first he thought she was trying to shield him, then he realized she was scrambling after the coins.

She grabbed up a penny and balanced it on her outstretched palm. Richard had the sudden and very unpleasant sensation that something cold and wet had just been dragged across the inside of his skull. The girl stared at him with an expression that included confusion, dismay and anger. She shook her head, sucked in a deep breath, and called out in a strange language. The penny began to spin and glow, throwing out copper-colored sparks. The girl tossed the penny into the air. It hung spinning like a tiny firework.

She batted the penny toward one of their attackers. The coin struck the monster in the chest, and there was suddenly a wall of flame. Richard threw an arm over his face as the blast of heat singed his eyebrows. The other monsters reeled away from their companion. The flames died away. The creature didn't move. The girl jumped to her feet, and kicked it hard. The creature shattered.

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Richard staggered to his feet. A thread of air was beginning to trickle into his chest. He spotted the roundhouse sweeping toward the girl's head. She didn't.

He wrapped his arms around her waist, and dove sideways. He barked an elbow on the pavement. His shirt tore and his skin with it. The cut on his elbow stung like crazy and blood began trickling down his arm. The girl was on top of him. Her hair, damp with perspiration and smelling of sweat and sandalwood, snaked across his face and mouth. He noticed, distantly, that one ear held a number of earrings stretching from lobe to tip.

Richard got one knee underneath him, shoved himself upright, lifting the girl with him. It wasn't easy because she was taller than he was.

"Come on, let's get out of here!" Richard said.

"They'll just keep coming," she sobbed.

Suddenly the girl jammed her hands into his chest and shoved, hard. Richard went tottering backwards as an enormous fist cut the air in front of him. Goblets of mud splattered against his face. He came up against the side of a building; there was a window to his left. He raised his uninjured elbow, smashed it against the glass, and howled. It always looked easy in the movies. The glass broke, the hero leaped through. In fact the glass remained firmly in place and the hero's elbow hurt like hell. Richard yanked out his nightstick and swung hard. This time the glass shattered.

"Come on!"

He felt the words ripping along his throat, and he beckoned frantically to her. She darted between the monsters and ran to him. He was going to boost her through, but she braced a foot high on his thigh, the heel grinding into the muscle, grabbed his shoulder, and climbed him like a stepladder. Her head landed inside. Which left him outside. With the monsters.

Richard grabbed the windowsill. The edges of the broken glass cut through his gloves and into his palms. He gritted his teeth against the pain, planted a toe of his heavy shoe against the wall and

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boosted into a handstand flip. He landed on his feet in the office and felt the jar from his shins to the top of his head. It had been a long time since he'd done any serious gymnastics.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow," he groaned as he surveyed their surroundings.

It was some kind of nondescript office space. Computers on metal desks, chairs on casters, and office cubicles formed from carpeted panels. Briefly he wondered why the alarms weren't working, decided it was all part of the lack of light and firepower, then forgot it all as sausage-sized fingers gripped the windowsill, dripping mud from their blunt tips onto the industrial carpet. The monster hauled itself through.

"PENNY!" the girl screamed. Richard dug into his pants pocket and pulled out a handful of change. The girl frantically sorted through and emerged with three pennies.

The second monster was through the window.

The girl huddled over the pennies cupped in the palm of her hands. She muttered in that strange language again. The pennies began to spin and burn. She tossed one into the air, and batted it at the attacker. Flames exploded around the monster. The girl tottered. Richard got an arm around her, and realized they were propping each other up. Then technology decided to work. The automatic sprinkler system kicked to life, and doused the flames.

"Oh . . . damn," Richard said.

The monsters advanced.

The girl lifted her head. Water ran out of her hair and across her skin. Richard ran forward and head-butted the lead creature. If his fist had been gross, this was disgusting, and he didn't shift the monster by an inch. He lifted his head, shaking mud from his hair, and saw a fist. It connected, snapping his head around. His cheek felt like he was chewing ground glass and his neck became a column of pain. He went staggering across the room, hit the wall and fell down.

The girl held up a penny and began to chant, but she was trembling, forcing the words past chattering teeth. A small section of

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mud slid off the thigh of a monster carried in water from the sprinklers. A thin thread of hope formed. Richard scanned the walls, and spotted the glass fire box with its extinguisher and coiled fire hose about ten feet to his left.

It was like moving through wet concrete, but Richard got to his feet. He tried to run, and managed a shuffle. Still it carried him to the fire box. He moaned, clenched his teeth, and broke the glass with his less-sore elbow. Icy water ran through his hair, and dripped off the end of his nose. The monsters were a foot from the girl.

He uncoiled the fire hose, turned the spigot, and nearly lost his footing as high-pressure water gushed from the nozzle. Holding hard with both hands, he brought the stream of water onto the chest of one of the monsters. Despite the lack of a mouth, a high-pitched howl emanated from the creature, weird and inhuman. Mud went washing down its chest, carrying twigs and branches with it.

Richard aimed the water at the other creature. It also produced the horrible cry. He alternated the water back and forth between them. Rivulets of filthy water sluiced around their feet as they melted. He had a wild image of the scene at the witch's castle in *The Wizard of Oz*, and couldn't believe he was doing this. Eventually all that remained was a floor awash with brown water and floating sticks.

Abruptly the alarms began to howl and all the computers sprang to life and began an automatic reboot. Outside the streetlights snapped back on and there was a sharp explosion as the unfired cartridge in the chamber of his gun detonated. Richard began laughing hysterically. Behind him he could hear the girl's choking sobs.

A dark figure lunged through the window. The laughter died as his air choked off in fear and Richard brought the fire hose to bear. The shock of the water elicited a long string of curses in a number of languages, only three of which Richard recognized. He pulled the hose aside, and stared at the face lifting cautiously back over the windowsill. Water plastered the man's long hair to his skull and

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dripped from his beard. Judging from the patched and dirty coat and the layers of sweaters it was some homeless guy in search of a quick profit.

“Forget it, buddy. There are going to be no free computers tonight,” Richard croaked, his throat raw from exertion and yelling. Water squelched between the soles of his feet and his shoes and lapped around his ankles. He was losing sensation in his toes. Now that he had stopped exerting himself he felt the sweat trickling down his back and chest like rivulets of ice. He managed to turn the spigot and the gusher of water died to a trickle.

“How the hell did you get in here?” the homeless man asked. The voice was youthful and he spoke in a normal tone of voice. Richard couldn’t understand why he was able to hear the man clearly over the din of the alarms. “You should not have been able to walk in darkness. . . .”

The words were oddly ominous and a clattering filled Richard’s ears as his teeth began to chatter.

Yea though I walk through the valley of darkness.

He was back in Sunday school at the strict Lutheran church his family attended. At six years old the words were parroted, meaningless and incomprehensible. Today he was twenty-seven and he was afraid.

The man looked closely at Richard. “Oh, I see what you are.”

Richard’s breath stopped in his throat and his gut clenched down tight. Instinctively Richard wrapped his arms across his chest and belly in defense against this body blow. It was a secret carefully kept, which haunted his nights. It had sent him fleeing from the East Coast to this nondescript city in a poor and obscure state, and into a new career, and now this man had perceived it.

Another sound joined the yammering of the alarms. Police sirens wailing in the distance.

The bum was breaking off the shards of glass sticking up from the frame like jagged teeth in a steel jaw. He ran a hand across the case-ment to verify it was clear, then leaned his elbows companionably on

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the windowsill like a neighbor talking across a narrow tenement street.

"We have a decision to make," the man said. "I was sent here for her." A jerk of the chin toward the girl who knelt in the water sobbing softly. "But then I find you, and you're not supposed to be here. I could take her, but I think she'll be safer with you. They can't see her when she's with you."

The sirens were very close now. Headlights and light bars danced white, red and amber through the windows as police cars came wheeling into the parking lot.

"What are you talking about?" Richard asked.

"I'll get back to you on that. Right now I've got to go before your brethren arrive. Remember, don't leave her. She's only safe with you."

The man spun away from the window. Richard lunged after him. "Hey. Wait. What do you mean?" He was yelling after the man's retreating back as the man ran up the alley. His coats ballooned around his body, giving the effect of wings. "You mean I have to . . . take . . . her . . . home?"

Richard turned back to survey the rescued. Her clothes were drenched, her black hair plastered to her cheeks. Despite the bruises and the blood-coated split lip she was the most beautiful woman Richard had ever seen. She had pale, pale skin, and winged eyebrows over green eyes with epicanthic folds.

"I need you to stay quiet. Follow my lead. Okay?" The girl nodded. Richard looked around the room and spotted a copper glow. A penny. Still spinning. Still on fire. He picked it up and deposited it in his pocket.

He couldn't do much about the mud and the sticks. They would have to remain, but in a state where a body found in the trunk of a car, hands tied behind the back and six bullet holes had been ruled a suicide Richard didn't think anyone would inquire too closely. There were reasons he'd selected New Mexico to begin his career with the police; this was one of them.

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The alarms cut off. Someone had reached the control box. The abrupt cessation of sound was almost painful. Flashlight beams were playing across the walls opposite the window. Richard pulled off his badge and held it out. The other hand he held prudently over his head. A gun and flashlight were thrust through the window. A head peeked cautiously around.

"Freeze . . . oh," the cop said.

Chapter

TWO

THE Browning, its barrel peeled back like a newly opened daylily, rested in the center of Lieutenant Damon Weber's desk. It was unfortunate that Weber was on duty tonight because he was smart and conscientious. The battered old PC on the desk sent up a dull hum, and the blast of tepid air from the heat register ruffled the edges of the paper piles which were stacked on every available flat surface.

"I observed three . . . men beating up the lady." Richard hoped Weber hadn't noticed the minute hesitation. "I ordered them to stop. They didn't, so I fired a warning shot," Richard said. It hurt to talk. His jaw didn't want to open and his neck had stiffened into a column of pain. He could turn it but only an inch to either side.

Somebody was heating a tamale in the microwave and the smoke and bitter smell of the red chile had him salivating. Too many hours and too much exertion had left him limp and empty. At least he'd

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been allowed to change out of his soaked uniform and into street clothes before he faced Weber's gimlet stare. So now he was just scared, hurting, tired and hungry instead of scared, hurting, tired, hungry, *cold and wet*.

"And that didn't produce asses and elbows?" Weber asked, and rubbed his fingers over the deep acne scars running along his jaw line.

Richard had noticed the lieutenant did that a lot. He wondered if the older man was embarrassed by the blemishes? He shouldn't be. Damon was a handsome man. Richard forced himself back to the moment.

"No, sir. Since I felt the victim was in imminent danger I shot at one of them."

"And?"

It was hard because it was going to look bad and send him back to the range for many more hours of practice. Richard swallowed. "I missed. I went to fire again but the gun jammed. I got us into the building and then the cavalry arrived."

"And the assailants?"

"Ran."

"All three of them?" Richard nodded. He was nervous at the sharp tone of inquiry in the lieutenant's voice.

"Our guys only spotted one person fleeing the scene," Weber said.

"Maybe they split up," Richard offered.

There was a long silence as the two policemen regarded one another. Beyond the frosted glass door phones rang and men's voices rumbled like the basso stops on a powerful organ. Occasionally a woman's flute-like tones would add a counterpoint to the bass.

The lieutenant looked at the girl sitting silently in the chair next to Richard. She was swallowed by the shirt and pants provided by Lucile, one of the dispatchers, who had had a change of clothes in her locker. Lucille was a lush lady, and her oversized clothes made the girl look even younger, like a child playing dress-up.

She's such a baby, Richard thought. *I wonder how old she is?*

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"Is that pretty much how it came down, Miss Davinovitch?" he asked her.

So that's her name, Richard thought. They must have talked to her while I was changing.

"Yes, sir." The voice was low with a husky catch at the end of the words. Richard wondered if she sounded like that normally or if it was the residue of a night of screaming.

"I'd like you to sit down with a sketch—"

"No," the girl broke in. Weber reared back in his chair startled by the ferocity. "I mean I couldn't do any good. It was so . . . dark. I didn't see anything."

"You have family we can call?" Weber asked.

"No, my family's out west. I was going to school here. I'll be all right. I just want to go home." It emerged in a breathless rush.

Richard stood. "I'll type up my report."

"No," said Weber. "We're fifteen minutes from shift change. Go home."

"Yes, sir."

Weber nodded toward the destroyed Browning. "You got a spare?"

"Yes, sir, at home."

Weber stood. "Okay." He turned to Rhiana. "We'll arrange a ride for you."

"Could he, Officer Oort, take me home?" the girl asked quickly as she jumped to her feet.

Richard flushed as Weber tried to hide a grin. "Sure. Don't see why not." Richard opened the door and stepped aside for the girl to pass. As he started to leave Weber leaned down from his six feet until his lips were level with Richard's ear, and with a leer whispered, "And another one bites the dust."

"With all due respect, sir . . . shut up," Richard responded, and he followed the girl out.

The main bullpen was awash with people trying to prepare for the shift change. Most were typing and filing frantically, but all of

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them paused to look as Richard and the girl emerged from the lieutenant's office. Richard understood why. From his early childhood Richard had known that his looks had an effect on people—male and female. He had learned to live with the stares, the whispers, the come-ons. Now he was standing next to a woman who matched his extraordinary looks. *And I wonder if it's been as much of a burden to her as it has been for me?*

Lucile bustled over, her arms filled with a bulging white plastic garbage bag. "I got your clothes, honey. They're still soaked so I put 'em in a bag. Just keep my things until tomorrow. Rich can bring them back."

"Richard," Richard corrected, knowing he wouldn't be heeded, but needing to try anyway. Davinovitch accepted the sack.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. We're just glad you're okay. It just gets worse and worse out there."

The girl's face was bleak as she said, "Yes . . . yes, it does." She clutched the plastic bundle to her chest and followed Richard out the door of the bullpen, and into the hall. He hesitated for a moment, looking from the door to the stairwell and the elevators. Finally he led her to the elevators and punched the call button.

"You usually walk, huh?" she asked.

He nodded. "I'm pretty sure we don't need any more exercise." The elevator arrived with an anemic "ding." The doors slid reluctantly open and they stepped inside. Richard punched the first floor and the elevator shook, groaned, and began lurching downward. "So where do you live, Ms. Davinovitch?" he continued.

"Rhiana, call me Rhiana, and I'm going home with you."

"I beg your pardon?"

"He told you to stay with me," she said.

"Well, yes, but . . . if we're talking about the same *he* . . . he was a bum."

"He's not a bum," the girl answered.

"Okay, then what is he?"

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"I don't know . . . exactly. Maybe a familiar," she mused.

The elevator stopped with a jar. Richard's teeth clacked lightly together and a white hot poker jabbed up from his battered jaw to emerge somewhere over his right eye. From Rhiana's expression she was experiencing something similar.

"So are you going to pretend it didn't happen?" Rhiana said as she followed him out of the elevator.

"I haven't decided yet," Richard said.

"I hope you don't because that won't help me much. I need you to believe if you're going to keep me safe."

The metal bar on the front doors was cold against his palms as Richard thrust it open. "Believe what?"

"That what happened tonight really happened."

They locked stares. Richard broke first, disquieted as much by the sooty lashes framing her beautiful eyes as by the lurking terror in their green depths. He turned and went clattering down the concrete steps and into the parking lot behind APD headquarters. Her footsteps pattered after him. It was very dark. This late in the fall the sun wouldn't rise over the rocky pinnacle of the Sandia Mountains until seven o'clock.

Taillights flared red as the morning shift pulled into the lot, braked and parked. Richard thrust the key into the door of his used Volvo. He looked back over his shoulder at Rhiana who stood a few feet behind him with the tentative air of a wistful child.

"So, what were those things?" Richard asked.

"I don't know. Not exactly. They were sort of like golems, but . . ." Her voice trailed away and she shrugged.

"Is there anything that you do know?" Richard demanded.

"I know that they're going to kill me if you don't let me come home with you."

As the hours passed Kenntnis decided that Cross had failed. The girl was dead. The sun climbed over the stony shoulders of the Sandias.

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Kenntnis's desk was situated to look up at the gray and rocky face of the towering mountains. He swiveled slowly in his chair, and keyed the control for the western shutters. Hydraulics purred and the shutters slid up into the wall over the vast picture window which offered him a view across the city to the Three Sisters, extinct volcanoes on the western edge of Albuquerque. Beyond them the mesa rolled away flat and brown. At the distant end of sight the snowcapped peak of Mount Taylor thrust glinting in the sunlight some sixty miles away.

He had lived in many places. None had the clear skies of New Mexico (though they were less clear in recent years), and the state's lack of moisture and low scrubby trees did little to obscure the view. It was a foolish whimsy, but in these early days of the twenty-first century he wanted to be able to see into the distance since he didn't seem able to see into the future. He had thought mankind would be so much further ahead. Instead they seemed to be sliding back into—

The hum of the elevator broke into his thoughts. He couldn't help himself. He left the office and stood waiting in the outer office for the elevator door to open. The polished stainless steel threw back his reflection. He stood over six feet tall and well over three hundred pounds, with features that were an amalgamation of the features of all the human races. Cross stepped out. The hairs of his mustache and beard glittered where his breath had condensed and frozen in the frigid morning air. He was alone.

"She's dead," Kenntnis said heavily. Cross shook his head. "Then where is she?"

"There was a cop in the mix," Cross said as he walked into the private office and over to the untouched breakfast tray sitting on an inlaid onyx table near the floor-to-ceiling bookcases. He settled into a chair, removed the covers from the plates, and began to eat. "I left her with him."

"Excuse me?"

"He was undeterred by darkness. He even finished off two of the hunters," Cross mumbled around a mouthful of toast.

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"Whose piece is he?" Kenntnis asked as he sat down opposite the homeless man.

Cross paused with a spoonful of soft-boiled egg halfway to his mouth. "Nobody's. His own. The name on the tag was Oort. Funny name." He shoved in the spoon, his lips snapping closed around the silver. Kenntnis leaned back against the desk. The polished granite was slick and cool beneath his palms. "Does Grenier know this Oort has her?"

"He'll think she's dead," Cross mumbled around a mouthful.

"No," Kenntnis corrected. "He'll know his constructs were destroyed. He won't assume success." Kenntnis fell silent, weighing the options.

Smacking and slurping filled the silence. His concentration broken, Kenntnis glared at Cross. Even after all these years in human form, the Old One still hadn't grasped the most basic of manners.

"You'll have to go get her," Kenntnis said, sharper than he'd intended. The creature had annoyed him.

Cross's head swung up and he presented Kenntnis with a view of half-chewed food as his mouth hung open. "From a cop? No way. This one's on you."

"I don't work that way. I don't get involved anymore."

"Well, you better fucking get involved. We've got the Clash of Civilizations coming, Armageddon, the New Dark Age." Cross's voice provided the capitals. "You keep dithering and I'm going to fucking end up on the other side."

Kenntnis knew it wasn't a threat, just a statement of fact. If the concepts of tolerance, love and forgiveness continued to erode between religions and races the Old One's darker nature would reassert itself.

"Okay, I'll call the mayor."

"By the way, the cop's one of the empty ones," Cross said as he poured out a fresh cup of coffee.

Kenntnis turned slowly to stare at him. "And you didn't think this was relevant and significant?"

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“Not particularly,” Cross said. He blew hard across the coffee. Steam bent and danced under the assault. “What are you gonna do? Arm him with the sword? It’s not 800 A.D. anymore.” The creature paused, considering. “Although he might be willing to use it on me.” There was a hopeful note in the final words.

“As I keep telling you, the only part of you that would die is the part that’s useful to me. So, no.”

Swinging behind his desk, Kenntnis pulled the computer out of sleep mode. He would investigate the background of this paladin before he actually contacted the man. But the arrival of an empty one at just this juncture and the symbolism of the policeman’s shield wasn’t lost on Kenntnis, though it represented a level of coincidence which made him decidedly uncomfortable. Fate was not normally a player in Kenntnis’s plans. In fact she was usually a downright bitch.

They hadn’t talked during the twenty-minute drive from downtown to Apartment Row out north on Montgomery. Her face throbbed in time to the beating of her heart and exhaustion dragged at every limb. Rhiana rested her head against the back of the seat and let the music pouring from the radio lull her. It was something soft and classical. She didn’t know anything about that kind of music.

She awoke, unsettled, from a sleep she hadn’t intended to take. It had been the jouncing of the car passing over a speed bump that woke her. As they pulled into the parking lot of an apartment complex, Rhiana noted it was one of the nicer units nestled close to the foothills, and built in a pseudo-Spanish style with tiled roofs and bright stucco on the walls.

She waited by the car as the policeman opened the trunk and removed a shotgun. She noted the bulletproof vest with its ceramic inserts lying on the floor of the trunk. *That won’t help him against what’s coming*, she thought.

Nausea took her as the fear returned. The slamming of the trunk brought her back. Oort was indicating the way with a gesture of his

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long, slender hand, allowing her to go first. Was it manners or did he want to keep that shotgun at her back? She started up the path from the parking lot.

He had a ground floor unit. He unlocked the door and stepped aside for her to enter. The cheap carpet was the usual apartment beige, but everything else was unexpected. The room was dominated by a grand piano set near the sliding glass doors leading onto the minuscule patio. There was a metal and white leather sofa of a very modern design arranged in front of a small television, an armchair, a glass coffee table with a few books scattered on the top. There was no dining table. It appeared he ate at the tiny counter that separated the kitchen from the living room.

A Bose stereo system sat against one wall. On the other wall was a tall bookcase. It was filled with books and sheet music, CDs, a signed baseball, and a NY Yankees World Series mug. On one shelf in a modern silver Nambe frame was a family photo. A stern-looking man with gray hair and amazing dark blue eyes looked out. Next to him stood two young women—one with light brown hair, the other with dark blond—both attractive without being beautiful. In front of the older man stood a slender and delicately beautiful older woman with white blond hair and gray eyes. The man had his hand on her shoulder, but it looked more controlling than affectionate. Rhiana didn't have to ask if this was Oort's mother. Her features were etched in his face. The cop was also in the photo, but he wasn't looking at the camera. His gaze was on his father's face with an inscrutable expression.

There were a few paintings on the wall. All abstract. All icy cool in shades of white, gray and pale blues. Everything was excruciatingly neat. The only evidence of use was an open book of music on the piano's stand.

She couldn't help but compare it with her family's home, cluttered with piles of old newspapers and *People* magazines, reeking of dog pee which had permeated the cheap carpet, and filled with the competing noise of four televisions in four rooms all tuned to different channels.

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It made her feel awkward and low class. She felt the embarrassment transform to resentment against the cop.

Oort propped the shotgun against the wall near the front door. He crossed the room. He had an economical way of moving and an upright posture. Rhiana realized it was not the erect stance of military service but more reminiscent of dancers or gymnasts. He twitched shut the curtains over the sliding glass door.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

The reminder had saliva bursting across her tongue and her stomach clenching. She nodded. The interior of the refrigerator was as neat as the rest of the apartment, and equally as spare. Milk, eggs, a carton of plain yogurt and various kinds of fresh fruit in the crisper drawers.

“I drink a yogurt shake in the mornings,” Richard said. “I also have oatmeal, if that sounds more appealing.”

“Oatmeal,” Rhiana said. She expected the usual microwaveable packet, but instead he took down a package of steel-cut Scottish oats from a cabinet. While the oatmeal cooked he dumped yogurt, honey, fruit, wheat germ and milk into a blender and whipped the mixture to a froth.

The oatmeal was set before her on the counter along with the milk, honey and a package of extremely tiny raisins. Rhiana surreptitiously turned the package to read the label. Zante Currants. So that’s what currants looked like. She had read about them, but they hadn’t been a staple in the Davinovitch household.

An experimental taste of the oats revealed a far richer, nuttier flavor than conventional oatmeal. The local New Mexico mesquite honey had an almost bitter aftertaste. The policeman stood in the kitchen, his shoulders propped against the front of the refrigerator, and sipped his drink. There was a frown between his pale brows. Finally he reached into his pants pocket and deposited the penny on the counter.

It sat spinning and glowing. Rhiana’s throat was suddenly too tight to swallow. She set down her spoon and met the icy blue eyes of her host.

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"Now I need to have a few questions answered," he said in his soft tenor. His expression was worried and vulnerable.

"O . . ." Her voice broke. Rhiana coughed and tried again. "Okay."

"What did you do to it?" He indicated the penny.

"Activated it so it could carry a spell for me." She saw no point in holding back. He was her only hope for staying alive.

"A spell?"

Furrows formed in the oatmeal and filled with milk as she dragged her spoon through her cereal. "When you do magic you need a focusing device. Some people use wands. Others use crystals. I use pennies. It's whatever works for you."

"And those . . . monsters, they're magical too?" Richard asked.

"Created by magic. They're not magical creatures. They were just sticks and mud animated by magic." She worried this was too much information, but his expression was still attentive.

"And they were sent to kill you?"

"Yes," Rhiana said.

"A gun would have been easier," Richard said.

"But guns need someone to shoot them, and people and guns can be traced. You can't trace mud and sticks."

"So who created and sent these things?" he asked.

"I'm not sure. Maybe the man who's been funding us. Maybe the group, but I didn't think they had the power for something like this."

"Does this man who's funding you have a name?"

"I don't know it. Josh never let any of the rest of us deal with him."

"And what was the funding for?"

This was getting dangerously close to the heart of the matter. "Magical stuff . . . work."

"And why do they want to kill you?"

And now they were to it. The million-dollar question. If she answered, it would slam her ass in jail and remove her from the protection of this man. In jail she would die and she didn't want to die.

Rhiana slid off the barstool and walked into the living room,

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playing for time and seeking inspiration. "It's complicated," she said slowly as her gaze flew across the books on the shelves, the books on the coffee table. One was open. Gilt-edged pages glinted and she realized from the minute type and the almost translucent pages that it was a Bible. Suddenly the other titles on the shelves snapped into focus. Works by Aquinas and Augustine set alongside an array of forensic books and psychology texts.

She whirled to face the policeman. "It's because I wanted to leave the coven." It wasn't a lie. She had, but not for the reasons this man would assume.

"All right," he said. Richard laid a hand on the edge of the oatmeal bowl. "Are you finished?"

"Yes, thanks."

He picked up the bowl and his glass and moved to the sink. They were quickly rinsed and deposited in the dishwasher. Rhiana drifted back toward the kitchen.

"You're not denying it. Pretending it didn't happen. Telling me you don't believe in magic," she said as Richard dried his hands.

He glanced at the glowing, spinning penny. He then opened the freezer and pulled out a couple of cold packs. He tossed one to Rhiana. She instinctively caught it. He laid his against his jaw and sucked in a quick gasp.

"The evidence is pretty incontrovertible," he said.

Rhiana laid the cold pack against the side of her head where one of the monster's fists had connected. Her gasp echoed his. They stood staring at each other across the breakfast bar.

"So what do we do now?" Rhiana asked.

"Sleep," came the reply.

The memory of Josh's pawing hands and how he always managed to press his crotch against her when they were working filled her mouth with a sour taste. Granted this man's slim body was a vast improvement over Josh's pendulous belly, but . . .

"You take the bed," he said. She looked into his beautiful face and realized he had sensed her dismay. "I'll sleep on the couch."

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Tears pricked hot and moist against her eyelids and hung on her lashes. Rhiana nodded and headed toward the bedroom door.

“And the door locks,” he added.

She looked back and wondered what fate had placed her in such gentle care. She found a small and nervous smile curving her lips. “I don’t think I’m going to need that.”



Her dreams were filled with burning people running down cavernous streets. Her horror was tempered by the tingle of power arcing along her nerve endings. Twisting shadows pushed through mirrors. Her legs cramped, sending pain shooting through her muscles, as she tried to run from their advance. Each time it happened she awoke with a gasp, and had to reorient herself in the strange room. At some point she was so exhausted that neither dreams nor pain could penetrate.

It was the furtive *snap* of the bathroom door closing which returned Rhiana to consciousness. Pushing back the tangle of her hair, Rhiana rolled over and squinted at the luminous numbers on the alarm clock. Ten a.m. There was the sound of water trickling from a tap. Rhiana rolled out of bed and wrapped the sheet around her body before crossing to the bathroom door.

“Just a minute,” the policeman called in answer to her light knock.

“Don’t you sleep in after a night shift?” Rhiana asked.

“Not on Sunday,” came the muffled reply. She heard the sharp rattle of the shower against a plastic curtain. “Go back to bed. I’m going to church.”

“Not without me,” she said to the door and gathered her clothes.



The church was drab. Plain glass windows offered a view of the brilliant blue New Mexico sky. The promise of snow had not materialized. Wooden pews. Wooden altar. Plain wooden cross. There was the smell of lemon-scented wood polish rather than incense. A small

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portable organ in the back corner of the church wheezed out a seemingly random series of scales as people filed in the doors. The men wore coats and ties and almost every woman wore a dress. There were very few Hispanic faces and no blacks.

"Is your family religious?" Richard whispered as they walked to a pew near the middle. Some of the woman were staring at her hiking boots and leather jacket.

"Holiday Catholics," she replied.

The wood was cold through the fabric of her jeans. Slumping down, she took the strain from her sore back onto her tailbone. The cop sat straight, holding his Bible between long, slender fingers. The bruise on his jaw was livid against his white, white skin.

People were still staring at them, and Rhiana lightly touched her own bruised face. She dropped her head allowing her hair to fall forward and veil her injuries. *People probably think we either had really rough sex last night or a really big fight*, Rhiana thought. She wanted to scream out what really happened and shake up their very white, very ordered lives.

The service began with an opening hymn. Next to her a soaring tenor rose above the congregation. Rhiana turned and stared at the cop. Her aunt Judy liked to think of herself as sophisticated, and always had classical music playing whenever her brother came over. Rhiana had only heard voices like this on the records her aunt played.

The only familiar thing was the Lord's Prayer. Rhiana could mumble along with the rest of them on that one. As the minutes ticked slowly past, Rhiana alternated between flipping through the hymnal and glancing at her companion's profile. He never felt her gaze, never looked at her. During the prayers his eyes were tightly closed, but his expression wasn't one of joy.

Based on the sermon there was plenty of reason to be grim. The minister seemed generally pissed about the state of the world and each and every person in it. Once Rhiana had the drift of his remarks she allowed her mind to wander. She wondered about the

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others. Did they know Josh had sent things to kill her? Did Josh know she hadn't died? Based on the homeless guy's remark that seemed likely. She had felt confident that they wouldn't use ordinary weapons against her, but that might have changed since her escape. The cop might be able to hide her from the darkness, but he couldn't stop a bullet or a hit-and-run driver, or a knife, or a fire. Her lungs felt clogged. She choked and struggled for breath.

Richard's fingers closed over her wrist. "Are you all right? Do you need to leave and get some air?" he whispered.

The realization that he had been aware of her, and seemed worried and concerned about her, created a lump in her throat. Tears blossomed wet and warm against her lower lids. She brushed them away with the backs of her hands and nodded. Richard took her under the arm, and helped her out of the pew and out the doors.

"I'm sorry," she said once they stood in the parking lot.

"It's okay, the service was almost over."

"What are we going to do now?"

"Go home. I need a little more sleep."

But that plan didn't work out. When they got back to the apartment there was a message on the answering machine from the mayor's Chief of Staff, requesting that Officer Oort go to a meeting with a Mr. Kenntnis of Lumina Enterprises at three that afternoon.

Chapter

THREE

THE Internet was a wonderful tool. While Officer Oort might have an unpublished number and a fake name attached to his address, all the real information was easily captured on the Web. The chair creaked under his bulk as Kenntnis leaned back and stared at the thirty-two-inch monitor.

Richard Noel Oort, twenty-seven, born on Christmas Day (Kenntnis assumed that was the source of the middle name) in Newport, Rhode Island. His father was a federal court judge. Two older sisters. Amelia, thirty-four, a surgeon. Pamela, thirty-one, a lawyer. Mother a homemaker. The youngest Oort had obtained his undergraduate degree at Cornell majoring in fine arts—music. He had been on the gymnastic team, joined the fencing club, the ski club. In his youth he and his father periodically entered yacht races and finished modestly well.

He did his graduate work at the Rome Conservatory, focusing on

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piano and voice. He'd returned home and joined a Wall Street brokerage firm and lasted three months. There was no record of him for six months until he turned up in the police academy in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He was unmarried, and he carried a staggering amount of credit card debt, much of it incurred buying clothes and art.

Kenntnis was still working on the missing six months, but either way it was a strange background for a beat cop in an undistinguished city in the poorest state in the Union.

It was annoying that it was Sunday, but Kenntnis had the mayor's home telephone number. A large contribution and the taxes generated by his building and company meant that Kenntnis's calls were answered and his requests met. His current request was that a young officer by the name of Richard Oort be assigned to help Kenntnis form a security force for a subsidiary company he was planning to relocate to New Mexico that would employ one thousand people. An appointment was set for 3:00 p.m. that day. Kenntnis checked his watch. Only a few minutes from now.

The Internet search meant he had tipped his hand, but the timing was so fast that he doubted his opponents could have arranged anything. Levering himself up on the palms of his hands, Kenntnis looked out through the window. The telephone line below his office sagged under the weight of the birds waiting to intercept his every call. Technology was his ally and he had long ago replaced his land lines with cell phones. It was now time to go to wireless Internet service as well. He couldn't understand why the Old Ones continued to rely almost totally on magic rather than wiretaps, shotgun mikes and all the other panoply of modern snooping technologies. Kenntnis assumed it was something psychological and hoped it would continue. Kenntnis then gave a rueful smile: of course he had an Old One standing guard, watching for any magical attack.

The westering sun slanted through the wide windows. A touch on a switch and the blinds rolled into place. He left the slats tilted so light laddered across the Persian carpet, bringing the blues and reds

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into high relief. He knew where Oort lived, so early in the day he had sent Cross to keep watch on the girl. The Old One reported that the pair had gone out around ten-thirty and been gone for a little over an hour. The most recent report established that the girl had a fine sense of self-preservation. According to Cross there had been a spirited argument in the parking lot which ended with the girl ensconced in the front seat of the car next to a disgruntled policeman. Thus the girl ended up where Kenntnis had intended, if some hours later than he could have wished.

His secretary's voice came over the intercom. "Mr. Oort is here to see you, sir."

"Send him in."

The massive carved wood and frosted glass panel of the door swung open. Kenntnis lowered his eyes to locate his visitor. He was a small man, no more than five foot four, and very slim. The camel overcoat over a blue cashmere sweater gave bulk to his slender frame. Perfectly tailored gray pants broke on his instep, and cufflinks glistened on the cuffs of the shirt worn beneath the sweater. Kenntnis now understood the level of debt. The clothing was all designer quality.

He transferred his attention to Oort's face. The policeman flushed under Kenntnis's intense scrutiny. Despite the bruise blooming across the right cheek it was a face of almost unearthly beauty, and beauty was the right word despite the gender. This was simply the handsomest man Kenntnis had ever seen. Silver gilt hair combed neatly back. Pale white skin so translucent that he could see the blue veins at Oort's temples. High cheekbones narrowing to a pointed chin, and unique eyes. The interior of the irises were ice blue, but haloed by a blue so dark that it seemed almost purple. The surface expression was polite and a bit aloof, but deeper there was a sweetness and a vulnerability in those eyes, and Kenntnis wondered again at the career choice.

"Officer Oort, pleased to meet you." Kenntnis rose from behind his desk and extended his hand.

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It was taken in a firm grip, the pale skin seeming even whiter against the ebony of Kenntnis's skin, but very quickly released, almost an avoidance of physical contact. Kenntnis took note of those hands—long and slender with tapering fingers ending in buffed and manicured nails. The young man wore one piece of jewelry, an elaborate gold signet ring on the little finger of the right hand. It looked old.

"Thank you for coming on such short notice," Kenntnis said.

"It appeared from my captain to be a request that I couldn't refuse," came the soft reply. The words were iced with an achingly monied East Coast accent.

"I have clout," Kenntnis said.

The blue-eyed gaze roved around the office, noting the collection of glass in the lighted cabinet, and the eighteenth-century French clock, and the Reynolds hanging over the fireplace.

"Evidently." There was a dry edge to the words.

Kenntnis indicated the chair in front of his desk and Oort sank down warily. Kenntnis came around and sat on the edge of the desk in front of Oort. The wariness intensified until the policeman had his back pressed against the chair. They regarded each other. The hum of the computer, the ticking of the antique clock, and the man's breath all seemed very loud.

"A few years ago I would have played the charade," Kenntnis began conversationally. "I would have set up a new company, formed a security force, wooed you with enough money so you would come to work for me—"

"You would have failed."

"Really?"

"I'm a police officer. I don't want any other career." There was something in the tone that made Kenntnis think this was part of a long-running discussion. Kenntnis wondered with whom?

"All right. Well, perhaps the work we do here would interest you."

The man's eyes narrowed. "Probably not. But make your case."

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The response pleased Kenntnis. Not the annoying and meaningless *I don't understand*, or the nervous babble of a man off-balance.

"I need to give you a little lecture now. Please bear with me," Kenntnis said. He drew in a deep breath and mentally looked over what he needed to impart. It loomed vast and unwieldy, an ocean of information in the era of the sound bite and MTV.

"There's a war being fought, much older than the 'war on terrorism' or our current adventures worldwide, but tied to them in a dark and fundamental way. And I use that word, fundamental, quite deliberately, as you will see. This ancient war is being waged for the spirit of humanity. I don't use the word 'soul' because it's too loaded, too charged, and it's one of *their* words. If my side wins, mankind literally inherits the stars. If *they* win, gateways between universes will be fully opened again and the earth and all of her six billion inhabitants will enter a new Dark Age with all the attendant ignorance, superstition, suffering and death."

He stared into Oort's eyes trying to read the reaction, but there was nothing to read. The man hid his thoughts and emotions well and offered no encouragement.

"Our weapons are science, technology, rational thought," Kenntnis continued. "Their weapons are superstition, religion and . . . magic. You encountered a touch of it last night." Oort stirred in his chair. Kenntnis anticipated the question. "No, it's not common for it to be used so overtly or openly in this modern world. Which either means they are very close to opening the gates and allowing a flood of Old Ones back into the world, or there is a power-drunk child wielding the power. Neither of which is good news." Kenntnis paused to encourage comment or reaction. All he got were two words, thin and tight with tension.

"Go on."

"Let me explain a bit about magic. It bends and warps natural law, and that takes enormous power. Power as in will, not in the physics sense of mass and energy. The Old Ones and the humans

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who serve them feed on human emotion. The more powerful the emotion, the deeper they can reach into our minds. Dark and negative emotions are easier to evoke than joy. Humans are utterly unique in what brings them joy. There's nothing unique in how they experience grief, pain, fear and death.

"We're at a crossroad here, Richard," Kenntnis continued. "We're on the verge of sharing technology, medicine and science worldwide, and if that happens it will kill forever the chance for the magic to return. But there are forces at work, human and otherwise, who tell us that it's too much information, that there is some knowledge that man was not meant to know—the origins of the universe, for example, or genetic engineering. They argue that the exploration of these questions undermines our values.

"They can no longer argue that science is the work of the devil so they offer us bad science—global warming is natural, condoms don't prevent disease, birth control is a sin but destroying the environment through overpopulation isn't, homosexuality is sin rather than a naturally occurring trait, creation science and intelligent design rather than evolution and Big Bang theory. We're raising a generation of truculent devout dunces inhabiting the wealthiest country on earth, with the most powerful army on earth." Kenntnis was both enraged and depressed by the litany. "It's a recipe for disaster for us, and a banquet of death for our foes."

Long, slender hands clutched at the arms of the chair and the policeman was on his feet. He came to rest across the room from Kenntnis with his back to the fireplace. It was a retreat, but only a partial one.

"And what or who are these Old Ones when they're at home?" Oort asked.

"Every dark myth and monster you can think of." Kenntnis paused, then said it. "And *every* god you can name."

That got a reaction. Oort stiffened. *He's not making the mistake of thinking that I'm only talking about safe, ancient pagan gods.*

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"I think you should know . . . I'm a person of faith."

Kenntnis hesitated, weighing what to say. "We can negotiate about that later."

The policeman advanced on Kenntnis. "It's not subject to negotiation."

"I think it might be when you understand a little better."

They were only inches apart. Blue eyes lifted to meet his. A whiff of aftershave reached Kenntnis, spicy and rich.

"What happened last night?" Oort demanded.

"Our opponents tried to kill a girl. And I owe you my thanks. The girl you saved is important to us."

"Stop assuming we're united in any way. What makes this girl so dangerous that someone would want to kill her? Aside from the fact she can make pennies light up and spin, and make sheets of flame?"

"You don't think that's enough?" asked Kenntnis, his sense of the absurd and ironic momentarily overcoming his good sense and very real worry.

He managed to offend his guest. Oort cloaked himself in dignity "Every tenet of my world has been thrown into question. I don't need flippant horseshit from you. So either answer my question, or I'm going home and get some sleep before I have to go back on shift."

"I'm sorry," Kenntnis said sincerely. "Sometimes you just have to see the absurd in all this or you'd lose your mind. Would you like some coffee?" Kenntnis asked, partly out of politeness and partly because he needed to marshal his thoughts.

"No, thank you. I don't drink coffee," came the reply.

Kenntnis regarded his guest quizzically. "You really are in the wrong business."

"So many people have said."

It was meant to be neutral, even lightly ironic, but Kenntnis heard the resentment just below the surface of the words. Kenntnis suspected it was not so many people as *one* particular person. He again wondered, who?

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Leaving the desk, Kenntnis crossed to the south wall and opened the hidden cabinet doors on the polished slate. Tucked away in the cabinet was an elaborate espresso machine. The body was a gleaming iridescent red tricked out in brass. "I do drink coffee," Kenntnis tossed back over his shoulder to the policeman.

Oort joined him. A small smile played at the cop's mouth. "I'd venture that's an understatement. This looks like an altar."

Over the grinding beans Kenntnis asked, "So where was I?"

"Ms. Davinovitch."

Kenntnis poured the grounds into the portafilter and tamped them down with the weighted metal tamp. He screwed it into place, and set a tiny cup underneath. The espresso machine began to hiss like a disgruntled dragon as he pulled a shot.

"Ms. Davinovitch is a physics major at the university. She's also at that age where one searches for spiritual meaning. She fell in with a group promising enlightenment and a return of magic into the world. Given that some current physics theories sound like magic it probably wasn't a big step." The thick dark liquid ceased falling into the cup. Kenntnis placed a cube of raw sugar between his teeth and drew in a sip of coffee.

"My opponents trawl for people like this. Most are harmless, though they all add to the general silliness in the world, but some, like Rhiana, have real power to be tapped. Now I'm going to have to make some assumptions, at least until we talk to Ms. Davinovitch, but my guess is that Rhiana realized the real goal of this group—to construct a nuclear bomb—and she ran."

Kenntnis caught Oort by the wrist as he pulled out his cell phone. The bones were fragile beneath Kenntnis's fingers, and he could feel the man's pulse racing.

"What in God's name are you doing?" Richard demanded. "We've got to call . . ."

"The police?" Kenntnis interrupted. "I'm talking to them."

"I'm a beat cop. This needs to go way higher than me."

"Wait. Hear me out. At the moment we've pulled their fangs

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because we have Rhiana and they don't have fissionable material. She was their bang."

"I don't understand," Oort said.

"Rhiana possesses enormous magical aptitude. Properly fed and nurtured she would have the power to manipulate matter, but you play with that at your peril. Eventually there would have been a catastrophe. Of course Rhiana wouldn't have survived, but at that point hell truly would have been released because all the evidence would point to Islamic fundamentalists. Then equally evil Christian fundamentalists would cry for holy war, and it would begin. We have some time because it won't be easy for them to replace Rhiana, and meantime . . ." He paused, a calculated effect. "I have *you*."

It was as Kenntnis had expected. Oort was bright, aware of subtleties, and he hadn't missed the emphasis.

"And what am I?" The tone was low and wary. Whatever Kenntnis was going to say, the man was not anticipating it with any pleasure.

"A genetic freak, a human utterly devoid of magic."

Cross, out in the street, saw it coming. A silver-gray feather against the deep blue New Mexico sky. It arched toward the building. Birds blew skyward with a clapping of wings. There was no time to enter the building, take the elevator and issue the warning. Cross pulled a knife and plunged it into his palm. Blood streamed toward the sidewalk, but never hit. It dissolved into red swirls and vanished. Only then did Cross run for the side door of the building.

Kenntnis's words fell like a blow. Once again he had come up lacking. *You're a disappointment to the family . . . I get you a job and then you quit . . . A policeman? . . . Do you really think you've got the grit for this? You've been very sheltered. What a waste of education.* The big man sensed Richard's distress. His large hand was warm and heavy on his shoulder. "No. Lacking magic is a *good* thing. Almost unique."

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Kenntnis broke off abruptly. Richard looked up and found the older man staring at his desk. The bowl of the ornamental fountain was steaming and the ceramic sides of the bowl flashed as swirling opalescent colors chased each other around the rim. Kenntnis flung himself at the desk. Richard was close behind. The water bubbling from the pump hung frozen in space and the water in the bowl showed an image of the stone and glass exterior of the building in which they currently stood. It also showed something about to break like a gray wave over the building.

Kenntnis grabbed Richard by the shoulders and propelled him through the door of the office and into the waiting room. Rhiana sat on a chair nervously flipping through a magazine. Her eyes were unfocused. She was seeing nothing but the inside of her head.

"Take cover," Kenntnis snapped at the older woman behind the desk. Without question or panic she dropped beneath the desk.

Kenntnis swooped down on Rhiana, collected her under one long arm, and threw both Richard and Rhiana to the floor, covering them with his body. As the weight fell onto Richard, yammering panic filled his head. He began to struggle desperately and violently. Kenntnis grunted as a fist found flesh.

"Shit! Be still! This will be over. . . ."

The rest of the sentence vanished in the shattering explosion. Numbing silence filled his head. For an instant Richard feared he had gone deaf. Slowly sound penetrated. It consisted of frightened queries, sobs of pain and terror. Breath also returned as Kenntnis rolled away.

Richard heard Kenntnis order, "Call emergency services!"

Richard slowly pushed to his knees and then to his feet. He offered a hand to Rhiana. Once she was up Richard walked slowly to the office door. He pulled it open. The metal slats from the shutters lay like twisted silver crepe paper across the floor of the office. A few slats were embedded in the wood of the door along with splinters of glass from the windows. It looked like a madman's version of modern art. The upholstery on the sofa and desk chair was shredded and

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stuffing peeked pale and white through the rents. If he had been in the room he would have been flayed.

Richard became aware of Kenntnis at his side. He glanced up at the older man. "Thank you."

"De nada."

Richard glanced over at Rhiana. She stood with her back pressed defensively against a wall of the outer office. "Is this a continuation of the fun from last night?" Richard asked.

Kenntnis didn't really answer. "What are they planning that they're being so overt?" His frowning focus was turned inward. He gave himself a shake, a tectonic movement of those massive shoulders. "I need to see to my employees. Fortunately Cross got the warning to us in time. . . ." His voice trailed away.

"What do you want us to do?" Richard asked.

"Wait," Kenntnis threw back over his shoulder as he stepped onto the elevator.

Through the broken glass of the front doors Richard watched Kenntnis climb into the back of an ambulance with the receptionist from the ground floor. She was the most severely injured and he wanted to accompany her to the hospital. The polished granite top of the horseshoe-shaped desk was spattered with blood. Richard shivered and tried to blame it on the icy wind whistling through the broken doors. Light from the ambulance splashed across the stainless steel and black marble walls, and the wail of the siren faded as it drove swiftly away.

Glass littered the floor of the lobby and crunched underfoot as Rhiana joined him. She came so close that her arm pressed lightly against his shoulder. Exhaustion clogged Richard's head, making his thoughts sluggish and disjointed. Though he longed to lie prone on one of the couches down in the main lobby there was work to be done. It was time he and the girl had a Come to Jesus conversation.

"So tell me about this bomb," Richard said.

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Rhiana jerked back from him, but not too far. "B-bomb," she stut-tered. She must have seen something in his face because as quickly as she started the pretense she dropped it.

"We were building it in a trailer down in South Valley. Josh put around that it was a meth lab so nobody bothered us."

Which says a lot about Albuquerque, thought Richard. "And you never thought to call the police?"

Rhiana trudged over to a couch and collapsed as if her body had lost its skeleton. "By the time I figured out that this wasn't your typ-ical coven they had me locked up."

"Give me the address," Richard ordered. She did.



He should have called his lieutenant, taken backup, but he was a ter-rible liar, and he couldn't find a way to explain why an off-duty po-lice officer should be interfering in the South Valley. Before heading out he pulled the shotgun out of the trunk and propped it against the passenger seat. He had started to roll out of the parking lot when the passenger door was yanked open and Rhiana jumped in.

"You are not leaving me."

Richard's peripheral vision caught a glimpse of the backdoor swinging open and a ragged figure jumping in. Richard slammed on the brakes and heard an aggrieved "Ow" from behind him. Looking around he stared into the dark eyes of the homeless man. He was nursing his nose with both hands.

"Excuse me!" The last pieces of Richard's patience frayed and snapped. "Get out of my car."

"You have to protect me."

"You might need my help."

His unwanted passengers said it in chorus.

"Look, this is not some f . . ." He bit back the profanity and swal-lowed hard. "Some game."

"You're wasting time," said Homeless.

And indeed, driving seemed more profitable than arguing.

Chapter

FOUR

THEY flew south on the freeway, the sun hanging red and swollen on the horizon. The barrel of the shotgun was cold and bumped uncomfortably against Rhiana's knee as they bounced over New Mexico's famously bad roads.

She had learned that the homeless man was called Cross. *Just Cross*, he'd said when the policeman pushed for more. She learned that every button on the radio was tuned to the classical station and that Oort wouldn't permit smoking in his car. The tape in the deck was a mystery novel.

She glanced over at the driver. Oort's skin was white and taut over his cheekbones and blue shadows hung beneath his eyes. She sensed she didn't look much better. They had only managed two hours of sleep.

She guided him past the two prisons, across the railroad tracks and down a narrow dirt road. Trailers sat on dusty one-acre plots.

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Often the area around the trailers was dotted with dead cars on blocks, broken washing machines and various kinds of farm equipment. Mixed breed dogs, most of them chained in front of peeling doghouses, sent up an ululating chorus as they bounced across the washboard surface of the road.

"If anybody's still there they sure know we're coming," remarked Cross from the backseat.

Oort's mouth tightened into a thin line, and his grip on the steering wheel turned his knuckles white. At first Rhiana thought he was angry at the homeless man. Then she realized he was scared. She sympathized. She had spent days afraid, locked in that trailer.

It loomed up ahead of them now, unique from its fellows in the total absence of yard clutter. She sagged with relief. It seemed that Josh and the others had decamped. Oort parked on the side of the road outside the drooping barbwire fence. Taking the shotgun, he climbed out. His hands opened and closed around the butt of the shotgun as he eyed the seemingly empty trailer. He then moved to the back of his car, opened the trunk and pulled out the bulletproof vest. Cross looked on approvingly.

"You're a cautious guy. That's good."

Oort stared at him for a moment, then shook his head and said, "Stay here with the car." He tossed his cell phone to Rhiana. "If something happens call for help."

"If something happens I'm going to run," she said.

"That's okay too. Just call at some point so maybe I can get some help," said Richard as he stripped off the overcoat and jacket and shrugged into the vest. He pulled his badge out of his coat pocket and clipped it onto his belt. He looked down at the ground for a moment and drew in a slow breath, as if he were trying to gather his nerve.

Rhiana and Cross watched as Oort made his way in quickly toward the trailer. He was careful to stay out of the line of sight from the windows and the front door. Cross started after him.

"Hey, wait," hissed Rhiana. "He said to stay here."

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Cross looked back over his shoulder at her. "It's incredibly liberating when you can't be killed."

"Yeah, well, *I* can be killed."

"I think you'll be okay for a few minutes," came the comfortless reply.

Oort reached the side of the trailer. There were three steps leading up to the front door. Rhiana watched as Richard stood well off to the side of them, and stretched out an arm, but he was too short to reach the door. He reversed his hold on the shotgun, and pounded on the door with the wooden butt.

"Police! Open up!"

The only response was the door swinging open under the first blow, and the cop nearly losing his grip on the barrel of the shotgun at the unexpected removal of resistance.

Cross appeared in the doorway and peered down at Richard. "They've cleared out, but you've got to see what our resident sorceress has done. You've got some serious mojo, girl," the homeless man called out to Rhiana.

Embarrassed, she hustled over to join the men.

"I thought I told you to stay with the car," Richard said angrily.

"I ignored you," said Cross.

The blunt challenge seemed to fluster him. Richard opened and closed his mouth a few times, then said weakly, "Well, this is a potential crime scene so don't touch anything."

"Her fingerprints are probably all over the place," Cross pointed out. "And I don't have fingerprints."

"Of course you do. Everybody does," Richard said. Rhiana followed him up the stairs and into the trailer. "Unless you've burned them off with acid or something."

Cross thrust out his hand, palm up. Richard inspected the tips of his fingers while Rhiana peered over his shoulder. The palms were smooth but with an old scar in the center of one and a fresh wound on the other. The fingertips were as smooth as a mannequins. Richard

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didn't just drop the other man's hand. He threw it away, and took a couple of steps back.

He jerked his head toward Cross's hands. "Those are stigmata."

"This one is," said Cross, pointing at the old wound. "This one was me and a knife."

"What caused the other one?" Rhiana asked.

Cross laid a hand on his chest. "Look, kiddies, this is a construct. How it looks depends on what folks are focusing on. Fingerprints have never been a big part of the vision, but stigmata . . ." He gave a thumbs up. "Very big with the religious crowd." He sighed. "It's a drag."

"I don't understand," said Richard.

"Of course you don't, but this is a bad time for explanations," said Cross. "How about we save it until after we've looked for clues." He made quote marks in the air as he said the final word.

It seemed sensible so they searched. They found some cut electronics wire, and a soldering gun which had fallen behind the battered green couch in the living room. There was a stack of videotapes from Blockbuster next to the old fifteen-inch television and the VCR. There was food in the refrigerator and Richard pointed at the half-filled pot of coffee sitting on its stand in the maker. The group had forgotten to turn it off and the smell of scorched coffee hung in the air.

"They left in a hurry," said Richard as he turned off the coffee maker with the tip of a pen from his coat pocket.

They checked the first bedroom and found the bed rumped and unmade, a few clothes in the closet and a suitcase fallen open on the floor. Shirts and pants hung like tongues over the sides of the open bag. The mirror over the dresser had a gray sheen instead of the twisting colors, but Rhiana jerked her gaze away, afraid it would draw *their* attention.

The second bedroom was much the same except that light was pouring in through the open bathroom door. They stood in the doorway and stared at the back wall of the trailer. A portion of it had

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crumbled into fluffy ash. The portion that remained was crisscrossed with fine gray lines like a spider's web.

"Like I said—mojo," said Cross.

The blue eyes locked on her. "You did this?" Richard asked.

"I had to get out." There was the faint smell of an unpumped septic system overlaid with the tropical fruit smell of an overturned bottle of shampoo. It caught in the back of Rhiana's throat and her stomach heaved. She swallowed hard.

"What did you do?"

"I deconstructed the molecular structure."

"Could you do this to anything?" he pressed.

"With enough time and enough energy to draw on." Rhiana caught a glimpse of herself in the medicine cabinet mirror, distorted by the silvering of the mirror. Dark circles hung beneath her eyes and her hair trailed in rattails over her shoulders. She jerked her gaze away. *They might still be there.* She pulled her thoughts away from the mirrors and faced Richard. "Of . . . of course there's a size limit. I couldn't bring down a building. . . . At least I don't think so."

"Don't test it," said Richard. He led them back to the living room.

As they walked Cross asked, "How did you draw the power without them noticing?"

"Naomi and Alice were so scared they weren't noticing much," said Rhiana in an undertone. She didn't want the policeman to hear and realize that she'd tried to feed on him.

Richard pulled a Palm Pilot from his coat pocket and set it on the scratched end table. Next he removed a handkerchief from his pocket, picked up the phone receiver and with the tip of a pen dialed in *69. He listened, then hung up the phone and wrote a number in the Palm. He took a slow turn, carefully inspecting the living room. He squatted on his heels and inspected the rectangular impression in the bilious green carpet.

"We need evidence techs," he said. "And I need a plausible story to get them."

"Our employer will get you whatever you need," said Cross.

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"My employer is the Albuquerque Police Department." He turned to Rhiana. "Give me the names of the people involved in this," he ordered.

"Josh Delay, Alice Rangold, Naomi Parsons and Dan Douglas." She followed the swift flourishes of the stylus.

"How did you all get together?" Richard asked.

"There was a notice in the Sub at UNM."

"So you were all students?"

"Me and Alice, Naomi and Dan were. I don't know about Josh. I'm not entirely certain that was his real name."

"Another reason we need evidence techs. It doesn't look like any of you were wearing gloves, and this place hasn't been wiped."

"Yeah, and I can't wait to see what your police techs are going to make of the magically disintegrated wall," said Cross. "You really ought to keep this in the family, so to speak." Rhiana could tell from Richard's expression that he hadn't considered this aspect. "Are you going to call the number?" Cross continued.

"No, I'm going to find out who it belongs to first."

There was an aggressive pounding on the front door and all of them jumped. "Hey!" a voice yelled from outside. "We told you to get the fuck out of here. What are you doing back?" The accent was the lilting cadence of a New Mexico Spanish speaker.

"I'm a police officer," Richard called. "Please open the door and show yourself."

The door swung open. Standing on the top step was a smooth-faced young man with sleek black hair and deep brown eyes. In one hand he held a statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe and in the other a .357 magnum. In the dirt yard behind him were a number of Hispanic males ranging in age from the mid-teens to their seventies. They were all armed.

"I'm going to show you my ID. Okay?" Richard said.

The young man nodded tense and tight. Richard reached slowly down to his belt and unclipped his badge, holding it up high so as many as possible could see it.

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"It's okay, he's not one of them. He's a cop," the young man called back to the crowd. They surged forward to the foot of the steps.

"What happened here?" Richard asked.

The answers battered at them. *Strange lights. Weird noises.* The oldest male moved forward, the others giving before him with the lightest touch from his parchment-thin hand.

"My grandfather used to go into the mountains and wrestle demons. They were walking last night." The old man stared at Rhiana with cataract-clouded eyes. "And I saw La Llorona, the Weeping Lady, last night." Rhiana shifted sideways until she stood behind Cross and Richard and hoped she wouldn't be recognized.

Cross cast her a sardonic look, and muttered out of the side of his mouth. "Hey, you've been upgraded from sorceress to demon."

"Shut up."

"So we came over this morning and told the *brujos* to get out," said the young man.

"So they left because of your request?" Richard asked.

"No, sir, they were already packing. We just didn't let them finish."

Two spots of color blossomed in Richard's cheeks. "Then you saw what they were driving?"

"Oh yeah, couple of minivans."

"Brand new," offered a heavysset man.

"All tricked out too," said a teenager enviously.

Out came the Palm and within minutes Richard had detailed descriptions of both vans, including the temporary tags.

"Look, we need to make sure this place is secure and nothing gets touched." The policeman gave the neighbors a sweet and sincere smile. "But there's this big hole in the back wall, so I was wondering if you would keep an eye on things until I can get some evidence techs out here."

"Like those guys on those *CSI* shows," said the young man with the shotgun.

"Exactly like that."

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“Cool. Yeah, we’ll watch it.”

“We wouldn’t touch anything anyway,” said the old man with a warning frown to the assembly. “Get yourself cursed.”

“Great. Thanks so much.” Richard checked his watch. “We’ve got to go.”

They piled back into the Volvo. “Can you drop me back at the office?” Cross asked as they pulled back onto paved road and headed for the freeway.

“Sure.”

“What about me?” Rhiana asked.

“I don’t know. Taking you to work with me would be tough,” said Richard with a frown between his pale brows.

“You can stay with us,” said Cross.

“Forgive me, but whatever else you might be, right now you seem to be a homeless bum, and your boss is . . . well, I don’t know what he is, and somebody attacked the building. . . .”

“I think they were gunning for him.” Cross jerked his head toward Richard. “Not you.”

“Me!? Why?” the cop blurted, and he had gone even whiter if that was possible.

“Look, both of you should just relax. You’re with me and Kenntnis now, and we’re the pros from Dover,” said Cross.

“Pros at what?” Richard asked. “What does Kenntnis do?”

“Controls one of the great fortunes of the world. He endows universities, funds scientific research, supports Doctors without Borders, finances politicians, puts computers in grade schools, donates money to the United Nations Fund for Population Activities. . . . How long do you want me to go on?”

Richard glanced back over his shoulder at the homeless man. “Until you get to the point. He does all these things, but what’s the ultimate goal?”

“They’re not worthy in and of themselves?”

“Of course they are, but no one does this without an agenda. He

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seems to be asking me to join in, but I don't sign on until I know what's behind the curtain."

They were driving north on the freeway and making good time. The tires thrummed on the asphalt and the headlights formed a necklace of light stretching south. Ahead of them taillights glowed red.

"We should wait for Kenntnis. He can explain this better than I can," hedged Cross.

"Why are you with him?" asked Rhiana.

"Because I want to die," he said simply.

Rhiana's neck jerked as Richard abruptly braked the car, and looked back at the other man.

"You told me you couldn't be killed," she accused.

"Yes, which is why the dying part is hard."

"Explain, please," said Richard. Each word was very, very carefully enunciated as the policeman hung onto the ragged edge of control.

"Okay, but you're going to need a history lesson, and it goes back thousands and thousands of years."

It wasn't like him; the ostentatious lifting of the arm, shaking back the cuff and looking at the watch face, but Richard was nearing the end of his frayed and exhausted patience. "Can we do this in the next twenty minutes? Or can we have the CliffsNotes?" Richard asked sweetly.

"Okay, asshole," said Cross. "Riding in the backseat of your car is Jesus Christ." He jammed a dirty forefinger against his chest and gave them a smirking grin.

Rhiana slid her gaze to the left and met Richard's eyes. He suspected that his expression was mirrored on her face. She pressed her lips together, but a bubble of laughter escaped. It broke the policeman's control and then they were both whooping with laughter.

For Richard it was the release of almost twenty-four hours of confusion and tension. The curtain had been pulled back and the

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Great and Powerful Oz had been revealed to be a poor deluded head case. The world began to settle back into normal patterns. Somewhere there were logical explanations for the earlier events, and like the homeless man they would be found and understood.

A new sound cut like a bass continuo through their laughter. Guttural gasps were coming from the backseat. Neck muscles twanging, Richard snapped his head around. Cross was arched as if he was trying to touch his feet with the back of his head. Blood suffused his face, turning it almost black. Foam speckled his lips. Richard jerked the wheel and with a squealing of tires sent them careening across three lanes of traffic. Horns blared. It was too dark to see the fingers being thrown, but he could imagine. They came to a halt on the shoulder. Richard tossed his cell phone to Rhiana.

“Call nine one one,” he ordered as he jumped out.

He had the back door open and pulled Cross out of the car and laid him down on the cold pavement. The seizures were continuing. Richard laid his head on Cross’s chest. He wasn’t breathing. The man’s neck was so rigid Richard had to struggle to position Cross’s head for CPR. Richard feared the teeth were too tightly clenched to open and that proved to be the case. As he pinched the hinge of the jaws, trying to force them open, a weird witch light rose like fog from the man’s body. Richard’s eardrums suddenly hurt as if pressure had suddenly been lost in an airplane’s cabin. He realized the cause was a sound at the upper limit of human hearing, but powerful enough to be felt.

Cross’s body began to shake; then there was the disorienting vision of multiple faces strobing across the core face. It was like watching an animation artist riffle pages of a drawing, causing it to flicker and dance. The sound became unbearable. Richard clapped his hands over his ears and fell back. From the corner of his eye he could see Rhiana doubled over in pain, the cell phone falling from her nerveless fingers.

Cross’s body flew into multiple figures. Transparent images of myriad men flew in all directions and then shot away, becoming

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streaks of light. Richard stared at the empty pavement where moments before a man . . . no, where *something* had lain.

Richard looked over at Rhiana, who was also staring at the ground. A shivering settled into the pit of his stomach. "Do you have any idea what the hell just happened?" he asked with elaborate care.

Wordlessly she shook her head.

Chapter

FIVE

THEY stood before him, looking like Hansel and Gretel when they discovered the birds had eaten the bread crumbs. Their hands were almost touching. Kenntnis suspected that if he growled they'd be holding hands.

The building echoed to the sounds of hammering and power saws as contractors began the repairs. "Let's go in the conference room," Kenntnis shouted over the din. The door fell shut behind them and the sound abruptly cut off.

A wave of his hand over the wall switch brought up the lights and started the ornamental fountain on the stone bar at the far end of the room. Richard and Rhiana looked like they could use some relaxation. Kenntnis settled into the large chair at the far end of the hexagonal table. He waved the couple toward chairs. They didn't take him up on the implied invitation.

"So what's up?" But the man and girl didn't move. Instead they

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exchanged glances. Each seemed to be urging the other to speak. The silence dragged.

Finally Rhiana blurted out, "We broke your homeless guy."

"Or lost him," Richard added. "Or both."

They both looked absurdly young and so painfully tired and confused that Kenntnis realized they couldn't handle a full explanation.

"Look, you didn't do anything. He'll be all right and he'll make his way back to us over the next few days." It was a calculated risk. As long as Cross was splintered there was a chance that one of the less benign fractals would make its way to Richard, but Kenntnis feared if a full understanding of Cross was presented he'd lose the policeman. And he needed him.

"What happened to him?" Richard asked.

"He was attacked. He'll recover. He's tougher than he looks."

Rhiana swayed and caught herself by pressing a hand on the table. Richard's arm went around her waist to steady her, but he didn't look much better. His cheekbones were prominent blades and his eyes had sunk into hollows.

Kenntnis stood and came toward them. "Look, I have a private suite in the building. Why don't you both get some rest?"

"I have to get to work. I'm going to be late as it is," said Richard.

Kenntnis waved a calming hand at Richard. "I've gotten you out of work, and you're handling the investigation."

"What investigation?" the policeman asked.

"The attack on my building. I'm trying to keep anyone from categorizing it as a terrorist attack. We've got quite enough hysteria on that front without me adding to the din. Now, where have you been?"

"We went to check out the trailer," Rhiana answered.

"What did you learn?" Kenntnis asked, looking to Richard.

"Well, for starters the people in the trailer are gone. I've got a good description of the vehicles they left in, and partial information on the temporary tags. We've got the neighbors watching the trailer, but we need evidence techs."

"So order them."

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"I'm a beat cop."

"Oh, sorry, forgot to mention it—you've been promoted to detective." Kenntnis was surprised to see dismay wash across Richard's face.

"Oh, great, I'm going to be even more popular now," Richard said very quietly.

"You want me to have them take it back?" Kenntnis asked.

"No . . . no . . . I just wanted to earn it."

"You were going to get there. It just happened a little faster than normal. So what are you going to do?"

"We have to give some explanation for what hit your building. Whether you like it or not I'm going to call it a bomb, call the people in the trailer suspects, and issue a four-state bolo. Since none of them are even remotely of Middle Eastern descent we should be able to avoid the kind of hysteria you're worried about."

"Sounds good," said Kenntnis. He stood. "Why don't you get that in motion and then get some rest? We won't know anything for several hours."

"I'll go with you," Rhiana said to Richard.

Exhaustion was probably the cause, but Oort's patience snapped. "Am I stuck with you for life?" he demanded. Rhiana shrank in on herself. The policeman didn't miss it. "I'm sorry, but I need some time to myself. Some time to think."

Kenntnis moved to Rhiana's side and laid a gentling hand on her shoulder. "You're magically opaque when you're with him, but you need to learn to do it on your own. He can't always be with you, and he might die." Now it was Richard's turn to shrink back. "Let me teach you."

Rhiana sagged as if the slight pressure from his hand had leeched all the strength from her.

"You'll keep her safe?" Richard demanded.

"I swear it."

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Richard had forgotten to turn on any lights when they'd left at 2:30 that afternoon. He felt foolish, but he drew his service pistol as he opened the door. Light flared in the living room as he hit the switch. The apartment was empty and serene. After locking the door behind him he swung through the kitchen for a glass of milk and a handful of crackers. He had the sensation he was having to search for the floor with his feet, a symptom of exhaustion, but nonetheless disconcerting.

He had ordered the bolo and sent criminalistics to the South Valley while he drove home. He kept waiting for someone to shout "Fraud!," but his requests had been met without comment.

He stood numbly in the center of the living room trying to decide what to do. Television? He shuddered when he contemplated the noise. A book? He was pretty sure that nothing would penetrate the fog wrapped around his brain. Music? He looked from the collection of CDs to the piano.

The piano won. But what to play? Chopin required too much emotion. Right now he needed to try and think. The mathematical perfection of Bach was the best choice. The resistance of the keys against the pads of his fingers helped ground him back in his body. The body of the big Bösendorfer amplified the hammer strikes against the wires and the sound seemed to struggle against the confines of the small room.

Guiltily he checked his watch, but it was only a little after 8:00 p.m. No one would object. He ate a few crackers, took a sip of milk, and resumed the sonata. The mistakes gave him an opportunity to pause and eat. Eventually, though, the mistakes became too irritating. He knew they were happening because he was tired, but the music was no longer soothing. If he couldn't play any better than this he needed to stop.

Richard took the gun with him into the bedroom. He made certain no round was chambered and he placed the gun on the bedside table away from the side of the bed on which he slept. It might be an urban legend, the story of the man who'd picked up his pistol instead

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of the phone and blown his ear off, but he didn't want to test the possibility.

Switching off the light, he laid his head against the Tempur-Pedic pillow and waited for the heat from his body to soften the foam. It wrapped softly around his neck and shoulders. He was falling head-long toward sleep. He blinked, holding it at bay. If ever there was a night for devotions this was one. He began the Lord's Prayer, but he kept seeing Cross's face reflected in the rearview mirror and hearing Kenntnis say "*and every god you can name.*"

He fell asleep before he reached the end of the prayer.



Rhiana looked about curiously. Kenntnis's living quarters occupied the entire top floor of the seven-story building. Windows to the east looked out on the bleak and rugged face of the Sandia Mountains. Monstrous boulders humped just beyond the wide glass windows like the shoulders of long-buried leviathans. They were close enough to touch if one were to lean out the window. She turned away from the forbidding view to the splendor of the living room.

A fire burned in a central glass fireplace. Comfortable furniture with butter-like leather upholstery clustered about the crackling warmth. The thick beige carpet caressed and cushioned her feet. Wafer-thin speakers suspended near the ceiling filled the room with low music. A Celtic harp rested near the bookcases on one wall. She thought she'd heard the strings give a soft musical sigh when she and Kenntnis entered. Pictures filled every available area of the remaining walls. She had the uncomfortable feeling that she had seen some of the paintings in art books. On the polished tabletops were more objets d'art—curved knives from the Middle East, a tiny carved marble statuette of a horse and rider that looked Greek, Lalique glass—it was an overwhelming display.

As had happened at Richard's apartment, Rhiana suddenly had the discomfiting sense of standing in two places at once, for her mind's eye had overlaid the living room of her family's home in Van

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Nuys. There were no bookcases, no art, just one wall dominated by a big-screen TV that they couldn't really afford, the stuffing protruding from the arms of the sofa sleeper where the dogs had chewed off the upholstery, the smell of cooking grease and an overflowing garbage can.

She felt ashamed and awkward so she glared at Kenntnis when he bustled in. The harp strings sighed again. He checked in the doorway.

"What?"

"Nothing," Rhiana snapped. Then, unable to help herself, she added, "How much money do you people have?"

"A lot," came the uninformative reply. "Are you ready to learn some control?"

"Will it keep me safe?"

"That's the goal," said Kenntnis. He beckoned her over to the sofa. Rhiana sat down warily at one end. Kenntnis sat at the other. "Cross says you're a lighthouse, a veritable flare of magic energy."

"Is that unusual?" Rhiana asked.

"Yes. Almost all humans have a touch of magic. I think it was laid down in your genes by the Old Ones so they could always keep a foothold in this dimension, but you have an extraordinary amount of it. Fortunately you also have a scientific aptitude." Kenntnis frowned. "Which is also pretty unusual, but it will help us now so we'll worry about the why later."

"Why do you rely so much on Cross?" Rhiana asked. "You seem to be the big shot around here."

"Cross can see magic before the spell is actually unleashed. I can't."

"But you fight it?"

He smiled at her. It enfolded her, warm and affectionate. "Yes."

"So you must really dislike me."

"You can't help what you are, and you could be very useful to us if you were willing to help. That's why I sent Cross out after you the other night."

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“So you’d use magic to fight magic?”

“I’ll use anything.” He clapped his hands suddenly together. “So, let’s get you protected. Do you read music?”

“No.”

“Hmm, that’s too bad. Breaking a song down to its mathematical components is an easy way to do this.”

Rhiana moved to a table and inspected the collection of small stone jars. They looked Egyptian. “I don’t really like music.” She turned back to find Kenntnis regarding her quizzically. “What?”

“That’s a trait of the Old Ones. Interesting.”

It felt like criticism. Rhiana felt herself flush. “Look, could you give me the big outline on how this works?”

“Oh, yeah, sorry, that might help. Emotion is the tool of magic. Tamp it down and you start to blind them. Go to the most rational and logical of the sciences. . . .”

“Math,” Rhiana said.

“Right, and you disappear. None of their spells can locate you.”

“But they can still see me?”

“Oh, yes. Light enters through the pupil, strikes the retina, travels down the optic nerve to the brain, and voilà, sight. The natural laws of the universe continue to function.”

“So I just keep a mathematical formula running through my mind?”

“Exactly. At first it will be a strain, but eventually you’ll have it running subconsciously. And we’ll keep a little Bach playing, just to help you along.”

Rhiana stood up and stepped closer to the glassed-in fireplace. She rubbed her hands together, hearing the rasp of chapped skin. “Could I actually become invisible?”

“Average people wouldn’t be able to see you, but the folks who want to kill you would spot you in a heartbeat. It would also take a tremendous amount of energy, and while you’re under my protection you don’t get to feed.”

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"If you want me to do magic I've got to draw power from somewhere."

"Use yourself."

"I had to do that Saturday night. It sucked."

"Tough. That's the deal. Take it and be safe with me. Leave it and go out there and face them alone." The callousness of the reply left Rhiana breathless. "You tried to use Richard, didn't you?"

Rhiana swallowed hard, then forced herself to face him. "Yeah, but I couldn't get anything. He was really scared. It should have worked."

"He's an Empty One. He can't be used in that way. But I reiterate, no feeding."

The confidence with which the order was issued pissed her off. Rhiana set her hands on her hips and glared at Kenntnis.

"And if I do?"

"The world can do with a little less magic."

She had to force herself not to retreat. "So, you'd kill me." She shook her head, disgusted. "I thought you were supposed to be the fucking good guy."

"First, I never said anything about killing you, but there is a way to prevent someone from using magic and I won't hesitate to use it if it becomes necessary." He paused and stared intently at her. "And I am the fucking good guy."

Rhiana turned away petulantly and gave him her shoulder. "Yeah, right."

His hand on her shoulder was gentle. "Rhiana, you've touched what waits on the other side of the barrier. They want them in this world. I don't. Doesn't that make me the good guy?"

Rhiana remembered the coiling and nauseating colors that filled every reflective surface in the trailer and the way they had sometimes coalesced into terrifying and horrifying faces. Shudders shook her and Kenntnis was at her side holding her comfortingly close.

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"I'm sorry. I'm putting too much pressure on you. Today just let me teach you how to stay safe. Later we'll talk about the future."

"Hey, Oort, the captain wants to see you," the desk sergeant said as Richard arrived at APD headquarters that morning. He stared curiously at him as Richard signed in.

"Okay. What about?"

"Probably your promotion," and there was no hiding the jealousy and resentment edging the words.

Richard ducked his head and walked into the squad room. Conversations stopped, then resumed and the looks seemed to strike against his skin. He was a beat cop. He'd been in the captain's office once—when he had been welcomed onto the force. He forced himself to walk briskly to the frosted-glass door. Then his nerve failed and he tapped tentatively on the glass beneath the stenciled name.

"Come in," Captain Ortiz called through the door. Richard entered and closed the door behind him, to the disappointment of the watchers in the squad room.

"So, congratulations are in order, Richard," said Ortiz. He was a burly man in his late forties with gray-streaked black hair and a conquistador's spade beard and mustache.

"I guess, sir," Richard stammered and felt himself blushing.

"So, somebody pulled a string. You're not the first and you won't be the last. And you've done your three years, you've taken the exam. You're eligible for detective." The captain slid a gold badge across the desk to Richard. "We found a desk for you." Ortiz stood and held out his hand. Richard shook it. "And hang the uniform in the closet. You're only going to need it now for funerals and disasters."

It was the opportunity to mention the bomb, but Kenntnis had said it wasn't really a nuclear bomb. It could only go nuclear by the use of Rhiana's magical powers. Richard decided to wait until he heard back from the evidence techs he had dispatched. If they found evidence of radiation. . . . *But geiger counters aren't normally part of*

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an evidence kit, intruded an uncomfortable and unpleasant thought. *Or maybe they were after 9/11.* He didn't know. He'd need to find out.

Richard and the captain stepped back into the squad room. The ringing of phones and the pecking of computer keyboards, the smell of cheap coffee and equally cheap aftershave assailed his senses. This was the real world. How did he tell his captain that a sorceress/witch had been tapped to turn an ordinary run-of-the-mill bomb into a radiological disaster? Answer: He didn't.

A desk had been squeezed into the area designated for plain clothes. It was easily recognizable as his because of the surface, naked except for a telephone. The other detectives' desks sported computers and coffee cups and stacks of paper and folders. A few of the detectives nodded to him. Most didn't. Richard wondered how many people had been passed over for him to get this promotion. He realized he had set his teeth and a sharp twinge between the shoulder blades reminded him he had braced. He shook off the tension, both physical and emotional. He pushed back the night stick, and heard the cuffs rattle as he sat down. It was going to be strange not to have the weight of the belt, stick, holster and pistol, and cuffs hanging at his waist. He realized he would need to buy a shoulder holster. Or was that too James Bond? Maybe it would be better to stick with a belt holster? But he had the start of arthritis in his hips from years of gymnastics, and it would be nice not to have the dragging weight of a pistol on his hip.

Stop accessorizing, he ordered, and pulled himself up to the desk.

The casters on the chair rattled over the uneven linoleum. Lieutenant Weber was on the telephone. He looked up and lifted a hand to Richard. Dale Snyder, who was closing in on twenty years, glared and turned his back.

Richard's stomach tightened at the blatant rejection. *I'll work hard. I'll win their acceptance.*

"What's up?" Richard quietly asked Joe Torres, a heavy jowled Hispanic whose five o'clock shadow appeared at eight a.m.

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"Guy got cranked on his own product. Shot the six friends he was partying with, his wife and two kids, then decided he could fly. Took a header off an overpass and splattered himself all over Tramway Boulevard. Not exactly heavy lifting on this one. Just a shitload of paperwork," Torres grunted and turned away.

Richard went to work. A call quickly established that there was as yet no response to his four-state bolo. Pulling out his Palm he checked the number he'd obtained at the trailer against an Internet database. It belonged to a pay phone in Detroit. That was way outside his jurisdiction. A call to criminalistics earned him a sharp rebuke to the effect that they had only finished processing the trailer at 3:00 a.m. and tests took time to run.

He drummed his fingers on his desk until an exasperated *Shut up* from Snyder sent him in search of notepads and pens. He drew a line down the center of a sheet of yellow legal paper. On one side he wrote "Cops." On the other he wrote "Magic." Or started to. He glanced left and right and crossed through the three letters he'd written. Underneath he wrote "Imponderables."

Under Imponderables he wrote: *What is Cross? Who is Kenntnis? Can Rhiana be controlled? Where do her loyalties lie? Where do mine lie?* Irritated, he drew an X through the notes and turned to the other half of the page. And then he knew what to do. He had the make on the vans. He knew they were new. He knew they had been purchased yesterday. He grabbed the phone and called the Honda dealership.

Chapter

SIX

YEAH, I remember them. Church group,” said the young salesman at Garcia Honda. He was a lean young Hispanic in a slightly shiny suit indicating long wear and insufficient funds to replace it. They stood in the glass-walled showroom surrounded by automobiles. The indulgent scent of new car filled the air.

The information that there was a religious connection was unwelcome to Richard. “Are you sure about that?”

“Well, they said they needed the vans to take folks up to a Bible study retreat in Colorado at a sister church in C. Springs.”

“Do you still have the check or has it been posted?”

“They paid cash.”

“Isn’t that a little unusual?” Richard asked.

“Yes and no. You know churches. Some are swimming in cash. Others scraping along asking for donated junkers. This was one of

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those fundamentalist groups. They seem to swim. Me, I'm Catholic. The church is rich, the parishes poor."

"Is there anything else you can tell me?"

"They were gringos, no offense."

"None taken. Accents?" Richard suggested.

"Kind of Texan," said the young man. He frowned and worried at his lower lip with his teeth. "They bought three car seats from us. That was a little strange; normally people have their own if they've got kids."

Richard now understood why he hadn't gotten a response to his bolo. He thanked the salesman and went outside and stood beneath the brilliant and famous New Mexico turquoise sky. He pulled out his cell phone and called the Colorado State Police. It was as he had feared.

The Staties had stopped the vans just outside Colorado Springs, and learned they were with the Faith in the Rock Church on their way to a retreat. Seeing two men and four women with attendant toddlers rather than the two men and two women described in Richard's bolo, they had sent them on their way. It had been the perfect cover.

He assumed it was a made-up church, but just to be certain he went back into the dealership and asked for the Yellow Pages. He then stared in disbelief at the listing for Faith in the Rock. There was a quarter-page picture ad with a smiling pastor in front of a utilitarian building adorned with a cross. More shocking was the small notice at the bottom of the ad that the church was affiliated with the World Wide Christian Alliance.

Richard's family was active in charitable work so they had crossed paths with the WWCA. Because of the Oorts' Washington connections they had even met its founder, Mark Grenier. Richard tried to recall what he could of the man.

Grenier had risen to public prominence some fifteen years back when one of his parishioners had become president. Grenier had become the presidential spiritual adviser, displacing the Graham

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family. He had actively and aggressively pursued the title of the "Face of American Christianity" in the press. Grenier led worldwide crusades bringing the Word of God to millions, and funneled millions to conservative causes. Though they were devout, the Oorts were a liberal family, which put them at odds with the fundamentalism currently sweeping the country. Richard was well aware of Grenier's efforts to stop funding for stem-cell research and how WWCA lobbied against various pure science projects like the super-collider.

And now an affiliated church in Albuquerque had knowingly or unknowingly transported a bomb to a sister church in Colorado Springs.

It seemed to support the view of reality described by Kenntnis, and Richard didn't like that reality at all.

There was a call from criminalistics when Richard got back to the office. They had some preliminary findings. He went down to the lab. It was next door to the morgue and the scent of formaldehyde and dead flesh came out of the heating vents. During the walk Richard had realized he was hungry. The smells in the lab took care of that.

Since he'd been a beat cop he hadn't had any occasion to deal with the chief coroner, but he had heard the stories. He found Angela Armandariz in her office. It was a temple to paper, both bound and unbound. Books crammed the utilitarian metal shelves, files formed stalagmites rising from the cracked linoleum floor and towers on the desk. Single sheets of paper fluttered like the wings of dismayed birds as Richard pushed the door open. Armandariz flipped the pages of a report with one hand while with the other she wielded chopsticks shoveling lo mein into her mouth. The noodles hung briefly over her chin like a walrus's mustache, then were quickly sucked into the bud-like mouth with a loud slurp. It was amazing that such a tiny person could produce such an amount of noise.

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Richard stared down at the elfin figure curled in the big office chair. Armandariz glared up at him from beneath dark brown bangs, and defiantly sucked in another mouthful of noodles. "What?" she demanded. She had a cute round face, rich cocoa-colored skin, the cheeks tinged with russet, and deep brown eyes.

"I had a message. You had some results for me."

"And who the fuck are you?" The voice drilled out.

"Oort."

"Any relation to the astronomer?" she asked.

Richard was surprised. Most people just reacted to his unusual name, never connecting it to the Dutch astronomer who had discovered the cometary cloud at the outermost edges of the solar system.

"Some kind of distant relation. My family's been in the country awhile."

"I'd bet a long while based on that candy-ass accent you've got." She pushed aside the noodles and opened a file in front of her. He caught a brief glimpse of a photograph of the disintegrated trailer wall, and packets containing ash, tufts of the stained green carpet, the trimmed wires, and other less identifiable substances and objects.

"Okay, so we found definite traces of C4 in the joint. The glass in all the mirrors had been silvered. Don't know what caused that." She raised her dark gaze to meet his and spun the photo of the trailer's back wall across the tops of several files. He caught it before it launched itself off the desk. "And I have no fucking clue what did that. Despite the ash there's no trace of heat damage. No explosive residue. The wall just fell down. That help?"

"Not particularly. Did you find any matches on the prints?"

"One young woman, Naomi Parsons, took the LSATs. Not your usual profile for a mad bomber."

"I think most of them were students," Richard said.

"Then I'd go talk to UNM," Armandariz suggested.

"Oh, right, duh." Richard could feel the blush.

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The criminologist suddenly grinned, revealing the thin line of a retainer. "Promoted today, I hear."

"Yeah, looks like I have a big learning curve."

"Bigger than you think, Dutch. My team didn't have a warrant." Sudden nausea filled the back of Richard's throat. Some of the shame and guilt must have shown on his face because Armandariz's expression softened. "I caught it last night, and we found Judge Blackman and got the paper."

"Oh, God, thank you."

"You're welcome, but now you owe me." It was more than just a simple remark, significance rode on every word.

"Okay, and what's the payment?"

"If you find out what took down that wall, let me know. It isn't often I come across something new, interesting and puzzling."

By the time Richard finished at UNM it was pushing four-thirty. It had been a productive few hours. He had addresses for Alice Ransgold, Naomi Parsons and Dan Douglas and, having learned his lesson, he had requested that APD's judicial liaison make the request for search warrants. He had family contact information and he had a list of their classes. Of Josh Delay there was no record. He had put in a call to Social Security, but it would be tomorrow before he learned if Delay had a number.

He sat on the edge of the dry fountain in the quadrangle between Popejoy Hall and Johnson Gym, and the brick was chill through the fabric of his pants. Brown brick and flagstone set in patterns swept away to meet the brown stucco walls of the buildings. After three years in New Mexico, he was beginning to appreciate adobe architecture, but UNM's faux-adobe style didn't really work. In fact he thought many of the buildings looked like dirt clods dropped randomly across the campus.

Reviewing his notes he noticed that the two girls had been in a

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comparative religion class together. Richard decided to see if the professor was in his office. As the sun set, the cold intensified. He decided to cut through the music building and get out of the cold. The New Mexico Symphony performed in Popejoy so he knew the building well.

He turned down a hall leading away from the concert halls. He was walking past practice rooms, and since the soundproofing wasn't very good he moved in and out of pockets of muted music. Violin, piano, and then a soaring baritone voice practicing the death aria from *Don Carlos*. Grief tightened his chest and he leaned back against a wall.

If he'd had more courage maybe he could have resisted the familial demand that he amount to something and this would have been his life. For an instant Richard was back in Professor Zanetti's office in Rome, lost in the music and the caress of the keys beneath his fingers and the stretch of the muscles across the back of his hands as he reached for the chords. He had been a good singer, but an exceptional pianist, and standing in the dim hallway of a second-rate university music department he suddenly realized why. He had felt safe behind the barricade of the piano. When he sang there was nothing between him and the world. Richard turned that revelation, studying it from every angle, and wondered if it would have made a difference in his singing if he'd come to that understanding earlier. A sharp head shake dislodged the regrets. He had chosen his course.

Professor Bernard was a spare, ascetic-looking man with shoulder-length brown hair and deep brown eyes. A jutting blade of a nose divided the face. Deep lines cut on either side of his mouth. Richard thought they suggested a life lived in pain, and then noticed the metal crutches propped against a filing cabinet. The office was the size of a large walk-in closet and the walls lined with bookcases and books gave the sense they were teetering and about to fall inwards under the weight of paper and binding.

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"This is rather eccentric," Bernard said as he studied Richard's uniform. The voice was dark velvet so warm and rich that it left the listener feeling breathless. Richard dropped his gaze from those amazing brown eyes. "Am I in trouble?"

"No, sir, I just wanted to ask you about a couple of your students. Naomi Parsons and Alice Rangold."

Bernard closed his eyes briefly and his brow furrowed. "Oh yes, Tuesdays and Thursdays 9:00 to 10:30 a.m. They haven't been in class for the past two weeks."

"Any idea why?" Richard asked.

"They're big kids. I let them make their own choices and mistakes."

"Could you give me a sense of them?"

"Desperate to have meaning," the professor replied dryly.

"How is that different from anyone?" Richard asked with equal dryness.

Bernard blinked several times and then seemed to actually focus on Richard. "You're an odd sort of policeman. I rather thought you would say *huh*."

"And you're making assumptions based on intellectual superiority and stereotypes," Richard said gently.

"Fair enough, officer. My impression is that Ms. Parsons and Ms. Rangold came into my class seeking answers and a support for faith, but faith shouldn't require either support or proof. If it did then it wouldn't be faith, would it? They didn't like the fact that my course deconstructs religions, shows the fundamental similarities and traces how religions change based on human and societal development."

"The idea that man creates God in his own image?" Richard asked.

"In a nutshell, yes."

"So I take it they didn't find meaning from you?"

"No, but they found it somewhere. The last few times they were in class they were positively argumentative and they had the air of people who shared a great big secret that put them well up on everyone else."

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“Can you be more specific?”

Bernard looked thoughtfully off into space for a moment, then nodded. “We were discussing Abraham and Isaac. They argued that rather than being a testament to faith on Abraham’s part or an example of mankind moving away from the idea of a capricious, bloodthirsty god, this was an example of a man shying away from true understanding and great power because he couldn’t make the hard choice. Alice said that sometimes sacrifice was necessary if humanity was going to take the next evolutionary step. I confess to being rather sarcastic. I pointed out that she might not feel so sanguine about human sacrifice if she were the sacrificee rather than the sacrificor. They walked out in a huff.” Bernard’s eyes darkened. “I remember they stopped at the doors, looked back at me, and laughed. At the time I was annoyed. In retrospect I realize it was all rather threatening.”

“And you don’t know the root of this?”

“No, sorry.”

Lean Cuisine hefted light in the hand as if the contents of the package were as cardboard as the box. Richard hooked open the crisper drawer of the refrigerator with the toe of his shoe. Fresh bok choy, peppers and ginger flashed color and guilt at him. He would cook. While the microwave hummed, defrosting chicken, he slowly chopped up the vegetables. He was glad he was making the effort; it was helping with the memory of his last phone call before leaving work that evening.

Emma Parsons’s valiant effort to mask terror and desperation under a bright insouciance had been heartbreaking. No, she hadn’t known where her daughter was right now, but *you know young people. You’ve got to give them the opportunity to try their wings even if they fall and bump their noses.*

She described Naomi as passionate and spiritual, always seeking

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the hidden meaning. According to her mother, Naomi was dissatisfied with what she called the sterility of the Presbyterian Church. She had opted for a more fundamentalist church. Richard hadn't been surprised to hear it was Faith in the Rock. Emma told Richard that three months ago her daughter had told her that she had been one of the select few to attend a retreat where many of her questions had been answered. She was evasive about just what those answers had been, and began to drift away from her mother. But Emma wasn't worried. It was perfectly natural. Then had come the question and the fear had shown through.

"Do you know where my daughter is? Is she all right?" And Richard hadn't had an answer for either question.

He splashed sesame oil into the wok and set it to heating while he went to the bedroom to change. There was a sharp pang of regret and fear as he hung up the uniform. Truth was he was finding his first day as a detective harder and more emotionally draining than fantasy had made it. As a beat cop he issued tickets, responded to wrecks, bar fights, domestic disturbances. Upsetting, sometimes sickening, but he rarely dealt with the collateral damage caused by the fight or the wreck. Now he was searching for three lost children, and their parents' desperation was like a physical blow.

He set his pistol on top of the dresser, dressed quickly, and returned to the kitchen. Passion, rage and fear had driven him into police work. Because it was so much more than a job he needed it to be pure, almost a sacred calling. That many of the men and some of the women who joined the police did so because they liked to drive fast, beat up people and shoot off guns, as Lieutenant Weber had said, had been a sobering and depressing realization. But despite it all Richard still believed that the police held back the darkness.

"I just thought the darkness was the evil living in the soul of every person," Richard muttered aloud to the kitchen. "But no . . . there have to be monsters too."

The oil was heating in the wok, the brown rice was in the steamer.

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Richard selected a CD of Schubert lieder and dropped it into the Bose. The first song began and he realized that unconsciously he had selected the song known as "Death and the Maiden." He stood frozen in the kitchen listening to the words and the music with the growing sense that Naomi Parsons was dead. From there his thoughts went to another girl who had brushed death. He wondered how Rhiana was doing, and decided that after dinner he would call and check on her. It was while listening to the German lyrics that something suddenly clicked for Richard.

Kenntnis means knowledge in German. The realization set the hairs on the back of his neck to pricking.

The doorbell broke through his whirling thoughts. For an instant Richard hesitated. His holstered pistol was on the dresser in the bedroom, but it seemed absurd to answer the door holding a gun. The bell rang again. A glance through the peephole revealed Cross. The hood of his sweatshirt was pulled up, and he was shivering. Richard opened the door.

"Thanks. Cold out there," the homeless man said as he brushed past.

"What happened to you?" Richard asked.

"Kenntnis didn't explain?" Richard shook his head. Cross smiled. "Hey, what's for dinner?" he asked.

"I don't recall inviting you."

"Charity begins at home." Cross was prowling around the living room. He threw back the lid on the piano and banged on the keys with a forefinger. Two strides had Richard across the room and shutting the lid. "Wow, touchy."

"It's very hard to keep the piano in tune in this climate. It has to be handled carefully." Richard returned to the kitchen. "If you need a ride back to Kenntnis I can call a cab."

"And here I thought you'd take me yourself." Cross's voice came from close behind him.

"Look, I've had kind of a long day, and I'd like some time to myself. . . ." Richard popped open the door of the microwave. As the

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reflective surface swung past him Richard saw Cross, the cleaver up-raised, moving rapidly up behind him.

Reflexes honed in hours of gymnastic training kicked in. Richard flung himself to the side as the cleaver cut the air where his skull had been. The linoleum's polished surface turned the lunge into a slip. Richard went with it, tucked and rolled. Using his hands he increased momentum and flipped back onto his feet. Cross grabbed a long butcher knife from the block. Cleaver and blade wove a deadly pattern before Richard's eyes. The hood of the sweatshirt had fallen back, revealing long dark golden hair and blue eyes. The Cross in the car had had brown hair and brown eyes, but the features were essentially the same. What wasn't the same was the murderous intent reflected in the blue eyes.

Fear hammered in Richard's throat, cutting off breath. A trembling in the pit of his stomach threatened to spread to his legs. He had always been terrible in his hand-to-hand combat training. He wanted to turn and run for the bedroom and his Firestar. He knew if he did he'd die.

He looked frantically around the kitchen, searching for a weapon. The knife block was behind Cross. A few pots hung from a rack overhead and Richard needed the footstool to reach them. Cross lunged, Richard dodged and a burning brand seemed to have been laid across his ribs. Warm and sticky blood flowed down his side. His frantic dodge left him leaning against the stove. The flames on the gas burner licked at his sleeve.

Richard grabbed the wok by its handles. The hot metal seared the soft skin of his palms. Teeth gritted against the pain, Richard tipped it forward until the oil just touched the open flames of the gas burner. The oil exploded, the flames shooting past Richard's face. He whirled and flung the burning oil over Cross. The thick fair hair went up like a hay rick. The oil permeated the sweatshirt, setting it ablaze. Richard ran backwards as the burning figure came after him, swinging the cleaver and thrusting with the knife.

They were in the living room now. Bits of burning material

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dropped onto the carpet, starting it smoldering. Richard was almost at the bedroom door. Just a few more steps and he'd have his gun. There was a stunning crash as a dark figure, surrounded by shards of glittering glass and dripping blood from a multitude of cuts, burst through the patio door.

It was Cross. The Cross Richard knew, or so he hoped. The burning man turned to face his doppelganger. They both let out bone-chilling shrieks and leaped at each other. Locked chest to chest they rocked back and forth. Flames licked at the fringes of Cross's hair. Blood smeared against his opponent. The cleaver bit deep into the rescuer Cross's shoulder. Richard cried out as blood fountained from the wound.

He ran into the bedroom. It required only a few seconds to have the pistol out of its holster. He thumbed off the safety as he ran and yanked back the slide, chambering a round.

The scene in the living room had changed. The flames were out. The cleaver lay discarded on the stained and burned carpet. The butcher knife quivered in the wall. The attacker held in the circle of Cross's arms seemed to be smaller. Appreciably smaller. Richard swiped the back of his hand across his eyes. It wasn't an illusion. The anti-Cross was shrinking not only in height but in girth. Within seconds he was a wraithlike figure. Cross bent and locked his mouth over the other's. His throat worked and he swallowed the other Cross. Richard gasped, gagged and vomited. Cross, singed and smeared in gore, turned to face him.

Richard's knees were shaking, the muscles in his thighs shivering with strain and terror, but his hands were rock-steady as he squeezed the trigger and proceeded to empty the entire clip into Cross's chest. Each of the nine bullets forced Cross back a step. The roar of the shots left Richard deafened, and the recoil sent agony lancing through his burned hands.

"Well, that's a hell of a thank you," Cross said. The words were muffled and seemed distant because of the ringing in Richard's ears. "Now we're going to have the cops on us again. Get to Kenntnis as

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soon as you can. And if you see any more of me wandering around . . . well, try to keep them from killing you.”

And he was gone, back through the shattered door. An icy wind sent the drapes billowing into the room. Richard sat down abruptly on the floor and shook.

Chapter
SEVEN

MUFFLED in bandages, his hands felt paw-like on the steering wheel. The flare from approaching headlights burned in his eyes, and there was a throbbing point of pain at the hinges of his jaw. Richard forcibly parted his teeth and tried to relax as he once again drove toward Kenntnis's building.

"Missed again?" The memory of Weber's dry question sent another stab of pain through Richard's jaw as he ground his teeth together.

Then there was the apartment manager's blustering statement that this kind of thing wasn't covered in the damage deposit, and Richard was going to have to pay to have the carpet replaced and the walls repainted to deal with the smoke damage. It was all he needed given the state of his credit cards.

And finally there were the lies . . . lies upon lies. The tale he had spun tonight was about a man hopped up on PCPs breaking into the

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apartment and attacking him. Weber had just looked at him, but how could the lieutenant argue? There was the shattered sliding-glass door, the knife in the wall, the bloodstains on the carpet, Richard's burned hands and the wound over his ribs.

An ambulance had been called and he'd been driven to the St. Joseph's emergency room just down the street from his apartment. A wounded cop never waits. Within moments of arriving he was seated in a curtained cubicle having the cut on his side stitched and his hands bandaged. They admitted him for "observation," but after availing himself of the bathroom and eating the sandwich sent up from the cafeteria, Richard checked himself out and walked back to his apartment to get his car.

As he drove up the winding road toward the foothills of the Sandias, Richard saw lights only in the top floor of Kenntnis's building. He called directory assistance and got the number for Lumina Enterprises. The phone rang five times before shunting him to voice mail, where a cultured voice gave him the office hours and suggested he call back during those hours. Richard didn't know how he was going to get in, but he was going to get in, find Kenntnis and throttle him.

He parked in the empty lot and walked to the front doors. He noted that they and the west-facing windows had been replaced. The doors were locked and there was neither buzzer nor intercom. Richard turned and looked out over the city's lights. They ran down to the river, which formed a ribbon of darkness. The lights resumed on the other side, climbing high onto the sandy mesas. Far off to the west the setting moon struck white against the snowcapped peak of Mount Taylor some sixty miles away.

He began a circuit of the building. In the back, nestled against a Dumpster, was a large cardboard box. Light leaked around the edges of a piece of cloth that served as a door and Richard heard the low hiss of a propane lantern. Suddenly footsteps rushed him and an arm was thrown across his throat. Gasping, clawing at the arm, Richard kicked back trying to connect with his assailant's shin. A violent

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shove from behind sent him sprawling onto the pavement. He caught himself on his hands. Even with the cushion of the bandages it hurt like hell. The fall also ripped the knees out of his slacks and skinned his other knee. He somersaulted back onto his feet and drew his pistol.

"Not cautious. Not cautious at all," said Cross. "Don't assume you're safe here. You're not safe anywhere."

"Why? Because of you? Because of Kenntnis?"

"Because of what you are, and because we found you." Cross started toward a door set in the back wall of the building. "Come on, we've been expecting you."

Pique and humiliation almost drove Richard back to his car, but he needed answers. Logic prevailed and he followed Cross into the building.

The private elevator deposited them in a marble foyer. Through an archway Richard saw flames dancing in a glass fireplace. He marched into the living room, leaving Cross to hurry after him. Kenntnis sat on the leather sofa, sipping brandy and watching the fire.

"Get the man a drink," he ordered Cross.

"I don't drink," said Richard, biting off the words.

"You don't? Why not?" Cross asked.

"No head for it."

Kenntnis cranked himself around to look at Richard over the back of the sofa. "And your mother spent time in rehab," said Kenntnis.

The statement was made matter-of-factly, but it unleashed a torrent of memory and emotion. His mother, tiny and fragile, kneeling in front of him with a suitcase at her side. The perfect bow of her lips curved in a smile, and her voice was light and caressing.

"You be a good boy, and do what Ellen tells you, and don't worry. Your papa is here to care for you. I'll be home so soon you won't even know I've been gone."

But even at seven he recognized fear and shame, and he saw them glistening in her gray eyes and felt them echoed in his chest. He raised his eyes to his father waiting at the front door. His father's

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gaze raked across him and he knew it was somehow his fault that Mama was going away.

With a snap Richard was back in Kenntnis's palatial living room. Anger clogged his throat and left a rank taste on the back of his tongue. "You son-of-a-bitch. How dare you! How dare you dig at me!"

Kenntnis stood up and bore down on Richard. "Oh, stop it! Of course I investigated you. I couldn't risk letting you close without knowing what you were. And by the way, it's nice to see that something can penetrate those perfect manners of yours. I need you to be angry. It's the only way you can stand up to the fear. Now sit down and let's get your questions answered."

Richard wasn't sure why he took the indicated chair. Maybe because he wasn't certain he'd survive another day without guidance and understanding in a world gone mad. Cross bent solicitously over the arm of the big chair and said, with a jerk of the head toward Kenntnis, "He's got almost anything you'd want. Fruit juice? Milk? Tea?"

"Milk," said Richard.

Cross left. Kenntnis stood, hands clasped behind his back, bouncing lightly on the balls of his feet, and stared down at Richard. Richard looked away and around the room. He recognized a Caravaggio on one wall and a Picasso on the other. He sensed the other works of art were equally rare and valuable, but he didn't have time for a thorough look because Cross returned carrying a tray with a glass of milk and a gigantic slice of chocolate cake and chocolate milk for himself.

"That going to hold you for awhile?" Kenntnis asked the homeless man with some exasperation, and then Richard realized that Cross wasn't exactly homeless. He referred to Kenntnis as his boss and lived in a box behind Kenntnis's building.

"So, why doesn't he live in the building?" The question emerged almost without volition. Cross and Kenntnis looked at him.

"Because of his episodes. I don't really need all those fractals caroming around the building. And some of them aren't terribly well

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disposed toward people . . . and *you* in particular . . . as you discovered tonight," said Kenntnis.

The milk was cold and thick across his tongue and laid down a soothing wash over Richard's burning gut. "Does everything in your universe want to kill me?"

"In a word . . . yes. Well, strictly speaking, it's not my universe, it's his." Kenntnis inclined his head toward Cross.

"Yeah, but you're not exactly innocent in all this," Cross mumbled around an enormous mouthful of cake. "Because once you found Richard he became a target." Crumbs blew between his lips, littering his lap.

"So, all I have to do is get away from you," Richard said to Kenntnis. "And I'll be fine?"

"No, you're too valuable a piece. Now you either have to play or be eliminated."

Richard's stomach twisted and the milk suddenly tasted sour. He set aside the glass on the Italian inlaid wood table at his elbow. Kenntnis rested his hand on the back of the armchair and leaned in over Richard. The smell of the older man's aftershave was bright and sharp. "Tonight you get answers, as many as you want."

Richard sat in silence gazing at the unwieldy mass of confusion and questions. He couldn't get his arms around it, much less frame a coherent question.

Cross leaned forward from his seat on the couch and laid a hand on Richard's knee. He left a chocolate thumb print on the fabric just above the rip. "You probably want to start with me," he said. Richard didn't answer. He just stared down at the ruin of his pants. His lips tightened in annoyance.

Kenntnis laughed. "I'll buy you a new pair. And I'll take care of the repairs at your apartment."

"Fine."

"Why did you shoot me?" Cross suddenly asked.

The fear and horror returned, only slightly dulled by the passage of a few hours. "You swallowed somebody . . . thing."

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“Just stickin’ the parts back together,” said Cross.

“You’re confusing him,” Kenntnis interrupted. Kenntnis sat down on the coffee table directly in front of Richard and looked him in the eye. “The forces we’re opposing aren’t native to this world.”

“Now we’re going to talk about aliens?” said Richard faintly.

“Good move,” said Cross sarcastically to Kenntnis.

Kenntnis waved his hands back and forth as if scattering the earlier words. “Erase that. Let’s start with physics. There’s a theory that there are twenty-seven folded multiverses. The theory’s correct—partly—there are actually twenty-three. Anyway, they’re densely compacted, touching at multiple points. We’re native to this universe.” Kenntnis pointed at Cross. “He’s not.”

“So, why are you here?” Richard asked Cross, deciding to just go along with the craziness.

“Because a few million years ago one of your distant ancestors left the trees, stood upright, and began the evolutionary scrabble toward intelligence. It doesn’t happen very often and when it does it attracts us; like sharks to blood, or bees to flowers.” Cross smacked his lips, and Richard didn’t think he was tasting chocolate any longer.

“Add to that that humans are relatively unique,” Kenntnis broke in. “You have this wild, almost chaotic, creativity and deeply rooted and very powerful emotions. You represent a source of sustenance to these creatures in the other multiverses.”

“And you eat emotions, that’s what Kenntnis said.” Richard looked over at Cross.

“Well, not exactly. It’s more complex than that. We feed off your life energy, force, however you want to say it. Emotions are the easiest way to feed, and dark emotions are the easiest of all. Early man was a scared little sucker. I was one of the watchers and every time some chimp got spooked by lightning, or lost a kid, the fear just poured out. We would suck it in, and soon we were tearing open the peep holes. A few of us wriggled through and helped you establish religion. The bloodier the better. We noticed you had a tendency to distrust anything different. We worked to promote that, and got

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some tasty wars rolling. With that much power we were able to turn the rips in the fabric of space-time into full-blown gates, and more and more of us arrived." Cross jerked a thumb at Kenntnis. "Then he came along and spoiled the party."

"How? By doing what?" Richard asked.

Kenntnis smoothed a hand across his hair, tugged at his upper lip. He frowned, then finally said, "By promoting rational and scientific thought, and trying to wean you off religion and superstition."

"Eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil," Richard said almost to himself.

"He had an effect—humans began to question, and Kenntnis and his paladins—" There was a throat clearing from Kenntnis. "The *Lumina*." Cross stressed the word, and nodded at Kenntnis in some kind of private exchange that Richard didn't understand. "Killed some of us. We were weakened and we couldn't keep the true gates open. But we could encourage you monkeys to keep the superstition train rolling, and we could keep opening tears into this dimension and those of us already here could keep feeding as long as you kept killing and hating."

"Since I wasn't able to eradicate gods and religion I tried a stop-gap measure," Kenntnis said. "I fostered the idea of loving and compassionate gods hoping that would weaken them further until we could push them back out of your world."

Cross joined back in. "Religion's about obedience and fear, and your early ones were real lip smackers. Blood sacrifice. Good stuff. But he," a gesture to Kenntnis, "was having an effect. Human sacrifice gave way to animal sacrifice, polytheism was pretty damn tolerant. So us Old Ones got together and fucked him good."

"How?" Richard asked

"We encouraged the One Bookers," said Cross. "They've been a magnificent disaster."

"Wha . . . what?" stuttered Richard.

"Monotheism. The second worst idea after religion," Kenntnis said, and he pinched the bridge of his nose as if his head pained him.

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“Now everybody has the ‘one true god’ and the Old Ones have religious hatred and religious wars on which to feed. Two thousand years of crusade, jihad, inquisition, pogrom . . .” Kenntnis sighed and he seemed to be looking across a vast distance. For the briefest instant Richard thought he saw whirling lights in the profound darkness of Kenntnis’s eyes. Then Kenntnis blinked and the lights were gone.

“Then Scripture is—” Richard began.

“Bullshit,” Cross interrupted. “Well, it’s not totally untrue. You humans actually wrote down some of the unbelievably horrible shit we did—killing every firstborn son. Fucking over Job, ordering you to war with your neighbors. Actually read what ‘*God*,’” Cross provided the quotation marks with quick flicks of his fingers, “ordered Joshua to do to Jericho. And what’s really amazing is how you humans try to justify it and find some holy meaning instead of saying, *Wow, these gods are crazy murderous psychopaths who like to watch us suffer. Why would I believe in this?*” Cross seemed to be working himself up into a rage.

Kenntnis rubbed a hand over his face and he looked unimaginably tired. “Anyway, I thought the grand march toward secular humanism was a dismal failure and then Cross showed up—the schizophrenic god. He had been supping on human emotions and there had actually been enough people who accepted and tried to live by these compassionate ideals that it began to affect this particular Old One.” Kenntnis turned and stared at Cross and reluctantly Richard did the same.

When set beside this incredible explanation Cross’s constantly changing appearance began to make a degree of sense.

“So you reflect back the vision of the faithful,” Richard said slowly.

“Yeah, but it depends on which faithful. For some I’m a pretty blond Jesus. For others I’m Allah, and for others, Yahveh.” The homeless man stopped frowning and preened a bit. “Not to be immodest, but I was the source for three world religions.”

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Memories of prayers and services spun through Richard's head. There was the feeling of an emotional snap and the core from which he guided his life seemed suddenly empty. The loss overwhelmed him, and he no longer heard them talking.

Slowly he became aware of Cross's voice again. ". . . got me with a triple whammy. A bombing in Tel Aviv, a retaliation in Gaza, and a gay bashing in America, and a massacre of Hindus in India. Guess that's actually four, but anyway they split me."

"That was deliberate?" Richard asked.

"Oh, yeah, they wanted to get me away from you and release some of the fractals so they could kill you."

"Why?" Richard cried.

"Because your presence at my side gives me an advantage in the struggle," Kenntnis said gently.

"How did they find out about me?" Richard cried.

"They watch me just as I watch them."

Richard looked at Cross. "You said you wanted to die. If Kenntnis wins will you die?"

"Yes."

"And the other aspects of you want to prevent that," Richard continued.

"Well, duh. That whole Kenntnis wins thing . . . not really good for our . . . their side."

"If Cross dies will it affect the rest of them?" Richard asked.

Cross perked up and looked hopeful. "Kid's got a point. Maybe it would weaken them. He could use the sw—" Kenntnis glared and Cross subsided.

"You are too useful to me, and I'm afraid it will make them even more powerful without your moderating influence. So, no," Kenntnis said firmly. Cross slumped.

"I don't understand how you can be all these creatures—" Richard began.

Cross made a rude noise. "Oh, please, you said you were a believer.

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That means you've accepted this shit for years—Father, Son, Holy Ghost.”

“But we're not talking about faith now,” Richard said. The effort to keep his voice level made his throat hurt. He fought back the rage. “I'm talking biology.”

“There are examples even in this world—amoebas, atoms. His kind evolved in a different universe, under different conditions,” said Kenntnis.

“Then you contain Allah and Yahveh . . . ?” Richard began.

Cross shook his head. “Not the big ones. They split off totally a few hundred years ago. And it's a damn good thing one of them, including the Big J, didn't try to come and croak you last night. If they had, you'd be dead.” There was another significant look between Cross and Kenntnis. Kenntnis gave an almost imperceptible head shake. “What I try to keep pasted together are all the little Jesusi created by small but passionate nut bag Christian sects, and the little Allahs created by equally nutty Moslem sects, and the little Yahvehs created by Jewish nuts.”

Richard stood and looked down at Kenntnis. “You're trying to enlist me in a war on God.”

“No, I'm trying to enlist you in a war on invading creatures who will enslave your kind, turn this world into a living hell and sink you in a darkness from which there is no morning.”

“And what happens if you win?”

“I give you the stars,” said Kenntnis simply.

They left it there. It was Richard himself who ended the discussion, saying he was too tired and too disturbed to properly evaluate what he'd heard. He needed time to process. Kenntnis offered a guest room and this time it was accepted. Kenntnis thought that was a pretty major victory. The policeman had so many barriers around himself. This was the first sign they were breaking through.

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The attack on his own building had shaken Kenntnis. He had to assume it was an overzealous subordinate, but if it had been Grenier himself it meant he and his masters were far too confident for Kenntnis's peace of mind. So he set Cross patrolling inside and outside the building, watching for magic. At least they'd managed to damp down Rhiana so she didn't interfere with the task.

Kenntnis lit a candle in one of the antique silver candlesticks in the dining room. It was an archaic gesture considering how deeply he revered and nurtured science and technology, but there was a power in the symbolism of the flame. Shielding the fluttering tongue of fire with his hand, Kenntnis went to the bedroom where Rhiana slept.

A fall of pale peach-colored muslin hung from a hook in the ceiling and draped, tent-like, over the graceful sleigh bed. Kenntnis caught a glimpse of himself reflected and refracted in the three mirrors in the vanity. Delicate Limoges boxes dotted the polished wood surface of the vanity. The Bose was set so low that the music of the Bach fugue was more an impression than any real sound. Nervous, Kenntnis checked to make certain it was still set for continuous play.

Reassured, he moved to the bed and drew back the veiling muslin. The light fell flickering over her extraordinary features. The high points of her cheekbones narrowed down to the pointed chin. Sooty lashes swept the top of those cheekbones. In the candlelight her skin seemed luminescent. The long black hair fanned across the pillow and cascaded over her shoulders. She slept with wanton abandon, sprawled across the entire bed, one arm thrown behind her head, one foot escaping from beneath the covers.

What was she? Kenntnis wondered. It had been long, long since this much power had walked in human form. Tomorrow he would begin investigating her and try to find some answers.

He left Rhiana and moved down the hall to where Richard slept. It was a simpler space with twin beds, a dresser and a large armchair set in front of a fireplace. The closet door was open and Kenntnis could see the coat, slacks and shirt carefully hung, the shoes set

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neatly on the floor beneath the clothes. The policeman's underwear was folded on the dresser. Next to it lay his empty holster. Kenntnis looked for the gun and found it lying on the table between the beds.

Richard slept curled tightly on his side. One hand was beneath the pillow, the other clenched beneath his chin. The white-gold hair had escaped from its perfect part, forming a soft fringe across his forehead. There was a furrow between the pale brows. If he had dreams they weren't pleasant.

A shadow on the wrist caught Kenntnis's attention. At first he thought it was a line formed by the sheet, but then he realized there was a scar running across Richard's wrist. Kenntnis craned to look down at the other arm. The skin was unblemished. Disturbed, Kenntnis stepped back and considered this development. *Old, but not terribly old.* Kenntnis wondered if this was the source of the missing months. Suddenly the man seemed terribly small and frail to be the repository for Kenntnis's hopes and the bulwark against his fears.

Kenntnis started for the door. Richard's voice stopped him before he reached it. "Who are you?"

Kenntnis turned back slowly. "Why did you try to kill yourself?"

"A piece of rope caught around my wrist during a yacht race," said Richard. His look dared Kenntnis to disagree. Kenntnis took the dare.

"And the examiners at the police academy bought that load of shit?"

"Albuquerque has a profound shortage of police," said Richard placidly.

They stared at one another in silence for a few moments.

"I need to know if you're strong enough to take this. Why did you try to kill yourself?"

"I only discuss personal matters with friends," said Richard. "Who are you?" he repeated.

"And I only give my name to friends," answered Kenntnis. As a barb it missed its mark. Richard just smiled.

"So I guess we'll keep our secrets." Kenntnis frowned, realizing

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he'd been trumped and hating it. Richard chuckled, a rich musical sound, and Kenntnis realized this was the first time he'd ever heard the policeman's laugh. "I think you're too used to getting your own way."

"You planning on teaching me humility?" asked Kenntnis.

"No, just pricking your arrogance now and then."

"Are you going to work for me?" Kenntnis demanded.

"I don't know yet," Richard replied.

"Don't take too long. Events are moving with or without you," Kenntnis warned.

Chapter

EIGHT

IN the morning Richard had found a box of non-adhesive bandages, medical tape and scissors sitting in the bathroom. He wanted to return to his apartment for a shower and clean clothes, but the bandages were a stark reminder that he needed another person to wrap his hands. The shower was stocked with high-end bath products scented with sandalwood. In a drawer by the sink he found an antique straight razor with a mother of pearl handle and shaving soap and a brush in a Limoges cup.

Given the attention to detail he'd found in the bathroom, Richard half expected to find a change of clothes in the closet, but only his torn and dirty clothes were there. He dressed, gathered up the antibiotic ointment and bandages and went in search of help.

The smells of freshly baked bread, ham and coffee led him into a large, aggressively modern kitchen. Rhiana was at a table set in the

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bay of a window. Covered chafing dishes stood on a buffet. Winter sunlight blazed through the glass and danced across the chrome and steel appliances. Flecks of what looked like opal glittered in the granite countertops. She was perusing a textbook, her chin propped in her hand.

Richard glanced curiously at the open page. There were a lot of mathematical formulae. The only thing he could read said,

A Bose-Einstein condensate is a gaseous superfluid phase formed by atoms cooled to temperatures very near to absolute zero. A rotating Bose-Einstein condensate could be used as a model black hole, allowing light to enter but not to escape. For a popularized version of this theory see the science fiction story "Light of Other Days," by Bob Shaw, which introduced a condensate as "slow glass."

It was a stomach-aching reminder of how he'd struggled to pull out a C in Calculus. Richard returned his attention to a more pleasant subject, the girl. The sun sparked highlights of blue and even deep purple from her hair. A dirty plate sat nearby.

"Good morning," Richard said.

She jumped and looked up. "I didn't know you were here," she blurted.

"I arrived pretty late," Richard said.

"Kenntnis should have woken me up."

Richard walked to the table. "Look, I was wondering . . ." He gestured with the box, tube and scissors.

"Sure." He sat down, and she took his hands in hers and gently turned them palms up. There was a hiss of quickly indrawn breath. "What happened?"

"I got burned."

"How?"

"It's a long story, and I really need to get to work. May I tell you tonight?"

"Yeah. Okay."

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She opened the tube of ointment and spread it gently across the raw blisters on his palms. The tips of her fingers were cool and very soft. Three of the fingernails, two on one hand, one on the other, were broken. The rest were long, perfect ovals carefully polished.

“Did you break them the other night?” he found himself asking inanely.

Rhiana nodded and laid a gauze pad over his palm. Her hair fell forward, brushing lightly across his wrists. The tang of citrus wafted to his nostrils. Desire shivered down his nerves. The reactions spreading through his body were unexpected. It had been a long time since he’d experienced any type of physical arousal.

Sex had been his greatest vice. His dirty secret. It had caused most of the problems in his life, and he hadn’t slept with anyone for four years. It hadn’t been hard, his injuries had been so bad and his fear so great, but now he was faced with Rhiana. He pictured them in bed, skin to skin, sweat slick and burning hot, and a stab of blinding panic gripped his chest. For a moment he writhed, pierced by two divergent, almost painful drives—passion and panic. Panic won and the bulge in his crotch subsided.

Rhiana shook back her hair and looked at him. “I never thanked you for saving me.”

“*De nada*,” he said.

Her words made him very glad the desire had drained away. If he had acted on his attraction it would have seemed as if he expected her to respond out of gratitude. And she was awfully young, he would be taking advantage.

She shot him an impish grin and said in a deadpan tone, “Just doing my job, ma’am.”

“Not quite *that* sanguine,” Richard said. “It fell just a tad outside my job description.”

Rhiana finished bandaging his hands and jumped to her feet. She nodded toward the chafing dishes. “What can I get you? There’s just about everything.”

She started lifting lids to reveal eggs poached, fried and scrambled.

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Beneath another gleaming lid was sausage, ham and bacon. There were waffles and pancakes, toast, fresh fruit and porridge.

Rhiana wrinkled her nose as she lifted the last lid. "And these weird little fish thingees."

"Kippers," said Richard automatically.

Rhiana flushed, saying quickly and aggressively. "I knew that."

But Richard hadn't been a psych minor for nothing. "Just some fruit and a slice of ham," he said quickly to get them past the moment.

It was pretty evident that the physics text no longer had any lure, so Richard resigned himself to breakfast conversation. "So, where are you from?" he asked, knowing that most people like to talk about themselves and if he asked the questions he would be able to eat. He bit into a piece of honeydew melon. The rich, sweet flavor exploded across his tongue. Definitely not from a local market.

"Van Nuys."

"And that's where?"

"Oh, California. My dad's a trucker. Mom works for a company that manufactures medical equipment."

"Brothers? Sisters?"

"Three brothers. Two sisters. But four of us are adopted."

"Oh." Richard paused and speared a large blackberry. He wasn't sure how to respond. *That's nice. How noble of your parents.* He settled for another question. "And how did you end up in New Mexico?"

"They gave me a full scholarship—encouraging women in science, you know. I'm the first one in my family to go to college." She was babbling with nervousness. Richard wondered if it was him and what he had done to elicit this reaction.

"Congratulations, that's a major accomplishment." He smiled over at her, and she blushed brightly.

"Thanks." She twisted a strand of hair between her fingers. "That wasn't my folks' reaction. All they could focus on was how the grant only paid for tuition and books, not housing. I had to take out a loan for that. They wouldn't help at all. Well, maybe they really couldn't, but still . . ." She frowned at the memory. She looked up and her

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brow cleared. "And anyway, I don't think they understand why I wanted to do it."

"Forgive me, Rhiana, I know this is impertinent, but how old are you?" She hesitated and fiddled with her napkin.

"I'm almost eighteen," she said.

"Wow."

"I skipped a couple of grades."

"I'm impressed." A glance at his watch sent him out of his chair. "I've got to go. I've got to go by the apartment for a change of clothes before I go to work."

"Okay. See you tonight."

"Right."

As he drove down Montgomery, Richard reflected on how odd human beings were. He was defensive because of his family's money and social position. Rhiana was defensive for the exact opposite reason. Maybe nobody was ever content and secure.

The stink of wet, burned carpet caught in the throat as Richard pushed open the door of the apartment. He stepped in and froze at the sight of the slender man seated on the couch.

Justice Robert Oort looked up over the rims of his half-moon glasses. The dark blue eyes were cool and emotionless. He set aside the book he had been reading. A year's absence made Richard aware of how his father's iron-gray hair had turned to silver. He wondered if it was him or his mother who'd caused that, or could he not feel guilty and assume it was just the passage of time?

"Sir," Richard said.

"The manager let me in," the older man said in answer to a question that hadn't been asked.

"But why are you . . . ?" Richard began.

"Your lieutenant informed us you'd been hurt. I flew out on the red eye and went to the hospital only to find out you had checked yourself out."

"Sorry, sir." It was stupid and inane to apologize but that was the nature of the relationship.

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"That was not wise."

"Yes, you're right, sir."

"Where did you go?"

"Friends," he almost said automatically, but he caught himself. He didn't want an inquiry into the identity of the friends. "Hotel," he answered instead.

The judge checked his Rolex. "You're going to be late if you don't start changing."

Richard walked into the bedroom. His father followed. Richard selected a coppery brown suit and a dark gold shirt. His fingers were trembling as he flicked through the dozens of ties hanging on the electric racks in the closet.

"Your lieutenant also told me that you were promoted."

"Yes, sir," Richard said as he pulled shoe trees out of a pair of brown loafers.

"You didn't think that deserved a phone call?"

He turned to face his father, and found himself unable to meet the judge's intensely dark blue eyes. Instead he studied the ugly Berber carpet. "It . . ." He paused to clear his throat. "It happened very suddenly."

"So I gathered. I talked with Captain Murphy in Newport and he indicated that it was almost unheard of for a young officer with so little experience to be promoted to detective without strings being pulled." The judge's voice provided the interrogatory.

Richard's stomach began to ache. He forced himself to relax his fingers, which had clenched tightly around the material of his shirt.

"You'd have to ask my captain," Richard said.

"You have no idea why you were promoted?" his father pressed.

Richard considered the events of the past three days and the conversation he'd had last night with Kenntnis and shook his head. He also realized that his father's arrival had little to do with concern over Richard and a lot to do with distrust of the mysterious patron.

"I'm concerned that you're mishandling this career as well."

"I thought you didn't approve of my becoming a policeman."

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His father sighed. "It wasn't what I'd hoped for, but you lacked the . . ." He paused and then resumed. "Temperament for law or medicine, and after your . . . illness you chose to quit Drew's firm rather than return. You needed to do something."

His stomach was pressed up hard against his lungs and Richard felt as if he had only inches with which to breathe. "I was good at music."

"You told us that only one tenth of one percent actually succeed in having a professional career. I didn't like those odds. And you told me yourself you weren't certain you had the talent. I wanted you to have something secure to fall back on. So I got you the job."

"But you seem to be objecting when someone makes an effort on my behalf in this career," Richard said, and felt the breath freeze in his chest at his father's look.

"I don't know who's acting on your behalf, and I want to make certain you're not doing anything that could blow back on me. I'm on the Federal bench. I have to be careful, and your judgment hasn't always impressed me."

Richard knew the force of his father's personality and will. Captain Ortiz would tell him who had made the request. "He's a businessman named Kenntnis. He owns a company called Lumina Enterprises."

"I find it disturbing when you lie to me. Did you think I would actually believe that you accomplished this on your own?"

The nausea was increasing. If he'd just told the truth initially he might have avoided this rebuke.

Robert Oort shook his head. "I don't understand you at all. I raised you to be better than this." Richard didn't respond. "Well, it's apparent you are determined to set your own course." The older man turned and walked to the door of the bedroom. He paused and looked back. "You might want to instruct them to inform someone else next time you come to grief. I'm a long ways away."

Richard heard the front door fall closed. Dropping the shirt, he ran for the bathroom, hoping to reach the toilet before he vomited.

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The ribbing started in the parking lot outside APD headquarters and continued all the way up to the bullpen. Various officers—plainclothes and uniforms—commented about the shootout at Richard's apartment the night before and his seeming inability to hit anything. After the encounter with his father Richard was finding it hard to maintain his equilibrium, but it was fatal with cops if you reacted. Like wolves, they sensed weakness.

Richard kept smiling, but his cheeks were burning by the time he reached his desk. He pulled out his notebook and Palm indicating dismissal, and eventually the pack wandered away. He tried to concentrate on transferring his notes, but his thoughts returned over and over to the conversation with his father. *If only he'd told him about Kenntnis initially. There was nothing wrong with having help. Why did he need his dad to be proud of him? The judge had never been proud of anything he'd done before. It wasn't going to change now.*

A shadow fell across the desk. He looked up at Lieutenant Weber. "Could I talk to you for a minute?" Weber asked.

Richard nodded and followed the other man into an empty conference room. Weber shut the door behind them and sat down at the round table. Richard remained standing. A hard knot formed again in Richard's stomach as Weber stared up at him.

"Sit down. You're not in trouble," Weber said, as if he'd read Richard's mind. Richard sat cautiously on the front edge of the indicated chair. "I sent evidence techs over to your place last night."

"And?" said Richard brightly.

"Whatever you shot at, you didn't miss," said Weber. His expression was somber, his brown eyes wary and confused. "There were no holes in the walls."

"He was in front of the sliding doors."

"I checked outside. There's a seven-foot cedar fence around your patio. You didn't hit that either. And we didn't find any bullets out in the commons area."

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"Why is this important?" Richard asked, swallowing hard, trying to force back the dread.

Weber ran a hand through his thick mat of wavy brown hair, leaving it looking like a disturbed haystack. "Because I found out yesterday that you were at the building that got bombed. The chief had sent you over there for an interview. Who's after you? And what have you done to set them on you?" Weber asked.

"I'm not dirty," Richard said, assuming that was what Weber was thinking.

"Oh shit, I know that. You're a fucking boy scout." Weber left his chair and came around to sit on the edge of the table near Richard. He laid a hand on Richard's shoulder. Richard noticed a faint dusting of freckles across the back of Weber's wrist and the powerful muscles and tendons.

"It's pretty damn obvious that you're in some kind of trouble, and I wanted you to know that if I can help I will. You're a good cop and we'd . . . *I'd* hate to lose you."

The support and honest concern were unexpected and terribly welcome after his earlier encounter. Richard felt a glow of pleasure that this decorated officer thought well of him.

The phone in the conference room chirped. Weber leaned over, picked up the receiver, listened and handed it over to Richard.

"Richard Oort," he said.

"Detective, this is Sergeant Vallis in Denver." Richard felt the pulse beating in his throat. "You had an APB out on some kids?"

"Yes."

"Well we've got three of 'em in the morgue up here."

"Which three?"

"Naomi Parsons, Dan Douglas and Alice Rangold."

You know how kids are, Emma Parsons had said. *They all want to try their wings*. Well, Naomi had tried and they'd failed her. Panic and dread overtook him as Richard realized that he'd have to break the news to this mother . . . to all their mothers. It had him so agitated that he momentarily lost the thread of what Vallis was saying. By the

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time he could focus again, he heard Vallis say, “. . . got caught up in a drive-by.”

“They were shot?” Surprise sent his voice up an octave.

“Yeah, that’s what I just said,” answered Vallis.

“Were they the only fatalities?” Richard asked.

“Nah, four bangers got hit, too. It’s been a long time since we’ve seen it this bad. Will you be comin’ up?”

“Yes, I think I better.” Richard handed the phone over to Weber to hang up.

“Bad?” the lieutenant asked.

“Yes.” Richard stood and started for the door. A new and unwelcome thought intruded. “Can I go to Denver?”

“Sure, if it’s part of an ongoing investigation.”

“It is. The bombing that’s now become a homicide.”

Richard got as far as the door, then hesitated, his hand gripping the doorknob. “Do I . . . am I the one who tells the families?”

“Some cops do it themselves. Me, I call the chaplain and have him deliver the news,” Weber said, trying to sound matter-of-fact and failing.

“I . . . I think I’ll do that.”

Chapter

NINE

VALLIS was a heavysset man in his midfifties. He sported ostrich cowboy boots and a belt buckle the size of a dinner plate wedged up his sagging belly. He nursed a big bottle of water, and periodically he would sniff at an open jar of Carmex. Richard felt like Vallis looked, after the turbulent flight up from Albuquerque aboard one of Mesa Airlines' twelve-seater prop jobs. The plane didn't handle the mountain updrafts terribly well. Richard took a companionable sip from his own bottle of Evian. Vallis stuck the water bottle under his arm and held out a shovel-sized hand.

"Glad you could get up here this fast. I've got the parents due to arrive in the next few hours and they all want to take their kids."

"Understandable," Richard said.

"Don't get many beat cops coming to take a look," said Vallis.

"I just made detective. . . ."

"Congratulations."

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“Thank you. Anyway, I’ve tried to get at least a journeyman’s knowledge about various aspects of police work so I’ve read a lot of forensic books over the past few years.”

“Well, this one is pretty damn cut and dried,” said Vallis over his shoulder as he led Richard through the office cubicles and the big double metal doors into the morgue itself.

Vallis choked out a cough and stuffed blobs of carmex into each nostril. Richard looked at the older man curiously. There actually wasn’t much odor in the morgue. Giant exhaust fans beat out a rhythm, moving the very chilly air. Richard wondered if Vallis had gotten a whiff he couldn’t forget, and now his mind provided the stench whenever he was near a body. And there were a lot of bodies. Denver was a much bigger and richer city than Albuquerque so there were three coroners at work and a couple of assistants. A body on one table had been cracked open, rib bones starkly white against the red and yellow of the viscera and muscles. There was the sound of gurgling water running constantly down the length of the steel table carrying away the waste.

An assistant spotted them. “Who you here for?” he asked.

“The drive-bys,” Vallis croaked out, trying to breathe through his mouth and talk at the same time.

The assistant nodded and led the way to the lockers set in the far wall. The drawers slid out with a rumble of metal on metal. Richard pulled thin surgical gloves over his bandages, and twitched back the first sheet to reveal the waxy pale face of a young man. Dark blond hair fell limply across his forehead. Richard steeled himself and pulled again until the torso could be seen. There were four wounds like tiny mouths in the dead boy’s chest and stomach. Richard covered the body and moved to the next.

The girl in the next drawer had soft brown hair cut to chin length. She had a wound in the side of her neck and two in the chest. The final drawer held a zaftig dark brunette with more torso wounds. He felt ghoulish, but he checked the toe tag. The zaftig brunette was Naomi.

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"Okay?" Vallis asked.

Richard nodded and pulled the sheet back up. The coroner's assistant rolled the brunette back into the wall. The man's hands closed around the end of the slab. There was a large bruise across the back of one hand and something snapped into focus.

"Wait!" Richard pulled the sheet back down from the first girl's body and stared at the neck wound.

"Could you get a coroner over here, please?" he asked the assistant. The man looked bored and irritated, but he nodded and walked away.

"What?" Vallis asked in an aggrieved tone.

"This bullet went in on an angle." Richard gently touched the ragged edges of the neck wound. "It had to have hit either the carotid or the jugular or maybe both. There should be a huge swelling from the hemorrhage."

Vallis bent forward, but Richard noticed that he never actually focused on the girl's throat. His eyes kept sliding away.

"Okay, so?"

"Let's see what the coroner says," Richard replied cautiously and turned to greet the white-haired, paunchy man approaching them. He was snapping his heels down hard as if to emphasize his annoyance at the interruption.

"Yes? Danny said you had a question," said the coroner.

"More of an observation," said Richard, and he repeated what he had told Vallis.

"Obviously it didn't hit either the vein or the artery." Impatience and superiority made each word hit like a dart.

"Could you just take a look?" Richard asked, since the coroner hadn't once glanced at the body.

The coroner's eyes slid off the body and focused on the far wall. "It's what I would expect from this kind of wound. We've done the autopsies."

Richard blinked at the coroner. He looked back at the smooth, unblemished body of the girl. "But . . . but you haven't," he said weakly.

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"Are you insinuating that I and my staff haven't done our work?"

"Well, no . . . yes."

The man's face was a mottled red. "If you'll excuse me. You can find your way out." The coroner turned and walked away.

"There hasn't been an autopsy," said Richard, appealing to Vallis.

"Of course there has," said Vallis. "Look, I gotta get back to the precinct."

He walked to the door. Richard followed, his mind whirling.

Just outside the door he caught Vallis by the arm. "Are you releasing the bodies to a mortuary?"

"Yeah, the Davis Funeral Home."

"When?" asked Richard.

Vallis looked at his watch. "Well, now that you've had a look, probably within the hour."

"Thanks," said Richard. He waited until Vallis cleared the front doors before he pulled out his cell phone and placed a call to Albuquerque.

Richard waited on the sidewalk out front of the Davis Mortuary. A redbrick building with white trim and wide bay windows with mullioned panes, it looked more like a house than a funeral parlor, as if the sting of death could be eased with Colonial respectability. His breath puffed white streamers in front of his face. Frost sparkled on the sidewalk where the light of the street lamps pooled. Occasionally he heard a car pass on the larger street behind him. He checked his watch. 11:43. Armandariz's plane had been due to land at 9:20. *I wonder if she's thought better of it and isn't coming after all*, he thought. *What I'm asking is completely out of line*. The icy air bit at the skin of his exposed wrist. Richard quickly shook the cuffs of his shirt, suit coat and topcoat back down, and pulled up his glove. He paced a slow circle.

A car turned the corner, the headlights sweeping across the

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darkened facades of the buildings. The Neon rolled into the curb and stopped. The lights and engine died and Armandariz stepped out wrapped in a bulky white parka with a fur-trimmed hood. The pale fur set off her dark skin. She had a medical bag in one hand and a Styrofoam cup in the other. The cup added its steam to their mingled breaths.

“Okay, you told me if I came I might get some answers about the ash in the trailer,” Armandariz said.

Richard held up a hand. “That’s not exactly what I said. I said you might find something as intriguing as the ash.”

“So I get more questions and no answers?” asked Armandariz.

“Possibly . . . probably. Or I misinterpreted what I saw and wasted your time and my money.”

The coroner nodded, accepting his caveats. “Okay, let’s do it.”

Richard led her around to the back of the mortuary. Two hearses and two white limos were parked in the lot near a Dumpster. “Tacky,” Armandariz opined as they walked past the limos. “They should be black.”

They reached the double doors set in the center of the back wall. Richard knocked softly.

“How did you get them to agree to this?” Armandariz asked.

“I waited until the owners had gone home, and I wooed the night staff with a flash of a badge and a hint of *Silence of the Lambs*. Todd liked the idea of being part of something bigger than a night spent embalming.”

“Yeah, I could see where that would enliven his evening,” said Armandariz, and she blew on her exposed fingers.

The locks clicked, and one door opened. Todd looked cautiously around the parking lot, and waved them in. He was a small man only an inch or so taller than Richard, but softly round.

“Todd, this is Dr. Armandariz. Doctor, Todd Aikens.”

“So pleased to meet you,” said Todd in a hushed tone as he pumped Armandariz’s hand.

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"We can't thank you enough for this," Richard said.

"Not at all. I knew when I saw them I had to do something. They looked so sad." He turned and led them down the hall.

Armandariz rolled her eyes at Richard and whispered, "What they look is dead."

"You're a cynic," said Richard.

The bodies, discreetly draped with sheets, were laid out on tables. On shelves lay the mortician's tools of the trade—putty, wax, jugs of bright pink and orange fluid. Richard stared at the neon colors in confusion.

"It takes a lot of pumped-in orange and pink to turn corpses back toward normal color," said Armandariz.

Richard had been expecting the reek of formaldehyde, but the room smelled of a floral air freshener. Armandariz shed the parka, pulled a long apron and a pair of surgical gloves out of her case, and donned them. Next she set out her instruments. Richard leaned against a wall to watch.

But the Albuquerque coroner was skittish. She pulled down a sheet, then turned away to fuss with her instruments without ever looking at the corpse. She picked up a scalpel, then asked Todd about the prospects for the Colorado Rockies in the upcoming season. Richard watched closely, trying to analyze what was happening.

Armandariz flung down her scalpel. It hit the side of the table with a metallic *ting* and went bouncing away across the tile floor. Todd ran to pick it up.

"Todd, I'm really tired. You got anything with caffeine around this place?" the coroner asked.

"There's coffee in the kitchen," Todd answered, handing the scalpel back.

"Would you get me a cup? Black." The mortician nodded. As soon as he'd cleared the room Armandariz rounded on Richard. "What the fuck is wrong with me?" she demanded.

"What do you mean?" said Richard, and he made his tone as non-committal as possible.

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Armandariz glared at him. "It's going to sound crazy."

"I won't hold it against you," Richard said.

She hesitated, then blurted out, "I can't look at these bodies, and I've never had a problem looking at bodies. It's like they're repelling any kind of close inspection."

Richard nodded. "I don't think that's crazy. I think it's the only explanation for why a professional coroner would fail to autopsy homicide victims." Armandariz stared at him. Richard stepped forward and took another pair of surgical gloves out of her case. He blew in them and pulled them on, working his fingers to smooth out any wrinkles. Taking the scalpel out of her hand, he said, "Tell me what to do. I'll do it."

"So you don't feel it?" Richard shook his head. Armandariz glanced down at the girl's body. Her eyes started to slide away, but she forced her gaze back to the neck wound. "Make a cut here," she ordered curtly, and indicated the line with the tip of her finger. A trickle of sweat slipped from beneath the hair at her temple, and ran across her cheek.

Todd returned with the coffee. Armandariz took the cup and gulped down a large mouthful. The smell of the coffee was dark and bitter, vanquishing the floral air fresheners.

The flesh parted under the knife. "Hold it open," she ordered. Richard clenched his teeth, worked his fingers into the cut and spread it open. Armandariz pulled a small, powerful halogen flashlight out of her bag and inspected the interior of the wound. She stepped back with a nod and pulled off her gloves with a sharp snap. "I'm done. You can have them," she said to Todd.

"So, what did you find?" the mortician asked with an eager glitter in his eyes.

"Sorry, Todd, you're not cleared for that," Armandariz said portentously.

Todd managed to look both disappointed and excited at the same time. "This is big, isn't it?" he whispered.

"Yes, *X Files* big, and we couldn't have done it without you," said

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Armandariz. The coroner closed her case and jerked her head toward Richard and the door.

Richard paused to shake Todd's hand again. "Thank you again, and please, please, keep this entirely between us."

"You can depend on me."

Outside Richard sucked in several lungfuls of fresh air so cold it burned his throat. "So, what did you find?" he asked, repeating Todd's question.

"They were shot post mortem, they need to be autopsied, and the cops need to look for somebody other than the bangers."

"I don't think they're going to," said Richard. "And here's why." He pulled the rolled-up papers from the pocket of his top coat and handed them to Armandariz. "This is a copy of the police report complete with the testimony from the only surviving gang member. Start at paragraph six."

Armandariz pulled the flashlight out of her case. The powerful beam illuminated the page to a stark white. She read quickly, then looked over at Richard, and slapped the back of her hand sharply against the page. "I want to hear this straight from this *pendejo's* mouth."

"No," said Richard. "You answered my question. You do not want to be involved in this."

"The fuck I don't! Get your ass in the car."

Richard looked, shook his head. "We won't be able to see him now."

"Fine. We grab a hotel, get some sleep and see him in the morning."

"Okay, but I'll drive myself. I have my own car." Richard waved toward his rental parked across the street.

"No. You are not ditching me."

She had anticipated him. Richard felt his jaw slide forward, ready to fight, but then just sighed. He was secretly relieved to have someone else around to verify and document the craziness.

"Okay, just let me get my case."

Richard retrieved his overnight case and tossed it into the trunk.

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He then opened the driver's side door for the coroner, Armandariz gave him a strange look, then shook her head and got in.



It was partly because she was hungry and partly because she wanted to spend more time with the enigma that was Richard Oort that Angela Armandariz insisted they stop for food. They found a twenty-four-hour Carrow's and were led by a frowning, gum-chewing teenager to a booth. Angela used the menu as a screen as she leaned across the table and said softly, "When I was her age I had to have the homework done and be in bed by ten." He smiled and Angela felt dazzled. She realized this was the first time she'd seen the detective not looking stressed, confused, or grim.

"Careful, you're showing your age," he whispered back. "But I have to agree. Where are their parents?"

"And you be careful. You're about to imply that women need to stay at home and raise the kids." She shook a finger under his nose and he sat back like a startled puppy.

"No, not at all. I was raised in that kind of home, but my parents encouraged all of us to get an education and pursue our interests," Richard said.

"And who's all of us?"

"My two sisters. One's a doctor and the other's a lawyer."

"And you didn't become an Indian chief," Angela quipped, and glanced at him from beneath her lashes to see how he would react. He chuckled.

"I've heard how you enjoy getting under people's skin." He paused and lined up his silverware. "Are you from New Mexico?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm a rarity—a native—a twelve-generation native, or thereabouts, at least on my mom's side. I'm one of the crypto-Jews of northern New Mexico."

He scanned her face as if searching for the joke. "I beg your pardon?" said Richard.

"Jews fleeing the Inquisition in Spain. A number of them fled as

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far as was physically possible, which was the mountains of New Mexico. They were passing as Catholics, and over the years they became assimilated, but certain eccentric rituals survived. I can remember my great-grandmother bringing out the candles on Friday evening, covering her head and praying to the Virgin.”

“So are you Jewish or Catholic?”

“Neither. I flirted with converting to Judaism, but I found out it was just as shitty toward women as Catholicism so I opted for agnosticism. It seemed a safer bet than out-and-out atheism.”

She had touched some nerve. The policeman was looking grim again. Angela paused for a long sip of her coffee. “Look, if I’ve offended you . . . well, tough. Some people believe. Some don’t. I don’t.”

“It’s not that, it’s . . . well, it’s an odd echo of . . . well . . . things that are happening in my life,” Richard said.

“Want to talk about it?” Angela asked, and mentally kicked herself as she watched him shift down and away from her.

“No,” he said, tempering it with a smile. “I’d really like to hear about New Mexico before it became trendy.”

The teenager returned and they ordered. While they ate, Richard a salad and a glass of milk, Angela pancakes, eggs, ham, sausage and bacon, she launched into stories about the family, the big house on Rio Grande Boulevard, the ranch outside of Taos, the horses, crawdad hunting in the ditches. Her six siblings and her parents.

“It wasn’t easy for them,” she said. “Dad was in the Air Force, stationed out at Kirtland. The women in our family tend not to marry outsiders, and Dad was *way* outside.”

“Because he’s African-American?” Richard asked.

“Yeah. That whole Rainbow Coalition thing . . . not so much in New Mexico. The Hispanic and the black communities don’t generally mix.”

“But your last name is Hispanic.”

“My paternal grandfather was from Cuba. Like the Indians in New Mexico with their Spanish names, well, the same thing happened to the slaves in the Caribbean.”

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"But your folks, they made it work? They're still together?"

"Yeah." Angela smiled fondly at the memories. "Love really can bridge all differences. Sorry, that sounds really corny."

"I think it sounds nice."

Angela grinned. "The irony is that Dad's actually Jewish. His mom is Jewish."

He insisted on paying, but didn't make it about being a gentleman. "You came up here to help me out on a case. I'll get reimbursed."

While he took a tip back to the table, Angela checked the phone book for a nearby motel. She tried to figure out how he had dodged talking about himself, and kicked herself for babbling like a teenager. She studied his ass as he walked away, the cut of his coat across his shoulders, and gave herself permission to feel like a teenager. Richard tossed down the money, turned and started back to her. Damn, he was gorgeous and without the swagger that incredibly handsome men usually possessed. It was also nice that he wasn't very tall. At five feet nothing she got very tired of always looking up.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Yeah. I found a Motel Six," she said.

"Excellent."

He held the door for her again.



Richard could hear the television from Angela's room next door. It stayed on for almost an hour after they checked in. He wondered if she'd actually be able to sleep after the three cups of coffee she'd drunk at dinner.

He had tried but each time he closed his eyes he saw the pale, slack faces of the dead, and replayed the conversations with their families. Soon they would be coming to Denver to collect their children and take them home. In the morning he would meet the sole survivor of the gun battle, a Hispanic kid who would undoubtedly be charged with felony murder, and there would be another grieving family to

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mourn the loss of a child. Whoever had actually murdered Alice, Naomi and Drew had a lot to answer for, and he was going to see to it that they did. Which meant he needed help.

He lifted his wallet out of the breast pocket of his coat and pulled out Kenntnis's card. For a long time he sat on the foot of the bed holding his cell phone, staring at the card, and feeling his stomach clench down into a tight, painful ball.

Kenntnis answered on the first ring, and there was no hint of sleepiness in the voice.

"Okay, I'm with you," Richard said without preamble.

"Why?" Kenntnis asked with equal directness.

"They killed those kids, at least three of them. We need to find the fourth, this Josh Delay. Perhaps you can make inquiries through less formal channels."

"All right. You need to be careful. I think this Delay is the one who threw the spell at the building. He's a pretty major sorcerer."

The incongruity of the words seemed to beat in time with his throbbing headache. Richard covered his eyes. "I can't believe I'm doing this."

"Do you think it's the right thing to do?" Kenntnis asked.

"I don't know what I feel . . .," Richard began.

"Don't feel," Kenntnis interrupted sharply. "I want you to think."

"I'm human. I feel," Richard said with matching sharpness.

"That's fine, feel all you want on your own time. With me, you think," Kenntnis replied.

Chapter

TEN

THE interrogation room at the county's juvenile facility was painted a bilious shade of green. The predominant smells were disinfectant, coffee and bacon. Angela glared at Richard.

"Damn, you had an actual change of clothes."

"Yes. What did you think I had in that bag?"

"I assumed you were like most cops and had a razor, a pair of socks and a pair of clean underwear."

"Sorry to disappoint."

"You just make me look bad. I hung my pantsuit up in the bathroom while I showered, and hoped," Angela said.

"It didn't work," Richard said, but smiled.

"Yes, I know that."

Shuffling footsteps and the rattle of metal on metal interrupted them. A guard escorted Danny Sisneros into the room. The guard removed the handcuffs but left the ankle fetters.

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"Knock when you're finished," the guard said, and left.

Sisneros was a burly kid with a long scrawny neck, like a straw balancing the square head on broad, blocky shoulders. His prominent Adam's apple bobbed up and down the length of throat like a cartoon character. His left leg was in a cast and thrust out stiffly along the side of the table. He stared at them bleary-eyed and kept rubbing his cheeks. The scratch of skin on stubble was loud in the interrogation room.

"Is this gonna take long, man?"

"No," said Richard. "I just want to hear what happened night before last."

"I didn't shoot nobody," Danny said with some urgency.

"We know that."

"In fact, you got shot," said Angela encouragingly.

The boy's lower lip drooped in a pout. "Yeah, and somebody's gonna pay for that. Not like you think," Danny hastened to add.

He had that *oh shit I shouldn't have said that* look that Richard had seen far too many times on suspects. Richard looked away toward the dingy pale green walls. He didn't enjoy witnessing the general stupidity and low impulse control of most criminals. He couldn't forget how much of it was due to trauma in the womb from drug-addicted mothers, and the violence and grind of poverty after they entered the world. Richard's was not a popular view in law enforcement, which is why he kept it to himself.

"Maybe we'll sue 'em," Sisneros added belligerently.

"Yeah, you hold that thought, sport," said Armandariz. "Now answer the nice policeman's questions." Richard threw Angela an exasperated look. She shrugged an apology.

"Please," he said gently.

"We were dealing . . . like big surprise."

Richard threw up his hand to stop the flow of words. "Have you said this before and have you seen an attorney?" He caught Angela's look of surprise out of the corner of his eye.

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"There was like shit all over the sidewalk, and the PD said the dope was like the least of my problems."

"All right then, go on."

"I was down the street about half a block on lookout. Everything seemed to be smooth. Johnny had the shit and Juan had the money. Then these Anglo assholes come walking around the corner at the other end of the street. Right into the middle of the deal. Next thing I know everybody's shootin'."

"And why was that?" Richard asked. "Did the Anglos do anything to provoke it?"

"I couldn't see. Me, I think Juan decided they were cops and Johnny had ratted him out, so he pulled his piece." He paused and massaged his face with his palms again. Richard waited and pinched his nose to briefly shut out the smell of scrambled eggs and old grease. "It was weird, though. Everybody else was diving for cover or running, but these dumb fucks just stood there in the middle of a gunfight."

Richard stood. "Thank you, Danny."

"That's it?"

"Yes, thanks."

Richard was pleased that Armandariz kept silent all the way back to the car. Dark gray and white clouds hung heavy in the sky and there was the smell of moisture in the air. He opened the driver's door for Angela, but she paused, leaned her folded arms along the top and stared at Richard.

"Dead people don't walk," she said.

"I warned you not to get involved," Richard replied.

"You're pretty cool about all this."

He didn't respond, just stepped into the car. Armandariz turned on the ignition and backed them out of the parking space. The heater was roaring. "Let's hope we can get to the airport before the snow hits," she said.

"I've got to pick up my car," said Richard. "Drop me back at the mortuary."

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As she climbed the narrow steps into the Mesa plane Angela cursed Richard mentally in English and Spanish. Despite her best efforts he had managed to ditch her. She had waited until the absolute final call for the flight and kept ringing his cell phone every fifteen minutes only to get his voice mail. She had finally left a message; simple, short and to the point. *"I'm in. Like it or not, I'm in."*

During the short flight back to Albuquerque, she considered. She needed details on the case, and she knew enough people within the police that it shouldn't be a problem. She didn't stop at home for clean clothes but went to APD headquarters.

She spotted Oort's desk immediately. It had the same neat economy as the man himself. There were only two detectives in at this hour. One of them was Snyder. Angela knew his reputation from friends on the force. He was a grumbler who always felt underappreciated.

She hailed him. "Hey, Snyder." He looked up from his newspaper. Powdered sugar from the open box of donuts coated his fingers. Angela sighed. Cops resented being stereotyped, but they were often total clichés.

"Doc," he said, and waved his coffee mug at her.

"The lab's doing tests for Oort, and he's fucked up some documents." It was absolutely the right tack to take. Snyder beamed.

"Little asshole. He's either got pictures of the chief fucking a chimp or he's fucking the chief."

"So may I look through his files?" Angela asked.

"Be my guest," Snyder said, and waved a hand grandly at Oort's desk.

Angela settled into the chair, and read quickly through the handwritten notes, noting the small and precise handwriting and the distinctive lefthander's tilt. It didn't take her long to realize that the trailer whose evidence she'd analyzed was step two in a trail that began with an explosion at Lumina Enterprises.

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She had never paid much attention to the elegant modern building with its multiple angles placed on a knoll at the foot of the mountains. Now she studied it closely as she wound her way up the hill and pulled into the parking lot. It reminded her of the prow of some fantastic ship preparing to sail out across the river valley far below.

There was a security guard as well as a receptionist in the lobby. The walls sent back the echoes from her heels tapping on the black and silver marble floor. She showed her credentials to the receptionist.

"I want to see Mr. Kenntnis."

"Who should I say is calling?" the woman asked.

"Doctor Armandariz." The woman turned aside and spoke so softly into a throat mike that Angela didn't catch a word.

Angela wandered around the lobby. Drew a hand across the butter-soft leather upholstery on the sofas and the chairs. Flipped through the assortment of magazines and newspapers, both scientific and business and not all of them American or even in English. The security guard watched her sleepy-eyed, but his physical stance told her he was very much awake. The perfectly coifed young woman answered the gentle chimes of the phone. Bored, Angela wandered up to the security guard and indicated the alternating dark silver panels on the walls and the dark floor with its swirls of silver.

"You know, if Darth Vader had an office it would be in a building like this."

"What makes you think he doesn't?" rumbled a basso voice.

Angela whirled, grasping for her scattering composure. She hadn't heard the elevator. The man who was stepping off and into the lobby was massive and African-American. She hadn't expected that. Then on closer inspection she realized his face was a fascinating mix of racial types. He thrust out a hand.

"I'm Kenntnis."

"Dr. Armandariz."

"Please come upstairs to my office."

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The elevator doors sighed shut. "You wouldn't know a bomb exploded here three days ago," Angela said conversationally.

"Considering there hasn't been any news to that effect I'm wondering how you knew," Kenntnis said. His eyes had narrowed and he took a step back from her. The retreat seemed odd from a man so large and powerful.

"I read Oort's file this morning."

"Now you are beginning to interest and alarm me a great deal," Kenntnis said.

"Hey, relax. I'm a good guy."

"I would feel so much better if Richard were here to tell me that."

"So you haven't been able to reach him either," Angela said.

Kenntnis reached out and hit the stop button on the elevator. "Who are you, and what is your interest in this?"

"I'm the County Coroner and I think Richard's in trouble," Angela said simply.

"Why?"

"I think he's still investigating in Denver and it's never a good idea to work a high-wire act solo."

"You act as if this investigation is dangerous," Kenntnis said, clearly probing.

"Considering three dead people managed to walk down a street and get shot I think it's way past dangerous and into fucking surreal. Now can we get this elevator moving and finish this conversation sitting down? I had three hours of sleep last night."

Suddenly Kenntnis was grinning down at her. It made her feel that shiver of joy reminiscent of when her father had praised her efforts after a track meet or the grades arrived. Kenntnis jammed the button down and the elevator hummed back into motion.

"How did you find me?"

"Richard's notes."

"You wouldn't happen to have a copy of those, would you?"

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"Hell, no." She paused and enjoyed his discomfort. "I have the originals."

This time Kenntnis laughed out loud. The elevator sighed to a stop and they stepped into an elegant outer office. Kenntnis began flipping through the pages, his eyes scanning quickly down the lines. Suddenly he stiffened and stopped walking.

"We need to go someplace more secure," he said, and turning on his heel, he led Angela back into the elevator. It took a key override to ascend to the topmost floor.

He was walking so quickly that Angela had only an instant to react to the marble parquet floor and the intricate plaster work. As they pushed through a pair of double doors Kenntnis called out, "Rhiana, if you're doing anything unnatural, please stop."

A stunningly beautiful girl looked up, startled, as they walked in. Angela registered the seven or eight tennis balls spinning like a green nimbus around the girl's head and shoulders before they fell onto the thick oriental carpet and went rolling in all directions.

Kenntnis glanced over at Angela. "How are you holding up?"

Angela made a rude noise. "Telekinesis? Please, that's kid stuff compared to zombies."

Kenntnis looked at her approvingly. "You'll do."

"Who is she?" the girl called Rhiana asked, and she didn't sound real happy.

"Someone Richard has pulled in on his line."

Rhiana stood up. "How do you know we can trust her?"

"Because there's no coincidence, just convergence. Work out the math," said Kenntnis shortly. He turned back to Angela. "Now, do you think Richard has gone to this church?" He slapped the file with the back of his hand.

"Yeah, but I wouldn't worry about the church. . . ."

"Oh, I'm very worried about the church," Kenntnis interrupted. He looked at Rhiana. "Do you think you're ready to confront some of the faces in the mirrors?"

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The sentence was nonsense to Angela, but it had a profound impact on the girl. The pale skin grayed as the blood retreated from her face and her lips thinned to a tight line. "He saved your life," Kenntnis said softly.

The girl shuddered and clenched her fists at her sides. "Payback time," she said almost to herself. She raised green and frightened eyes to Kenntnis's face. "Am I strong enough?" she asked.

"Yes. And you won't be alone. Cross and I will be there."

"And me," Angela chimed in, though she had no idea where they were going or what she was getting into.

Chapter
ELEVEN

HIS first impulse had been to drive directly to the Faith in the Rock Church in Castle Rock, but Richard thought about it and acknowledged that he was exhausted and hungry. He checked into a Super Eight, and walked to a nearby café for lunch. Castle Rock had become a bedroom community for both Denver and Colorado Springs, but it still maintained its charm. The downtown held nineteenth-century redbrick buildings and there was a stretch of cobblestone on a few streets. He was seated at a window table that gave him a view of the rock formation that provided the name for the town.

His waitress was a gawky girl with long straight brown hair, a long torso and equally long legs. She was also chatty, and she told him about the restaurant that used to be open on the top of the rock, but rattlesnakes had infested the walls and slithered out to the dismay of

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the diners. Despite Kenntnis's disdain for feelings, it still felt like an omen to Richard.

After returning to the hotel Richard called the church and made an appointment with the pastor for five o'clock. He changed into pajamas. Like many cops he kept a big bottle of generic aspirin close at hand. He shook out three pills and dry-swallowed them. He also had a wider range of pharmacopeia available. The Xanax bottle came easily to his hand. Richard checked the expiration date. It was a few months past the date. He hadn't needed the drug for a long time. He bounced the bottle on the palm of his hand and considered. No doubt he was stressed. No doubt he needed to rest. He placed the bottle back in the overnight case and climbed into bed. It felt like a victory.

The Faith in the Rock Church was at the north end of Castle Rock in an industrial area. In fact the church looked like it was housed in a converted warehouse. There were only a few cars in the enormous parking lot. Either they got a lot of worshippers or they were really hopeful.

The lobby area held the usual array of flyers listing the times of worship. The pastor, a blow-dried young man in a light blue suit, grinned out from the front cover. He was posed seated with an open Bible resting on his knee. The air held the dusty smell of cheap paper and candle wax. A sign on the wall of a hallway read "Office." Richard headed down the hall. His heels echoed against the bright blue linoleum floor. He reached a door. Etched on the glass was "Reverend Darryl Hines." Richard knocked.

"Come in."

The voice was deeper and more cultured than Richard had expected. He entered and understood why the voice didn't match the picture of the man on the flyer. It was Mark Grenier seated behind the broad desk. The presence of this counselor and comforter of presidents in a seedy, makeshift church in Castle Rock, Colorado, suddenly made Kenntnis's claims a great deal more credible. A cold hand seemed to brush across the back of Richard's neck. He shuddered.

"Welcome. Do come in," Grenier repeated as he unfolded the

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long, spare length of his body from the chair. He indicated a chair in front of the desk with an elegant turn of wrist and hand.

He was as tall as Kenntnis but lacked the bulk. Where Kenntnis's hair was black and thick, Grenier's was iron gray shading to white over the temples and it formed a close cap across his skull. His features were aquiline. He had hazel eyes, and he boasted a perfect tan achieved on a variety of expensive and exclusive golf courses.

Richard felt off-balance both from Grenier's presence and from his physical similarities to Richard's father. The policeman retreated to rote, using it like a security blanket. Pulling out his badge in its leather holder, he held it out, saying, "I'm Detective Richard Oort of the Albuquerque Police. . . ."

Grenier waved a hand dismissively. "Oh, do let's dispense with all this. I know why you're here. And more importantly I know *what* you are, which is why I made the trip out here so I could meet with you in person." Grenier was fiddling with a pair of thin reading glasses. There was something odd about them, and then Richard noticed that the lenses weren't clear but silvered.

To cover his confusion Richard glanced around the office. There were a surprising number of mirrors on the walls; the top of the desk was glass, as was the top of the coffee table. He noted the same silver-graying of the glass in the mirrors he had seen in the trailer in the South Valley of Albuquerque.

Ignoring the proffered chair, Richard went to the naugahyde sofa and sat down. It forced Grenier to cross to him and bought him a few more seconds to think. It was Richard's nature to wait and allow others to make the opening move. For some reason that didn't seem safe this time.

"Kenntnis says you're evil," Richard said bluntly as Grenier sank into the chair on the other side of the coffee table.

"And I say he's evil," Grenier replied. "Now you have a dilemma. Which one of us do you believe?"

"No, you don't get off that easy. He made his case. Let me hear yours," said Richard.

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Grenier threw back his head and laughed. "You're a cool one, aren't you?"

Richard was glad the veneer was working, because he could feel his heart beating in his throat and the air didn't seem to want to reach his lungs.

"I'm sure Kenntnis has been railing against the evils and dangers of faith and feeling, and extolling the virtues of science and rationality. I'm sure he's nattered on about the stars, but never mentioned the flip side of all his wonderful technology. Somehow he always turns a blind eye to pollution, extinction, resistive bacteria, not to mention rush hour and gridlock." Grenier paused and smiled at Richard. It was a practiced smile exuding warmth and charm, but it never reached his eyes.

"All that's true," said Richard, then added, "but why have you opposed beneficial research such as the work with stem cells and research for the sake of pure knowledge like the super-collider?"

"My, my, we have done our homework," said Grenier, and there seemed to be a bit of an edge to the smile this time. "Because, while worthy, these things are like tiny pebbles shaken loose on a cliff's edge that will eventually lead to a catastrophic avalanche. Think about the end point of Kenntnis's position. It's sterile, cold logic, and utterly confining. The universe as clockwork and humans trapped without choice or free will. Think how horrifying."

Richard crossed his legs, and straightened the crease on his pants before answering. "You've picked the wrong argument with me. I was raised in the Dutch Reformed Church, the closest thing to old-fashioned Calvinism still around. I've grown up with the idea of predestination. Free will seems a luxury." Richard forced himself to meet Grenier's gaze. "Shall we try another?"

Grenier surprised him by laughing and this time it sounded genuine. "All right, let's talk about magic. . . ."

"Let's not," Richard interrupted. "It doesn't seem to be terribly relevant since I apparently don't have any."

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Grenier leaned forward avidly, his hands closing tightly around the reading glasses. "Ah, so Kenntnis has told you that."

"Yes. . . ."

"So, he's no doubt told you other things." The man's eyes were intent, and he leaned completely across the coffee table, his hand reaching for Richard's knee.

At the edge of his vision Richard thought he caught a glimpse of color roiling turgidly through the glass tabletop and an answering flash of color in the lenses of the glasses. A stab of fear sent minute shivers through the muscles in Richard's arms and legs. He jerked his knee away from Grenier and stood up.

"Look, why don't we come to the point. What do you want from me? You wouldn't have come here yourself unless you wanted something."

Grenier also stood up and stared down at Richard. "Kenntnis gave you something or soon will. We want it."

He almost blurted out, *No he hasn't*, but his usual caution reasserted itself. "Why?" he said instead.

"We need it."

"Well, that's a compelling argument," Richard said.

Grenier didn't react to the sarcasm. Instead he took the time to fold and refold the ear pieces of his glasses, wipe the silvered lenses. "Let's break this down into advantages and disadvantages. First, no one who's ever borne this thing lives very long, but I expect that won't mean much to you. You have the look of the martyr. My allies will suck you dry and kill you. But before you die I can make your life quite unpleasant." Grenier stood and strolled back over to the desk where he picked up a thick file folder.

"I have a large, well organized and well financed organization. We've dug into every aspect of your life." He paused and flipped through a few pages. "Your mother is certainly a weak reed, isn't she?" Grenier lifted his head and smiled at Richard. "And secrets . . . my, you have more than your fair share. Believe me when I tell you

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that I won't hesitate to disseminate them in the places where they will do the most harm."

Panic stopped the air in his lungs. Richard found himself gripping his wrists with either hand. He couldn't feel the scar on his right arm through the bandages and the material of his shirt and coat, but the memory of hours of pain, humiliation, and betrayal that had led to the suicide attempt crashed across his mind and swept away all rational thought.

The memory of a voice surfaced through the black memories and desperate shame. "*Face the monsters who hurt you, and don't let others like 'em hurt anybody else.*"

Four months later Danny McGowan had found Richard in his apartment, leaking blood from his right wrist into the warm waters of the bathtub and trying to keep a grip on the knife handle, his hand so slippery with blood that he couldn't slash the other. Danny had been a medic in Vietnam and he'd sewn up the wrist, keeping Richard out of the hospital so no one would know he'd tried suicide. Richard asked the older man if he didn't think he needed a shrink. It was McGowan's answer that now pushed back the fear raised by Grenier.

Officer Danny McGowan, sturdy and round as a boulder, his face seamed with wrinkles and his head crowned with a thatch of thick white hair: He was the reason Richard had become a cop. McGowan found Richard dumped in an alley, took him to the hospital, and visited him for weeks after, trying to get Richard to say who'd assaulted him. Richard never had. But a deep friendship had formed, and McGowan had continued to monitor the younger man.

"*No, boy, I think you need to need to make a difference. Face the monsters who hurt you, and don't let others like 'em hurt anybody else.*"

Richard slowly lifted his eyes. Whatever Grenier saw there made him take a half-step backward.

Grenier said hurriedly, "Look, all you have to do is give us what we want, and we'll support you in any and all of your goals. Chief of

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Detectives for New York? Director of the FBI? A brilliant concert career? A contract with the Met?"

"You could do all that?" Richard asked softly.

"Yes." Grenier stepped in closer, gripped Richard's shoulders in both hands and drew him to his feet. Richard tried to step away, but Grenier tightened his grip. "Listen to me. Our world is not so terrible. . . ."

"The parents of Naomi and Dan and Alice wouldn't agree," said Richard.

"Ask the dead at Hiroshima if Kenntnis's path doesn't exact a price." Grenier gave an angry wave with his glasses. "You can't counter the faith of millions. Even now, you want to believe. Go back to that. Worship. Live your life. Be safe and we will give you anything you want. The only cost is that you turn aside, and leave this unwinnable fight to others."

"Excuse me. Those are traditionally *my* lines," came Kenntnis's voice from the doorway.

Richard and Grenier whirled. Kenntnis pushed his shoulders off the doorframe where he had been lounging and strolled into the room. Cross, Rhiana and Angela appeared from behind Kenntnis's camouflaging bulk.

"A rescue." Grenier's lips skinned back from his teeth in a parody of a smile that he turned on Richard. "Which tells me all I needed to know."

"He's throwing a spell!" Cross yelled, and he flung himself between Richard and Grenier.

Richard had the briefest glimpse of color flashing in the lenses of the reading glasses before electricity arced from the overhead light and from the lamp on the desk heading straight at him. Cross took one bolt full in the chest, then pirouetted and threw himself sideways to intercept the other. He lay on the floor, his clothes smoldering, and grinned thinly up at Grenier.

"Shot your wad, asshole," he said.

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“Not quite,” said Grenier calmly, and reached into his coat pocket.

Richard heard a woman scream in wordless warning. The barrel of the gun looked enormous at such close range.



Angela jerked at Rhiana's shrill scream, and then registered the gun leveling at Richard. *No time! No time!* her mind yammered as Richard flung himself sideways. The deafening report of the pistol crashed off the walls of the room. The impact of the bullet sent Richard tumbling into the coffee table. The top broke into a thousand glittering shards, leaving the policeman tangled in the metal frame. Cross struggled to his feet as Kenntnis rushed the gunman, but Grenier was running straight for a blank wall by a window.

Angela ran to Richard. Blood was pumping from a cut on the side of his head. He groaned as he pushed to a sitting position. His hand was pressed against his side, but there was no blood oozing from between his slender fingers or staining the bandages on his palm. He clutched Angela's shoulder with his free hand and used her to lever himself to his feet. She could smell sweat overlaid with the rich scent of his aftershave.

“Stop him,” Kenntnis was bellowing.

Angela looked up. Grenier was clawing at the wall, and suddenly a crack appeared. Cross put on an added burst of speed. The crack lengthened and widened and Grenier turned sideways and vanished through it. The rent disappeared, leaving a plain white gypsum wall. Cross smashed face first into it.

“Shit! Fuck! Hell! Piss!” Cross bellowed as he cupped his nose.

Angela became aware of Rhiana standing stiffly in the center of the room muttering to herself. A penny lay on the palm of her hand. It began spinning and glowing, throwing off copper-colored sparks. She threw it at the wall. It left a trail of sparks like a comet's tail.

The copper fire struck the wall and the wall tore open again. There was no sign of the man. There was also no sign of the parking lot of the church. Instead Angela saw a vast expanse of seething gray sand

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and several burning suns. *It was night in Castle Rock, Colorado*, Angela's mind provided with rare calm. Then she saw the shapes on the other side, but her mind was unable to define what her eyes perceived.

"This ain't good," said Cross in a tight, stretched voice.

Rhiana gasped and ran to Kenntnis's side. Kenntnis gathered Rhiana within the circle of his arm. Angela realized she was screaming. She never screamed.

"Sure hope you got some dandy ideas," Cross said to Kenntnis, "because they've seen us."

Angela clamped her teeth shut to silence herself. Kenntnis reached into the pocket of his overcoat, and pulled out a strange, twisting object that looked like a piece of blown gray glass. "Richard!" he called out commandingly. Richard looked up and Kenntnis tossed the object to him. Angela had a feeling that the cop caught it more by reflex than design. Richard's fingers twined through the open curves and Angela realized that it resembled nothing so much as a Klein bottle.

"Okay, now what?" Richard called, and his voice was a high tenor squeak. The shapes were moving, drawing closer.

"You've got to close the tear."

"How?" Richard interrupted desperately.

"I'm going to tell you. Just shut up and listen." Kenntnis sucked in a deep breath. "That's a sword hilt. Draw the sword." Richard stared at the man blankly. Angela didn't blame him. She was just as befuddled.

Kenntnis set Rhiana aside and mimed drawing a sword. "Pretend there's a scabbard and just draw it!"

The *things* on the other side were drawing closer.

"Boy, I sure hope my detect magic/no magic gizmo wasn't broke when we found him," muttered Cross.

Angela stared at Richard to avoid looking through the tear in the wall. His face was tight with concentration. The pale brows furrowed and he cupped his right hand at the base of the hilt. With his left hand he swept the abstractly shaped hilt away from his right hand in a smooth gesture.

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Angela's gasp was involuntary. A meter-long swordblade appeared, seeming to slide out of the palm of Richard's right hand. It was profoundly black, the blackness of deep space. She felt rather than heard a deep thrumming hum as if she were leaning against the mother of all amplifiers. Everyone in the room and the *things* on the other side of the opening froze.

"Go," Kenntnis whispered and Richard launched himself at the opening. He held his torso slightly hunched, and his panting breaths were loud in the silence.

"Of course. Kevlar," Angela muttered hysterically to herself. "He was wearing a vest. Clever boy."

Richard was at the opening. He hesitated, looking from side to side as if trying to figure out how to bring them together. He lightly touched the sword's point to the floor, then with sinuous turns of the wrist he parried his way from side to side up the length of the tear. Beneath the sword the normal drywall appeared, but it was scorched and blackened. He had almost closed the rent when a bubble of coiling and pulsing colors ranging from darkest purple to bilious green pushed through the remaining gap at the top. Richard lunged and stabbed at the thing. There was a high-pitched squeal and the intruder withdrew. The gap closed.

Richard slowly turned, rested the tip of the sword on the floor, leaned on it and stared at Kenntnis. "Does everything have to be so damned operatic with you?" he asked, trying to make it sound casual and failing completely because his voice was shaking. Kenntnis threw back his head and filled the room with his booming laugh.

Angela rushed to Richard's side, and found Cross there before her, pounding the far smaller man on the back. Cross reeked of burned material and singed hair. Angela shoved the bum away before he could drive the cop to his knees.

"Back off," she snapped. She gently pulled back the side of Richard's suit coat. "I know I normally work on the dead, but let me have a look at you."

"Not now. Not yet," Kenntnis ordered. "Grenier's people will be

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returning and we don't want to have to answer any awkward questions."

"Yeah," said Angela. "You're going to have enough trouble dealing with *my* awkward questions."

"I'm sorry." The strained and tearful whisper brought all their attention to Rhiana. The young girl was shivering, tears coursing down her cheeks. "I was just trying to stop him. What did I do?"

"Shhh," Kenntnis soothed and gathered her once more in the circle of his arms. "We'll sort that out later, too."

Chapter

TWELVE

THE powerful jet engines on the Gulfstream GV were a muted roar and a subtle vibration through the floor and seats of the jet. The air in the plane tasted rich and thick, heavy with oxygen, and carried none of the stink of stale coffee that one found on commercial flights. Outside the window, stars shown diamond bright and diamond hard against the night sky. Beneath the wings roiled and bulked heavy white and gray clouds.

Cross, Angela and Richard sat around a small polished mahogany conference table set in the middle of the plane. The coroner and the homeless god had bottles of beer from the galley in front of them. Richard sipped hot chocolate, trying to ward off the chill air blowing across his bare chest and the stabbing burn of a Baggie filled with ice pressed against the spectacular eggplant-colored bruise blooming across his sternum. He felt exposed with his shirt unbuttoned, but

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Angela had insisted on examining him. He glanced nervously toward the front of the plane where Rhiana, curled up in one of the oversized, leather-covered seats, slept deeply.

Removing his shirt revealed the bandage covering the knife thrust from Cross's doppelganger. The bandages had been removed and the cut examined. Not content with stopping there, Angela was now unwrapping the bandages covering his hands. She inspected the burns, looked up and declared, "Jesus Christ, you're a walking disaster area!" Cross burst out laughing and even Richard chuckled. "What? What's so fucking funny?"

Richard shook his head. "Nothing." But in fact the amusement didn't last long. After today's events Richard was beginning to think Grenier had spoken the truth when he said Richard's life expectancy wasn't all that great.

This brought his focus back to the center of the table and The Object. His mind provided the capitals since it couldn't produce an explanation. The hilt lay on the table. Angela had called it a Klein bottle. To Richard it looked like something out of an Escher drawing.

"So, what is it?" Richard asked Cross.

The homeless god shook his head, and held out his hands palms out. "I think we should let himself tell you. He's the answer guy. I can tell you this. You're in exalted company to be able to draw it and use it."

"Like who?" asked Angela.

"Hammurabi, Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus, Justinian, Arthur—the real Arthur who tried to hold back the darkness after the Romans pulled out—Charlemagne, Franklin."

Richard sat up straight. "As in Benjamin?"

"Yep."

"Why?" asked Angela.

Cross looked at Richard like a teacher encouraging a reluctant student.

"He was the last great renaissance man," said Richard slowly.

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“Scientist, a publisher who valued books and learning above everything, and when asked to edit Jefferson’s first draft of the Declaration of Independence, he removed the word sacred from the text.”

“Where did it say sacred?” Angela asked.

“*We hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable,*” Richard quoted. “Franklin argued that our rights derived from a rational source. He changed it to read, *We hold these truths to be self-evident.*” For some reason this knowledge about one of America’s founders gave greater credence and strength to Kenntnis’s arguments.

Cross glanced at Richard. “And in between the famous guys it’s mostly been poor, noble schmucks like you.” He fell silent for a moment and shook his head. “I also now know we are really, truly fucked because Kenntnis didn’t intend to arm you, which is why he never mentioned the sword to you.” Cross looked depressed and took a long pull of beer. “Could be *I’m* gonna be the one to die, and not my evil twins.”

“So, who carried it after Franklin?” Richard asked.

“I’m betting Darwin,” Angela said.

“And you’d lose,” came Kenntnis’s voice. Even before takeoff in the elegantly appointed private jet he had removed himself into a small cubicle office at the back of the plane and closed the door. “No, it was no one you’ve ever heard of.”

“One of the schmucks,” Cross interjected.

Kenntnis frowned at him. “Though Jonathan did cross paths with Darwin, and touched him with the sword.”

“You remember his name,” Angela said.

Kenntnis bent his dark gaze on Richard. It was disconcerting because Kenntnis looked sad. “I remember all your names.”

Richard pointed at the hilt, and repeated his question. “What is it?”

“A weapon that only a select few can wield.” Kenntnis turned his dark-eyed gaze on Angela. “You saw what he did. You draw it.”

She stood and picked up the hilt. For a moment she bounced it in her hand, then, drawing in a deep breath, she twined her fingers

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through the curves, and drew. Nothing happened. Frowning, she turned it and inspected it from all angles. "Okay, what's the trick? Where's the release button?"

"Coded in your genes," said Kenntnis, taking the hilt from her and handing it to Richard. "Like most humans, you possess a touch of magic. Only a human born without any magic can activate the sword."

"And now your involvement with the human genome project and stem cell research makes more sense," Richard said.

"Yes, if we could design a retro-virus to edit magic out of your DNA it would be a big help. As it is I have to wait for that particular confluence of genes to occur before I get a new paladin."

"And boy, could we have used one in the twentieth century," Cross said. He ticked off on his fingers. "World War I, World War II, Stalin, Mao, Hitler, Pol Pot—"

Kenntnis held up a hand. "Spare me the recitation." Cross subsided.

Kenntnis resumed. "Sometimes there will be a whole clump of you born. Other times we go for years without a single one."

"You mentioned touching Darwin," Richard said. "What does that mean?"

"If you touch a normal human with the sword it will render them incapable of performing magic. And it has many other uses. It can repair the tears in reality caused by the injudicious use of magic by humans, and the judicious efforts by the Old Ones. When it's drawn it makes people sane. Unfortunately its effect can't cover the entire world."

"Okay." Angela gave the gesture for "time out." "He . . ." she pointed at Cross ". . . says you're the answer guy. Well, I need some. I've been pretty cool with this so far, but now I really need to know what the fuck is going on."

"Richard first. He's more important than you," said Kenntnis. It was rude and arrogant and put Richard in the spotlight, and he wanted to hit Kenntnis.

"Because he can use this thingy?" asked Angela.

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“Precisely.”

Richard raised up the hilt. “So this was why you wanted me to work for you.”

“Partly.”

“And what am I supposed to do? Go through the world touching everyone with this thing?”

“A daunting if not impossible task, and enlightenment can’t be handed out like a magic pill.”

“Meaning what?” Angela broke in.

“People have to develop a conscience. As late as the nineteenth century slavery was accepted. One hundred years ago women were property all over the world. Today only some of you are freed. Even if we erased magic from every person on Earth, our opponents would still be here, and they can still feed. Until people can give up the violence associated with bone-searing hatreds, racial, religious, ethnic—the Old Ones will continue to thrive.”

The two humans present and awake sat silent, and Richard wondered if the prospect of a tolerant humanity was so remote as to be hopeless. He stirred and looked up at Kenntnis.

“So, you’ve told me how it affects humans. What does it do to . . .” He had a hard time forming the words. “To magical creatures.”

“It’s deadly.”

Richard looked at Cross. “So, I could kill him?” Cross sat up and looked hopeful.

“Yes.” Kenntnis held up a restraining hand. “But you’d leave his splinters free to operate, and his presence is as much of an annoyance to them as they are to him. Right now we need Cross and his abilities on our side.” The homeless god slumped back down in his seat looking glum.

The rumble of the engines changed cadence and tone. Kenntnis glanced out the window, then back. “Sounds like we’re beginning our descent. If you’ll excuse me, Doctor Armandariz, I need to speak to Richard in private.” He beckoned and Richard followed him into the private office.

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The door closed and the hum of the engines faded to mere vibration, indicating the extent of the soundproofing. It was a confining space made too small by the presence of a desk and three chairs. There was an array of office equipment and three phones cluttering the desk. The screen of a laptop computer glowed in the dim lighting.

Kenntnis settled into the chair behind the desk, the springs creaking under his bulk. "Rhiana is your backup so you're going to have to be very careful using the sword around her. We need her."

"Okay, that seems pretty self-evident. So why bring me in here to tell me that?" Richard asked.

"Cross and I are having a difference of opinion regarding Rhiana. It's pretty clear she's not completely human. The safest course would be to neutralize her, but I think she can be controlled and guided and will be useful to us."

"What do you mean she's not human?" Richard asked and felt crazy for even saying the words.

"There is no way a normal human could have opened a tear between the dimensions with such ease. I've been doing some checking on Rhiana, and discovered she was an abandoned baby in the California foster care system. Eventually she was adopted, but it's all completely consistent with her being a changeling."

Richard started edging toward the office door. "This is . . . is . . . ludicrous."

"You need to remember your legends, Richard, and remember that they're all based on fact," Kenntnis said. "In the Bible they talk of the sons of God coming down and lying with the daughters of men. In the Middle Ages it was stolen away by elves; today we've got alien abductions."

"Would you stop lecturing!" Richard snapped. "Rhiana is a living woman—not an abstract."

"You're all abstracts to me. You have to be. I've known so many of you, and I can't allow myself to be touched by any of you. Or at least not much." Kenntnis's voice softened to a bass rumble and for the

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first time since meeting the man, Richard sensed emotion behind the words.

Richard concluded the sentence. "You've watched so many of us die." Kenntnis nodded.

The door to the office opened and Cross entered. "You're discussing her, aren't you?" he accused. Richard followed Kenntnis's lead and remained silent. "Well, I'm warning you both I want something done about her. She can't be trusted. Nobody knows better than me what she's capable of doing."

"So, just kill her because she *might* do something?" Richard asked. Disgust was a bad taste across the back of his tongue. "I've never liked this doctrine of preemption, not nationally and not personally."

"Who said anything about killing her?" Cross replied. "Just use the damn sword on her. Neutralize her."

Richard pulled the hilt out of his coat pocket and turned it slowly in his hands. "But this thing kills magical creatures."

Cross shrugged. "She's only half magic. She'll probably survive."

"And what happens if half of her nature is destroyed?" Growing anger had Richard's voice rising in level and pitch.

"My guess is that it would be similar to a lobotomy," said Kenntnis smoothly.

Cross glared at him. "Whose side are you on?"

"Humanity's," said Kenntnis.

Moving slowly and deliberately, Richard returned the sword hilt to his pocket and buttoned up his shirt. "That's too esoteric for me. I'll be on Rhiana's side." He looked at Cross. "If you won't work with her then we'll send her away."

Kenntnis shook his head. "No, she's far too dangerous and valuable an asset. If she's not our piece she'll be someone else's."

"She's a girl. Not a piece. And I won't harm her . . . or allow anyone else to," Richard added, stressing the final words.

"And how are you going to stop me?" Cross's normally open and pleasant expression was twisted.

"I'll go to Grenier."

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"Then I'll kill you," blustered Cross.

"No, you won't," said Richard. He was oddly calm, but he'd realized this was chess and he saw the endgame. "You need me, and if you start the killing you're just giving strength to your enemies. You'll end up consumed by one of your counterparts, and you'll never achieve the peace you're seeking. So, let's accept the stalemate, and not give Rhiana any reason to turn against us."

"You're not in charge here," said Cross.

"Yes, I am. I have to be." Richard seated himself in the chair opposite Kenntnis. "Now it's my turn to give a little lecture." Resting his arms on the desk, he leaned in on Kenntnis. "You honor, almost worship, the scientific method, but you've lost sight of its most important element. Doubt is the key to everything you profess to represent; the ability to say *I don't know*, and the strength to examine and question every conclusion. But ever since I've met you, you've been giving me all the answers, and when that happens you've lost touch with humility, and that makes you no different from your opponents."

"You ballsy little bastard," Cross whispered.

Kenntnis didn't respond, he just stared at Richard. Richard forced himself to meet that dark gaze. It wasn't easy. The force of Kenntnis's personality was a physical presence in the room, making Richard feel even smaller than usual.

"You present a utopian result for your path, but there are dangers on your path as well," Richard continued.

"I'm listening." The voice rumbled out deep and dark as the eyes.

"You can end up with profoundly secular and profoundly evil regimes—"

"No, no, Richard." Kenntnis shook his finger at him. "You don't get to trot out the old 'intellect without humanity' argument. It's been used by reactionaries since Hume to frighten people into obeying religious authorities. Which is not to say that your argument isn't valid. I bear watching as much as any living being. Just be intellectually honest and say what you mean."

"All right." Richard slowly stood and looked down at Kenntnis. "I

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will not harm Rhiana. No matter how justified the end." He paused and drew in a breath. The explosion of air into his lungs made Richard realize he had been holding his breath.

Cross blew out a breath, startlingly loud in the silent room. Kenntnis shook his head. "Why couldn't you have just been an ignorant flatfoot?"

Richard allowed himself a small smile. "And just done what I was told?"

The briefest of answering smiles touched Kenntnis's lips. "No, that's Grenier's way. All right, I accept your terms."

Richard walked to the door, then paused and looked back. "By the way, I know who you are, or at least some of the names we humans have used for you." Kenntnis raised an inquiring eyebrow.

"You're the Serpent, and Prometheus, and Lucifer."

"I've always liked Prometheus the best," Kenntnis mused.

"And given your background we don't want you thinking too much about this Satan thing," said Cross, waving his hands as if to obscure the word. "Remember, we're the good guys."

"And I'm here to keep you good," Richard said softly.

Chapter

THIRTEEN

ISN'T it a little late?" Rhiana asked as Kenntnis deposited the standing rib roast in the center of the dining room table. Mashed potatoes were piped around the edge of the platter, vegetable whitecaps breaking against the dark sides of the roast. Cross followed with a basket of popovers and a bowl of green beans.

The rich smell of fresh ground black pepper and beef juices hit Angela's nose and saliva erupted in her mouth. "Food is good," she said. "Keeps the strength up. Calms jittery nerves."

"You're my kind of woman," said Cross as he seated himself and stuffed a napkin into the collar of his dirty flannel shirt.

"You shouldn't have let Richard leave," Rhiana directed at Kenntnis. Her tone was aggrieved and accusing.

"Short of sitting on him I don't know how I was supposed to stop him," Kenntnis replied mildly.

"He might be in danger," Rhiana persisted.

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Got a major crush developing here, Angela thought, but she knew from the faint twinge of pique that she was also in danger. Not wanting that much self-analysis, she turned her attention to the room. She studied the art gracing the dark wood-paneled walls, the ethereal crystal chandelier looking like a frozen waterfall, the deep glow of carved and polished wood in the table, chairs and buffet.

Kenntnis opened a bottle of Merlot, and filled their glasses. He then raised his. "To the Lumina."

"About damn time we have it back," grunted Cross.

Angela tapped the rim of her glass against Cross's, and a pure ringing tone hung in the silence. Rhiana held out her glass toward the homeless god, but Cross ignored it, focusing on his plate.

So, I wonder what's up his ass? Angela mused.

The candles on the table sprang to life, their fire dancing in the crystal and reflecting in the polished wood of the tabletop. Angela jumped. Kenntnis and Cross looked at Rhiana. She looked back, and her posture yelled defiance.

"I'm still here," Rhiana said.

"We're not likely to forget about you," grunted Cross, and the tone wasn't friendly.

"Don't do parlor tricks," Kenntnis ordered. "It takes energy and it puts a pinprick hole in the universe. Do magic when I tell you to."

"So, I can keep using magic?" Rhiana asked.

"Yes, of course."

"But I thought magic was baaad." Angela put a long drawl on the final word, and was pleased to see Kenntnis flash her a look of annoyance.

Her granny had always told her the way she liked to poke people was perverse, but she couldn't help herself. Even with a man who possessed this much presence and, she suspected, power, she couldn't rein in her unruly tongue.

"There are no perfect or totally harmless choices here. We're playing to win," Kenntnis replied.

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“So the ends justify the means?” Angela asked and gave Kenntnis a limpid and innocent look.

The big man looked even more annoyed, and Cross gave a bark of laughter that sent popover crumbs spewing across the table. “He’s already had this conversation once tonight.”

“With Richard?” Rhiana asked eagerly.

Kenntnis didn’t reply. Instead he picked up a carving knife and a sharpener. Steel rasped against stone. He cut into the roast, parting the seared exterior. Blood flowed and red meat showed against the bone. Angela saw Rhiana staring with repellent fascination.

“Vegetarian?” she asked the younger woman. Rhiana nodded.

Cross reached across the table and speared a slice of beef. Angela watched the blood drip onto the white damask tablecloth and had a sudden flash of Richard’s blood.

“I’ll take a burnt end,” Angela said firmly and held out her plate to Kenntnis.

Kenntnis sent down her plate, and filled Rhiana’s with potatoes, green beans and a popover. Angela broke open the hot popover, filled the hollow interior with a large pat of butter, and took a bite. It was heavenly.

Rhiana took a few tiny bites then threw down her fork. “I still don’t think you should have let Richard leave,” she said again.

“He needed a break from all of us.”

“From you, maybe,” Rhiana muttered at her plate.

Angela cast a covert glance at Rhiana’s flawless profile. The line of Richard’s jaw was suddenly foremost in her mind. *Why couldn’t this have been like a perfect television sitcom with a perfect set of couples? Instead we’ve got a monster, an enigma, a man and two women. Lovely.*

She took a bite of roast, and decided to pull the attention away from Richard. “I have a question,” she said. Kenntnis and Cross looked at her. “Why did Grenier resort to a gun? Why not continue to use magic?”

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"Because I took the magical blast and he didn't have enough juice for another one," Cross answered.

"But based on the universe according to you," Angela shot Kenntnis a quick ironic smile, "couldn't he have used our fear to recharge?"

"He did; it's how he got through the wall," said Kenntnis, "but a death spell takes real power. He got it by killing those college kids."

"You're not suggesting that every time someone goes postal these guys are behind it?" Angela asked.

"No, but they certainly take advantage when it happens," Kenntnis replied dryly.

Aside from the smacking as Cross wolfed food, they ate in silence for a few minutes.

Angela found she didn't like the privacy of her own head right now. She framed another question. "So in the lexicon of mythic monsters what's Grenier? Or is he just a person?"

"He's a person," Kenntnis answered.

"Yeah, he's been carrying water for one of my splinters for years," Cross grunted and crammed a popover into his mouth.

"Why? Why him and not another preacher?" Angela asked.

"Access," said Kenntnis shortly. "He hooked up with a governor who became president, and then he was in. Given the rightward tilt of recent administrations he's been able to push the Old Ones' agenda."

"He's the reason they're teaching Intelligent Design instead of evolution in six states," added Cross, but the words were blurred as he continued to masticate popover. Angela watched the homeless god's throat work as he swallowed and she was reminded of pythons and puppies. "He's also got a lot of magical juice so it was easy for him to learn the skills."

"Are all your . . . splinters hostile to each other?" Angela asked. "Could we do a little divide and conquer action?"

"Use your brain, girl," Cross muttered. "As long as they can get Christians and Muslims, and Jews and Muslims, and Muslims and Hindus, and Protestants and Catholics killing each other they're in hog heaven. I'm the only wart in their ointment."

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“So why don’t they just kill you?” Angela asked sweetly. “And don’t call me ‘girl.’”

“They’re not certain what that would do to the other fragments,” said Kenntnis stepping in as if he sensed she and Cross were about to spat.

“How do angels fit into all this?” Rhiana asked.

“Ah, angels.” Kenntnis shook his head. “It was a fallback position for some of the late arrivals. People like our friend here,” he indicated Cross, “had taken most of the god positions, but they found a use for their tardy companions. You get to spread a lot of destruction when you’re an angel.”

“Or you got to until he,” Cross jerked his chin toward Kenntnis, “came up with the idea of guardian angels.”

“I never thought of angels as bad,” said Rhiana.

Angela looked at the girl. “In the Bible the first words out of an angel’s mouth were usually—*Don’t be afraid. I’m not here to kill you.* Which now makes a whole lot more sense.”

“Except that usually they were going to kill you,” said Kenntnis dryly.

Thoughts spinning, Angela leaned back in her chair. “So, is there anything sacred that is good?”

“No,” Cross said brightly, and helped himself to another slice of beef.

“So there is no God,” Angela persisted, wanting to be sure she understood the full implications of the day’s revelations.

Kenntnis dropped his chin to his chest, and pursed his lips thoughtfully. Angela counted her heartbeats as they waited. “I’ve been around a long, long time,” Kenntnis said slowly. “I have yet to see any evidence of one.”

Exhaustion dragged at his eyelids, and the various aches in various parts of his body throbbed in time to his heartbeat. Richard knew he would need to rest soon, but his apartment was still under repair.

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That left the Lumina headquarters, and he couldn't face them yet. No, correct that, he couldn't face Kenntnis yet, not with what he now knew.

So he drove aimlessly through the streets of Albuquerque. The light from the street lamps flickered in his fogged windshield as the blast of warm air from the Volvo's heater struck cold glass.

He had thrown out the challenge to Kenntnis hoping to be denied, but knowing his conclusions about the man . . . creature . . . were correct. It helped if Richard thought of him as Prometheus or Loki or Coyote, but the other names remained; leaden, frightful and horrifying—Satan, Lucifer, the Devil.

But he saved my life. And his arguments make sense.

But they would, wouldn't they? He's the Great Deceiver.

The mountains served as a magnet drawing him toward the frowning rock face iced now with new-fallen snow. The storm had entered the city, and he drove through swirling snow as he followed Central Avenue east. To the north Kenntnis, Cross and the women ate and talked in the elegant confines of the penthouse. He assumed they were talking about him.

Judge Robert Oort's dry voice echoed in his ears. "*Why do you think people would notice you? You have a pretty face that attracts attention, but it's fool's gold. As yet you've failed to demonstrate that there is either accomplishment or character behind it. You lack the intellectual abilities of your sisters, and you're not a woman so you can't rely on beauty and charm the way your mother has. You'd best find something to recommend you.*" But now somebody had said he was special.

But that somebody had admitted he was the embodiment of ancient evil.

Richard saw the outline of a cross dark against the shifting backdrop of snow. The building came into view, a peaked profile of a church reaching toward the sky like prayerful hands. He didn't know what denomination it might be, but right then he needed the comfort of religion. Spinning the wheel, he pulled into the parking lot. With the turn of the key the engine died. Snow tapped like fingernails

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against the windows and body of the car. The engine pinged as it cooled.

The snow squeaked under the leather soles of his shoes as he walked to the front doors. It wasn't his church, but the Lutheran church he normally attended was far out on Montgomery and dangerously near the Lumina headquarters. Letters in brass spelled out *Saint Luke's on the Mesa* over the door. Richard didn't have much hope the church would be open, so he had to scramble to keep his balance when the door swung open in response to his tug. It was unusual in these secular and uncertain times to find a church unlocked at night. Richard wanted to take it as a sign, but it seemed a pathetic reed on which to hang his faith.

The wall at the end of the nave was an expanse of glass. The sloping walls to either side were vast fields of stained glass. The white of the snow beyond the front window gave a pale illumination to the interior of the church. There were tall candles on the draped altar and the scent of frankincense hung in the air. A red light burned over the altar. With the steps and railing separating the nave from the apse and the kneelers in each pew it felt like a Catholic church. Richard glanced down at the hymnals in the holders on the back of the pews and saw the *Book of Common Prayer* among them. He was in an Episcopalian church.

He wasn't a smoker, but Richard carried a lighter in case he found himself stranded during one of his long drives into the New Mexico back country. Because he had been raised in such a fiercely Protestant sect the barrier of the railing held no power for him. He walked to the altar and lit both candles. He then bowed his head and began to pray.

Dear God, are you there? Do you exist? I don't know what to believe anymore. Is it presumptuous to ask for a sign? Help me, Dear Lord, I'm losing myself.

The wind hissed around the building, the snow pecked at the glass and the flames on the candles shrank briefly and then elongated once more into orange-yellow flares.

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"That's it?" Richard said aloud. "Your enemy is giving me wonders."

He yanked the sword hilt out of his pocket and tossed it onto the floor in front of the altar. There was the sound of a deep-throated bell as the twisted form hit the stones. For long seconds Richard heard the overtones echoing away toward the distant ceiling.

"I've only heard something similar in the baptistry in Pisa with its perfect acoustical overtones," came a deep and gravelly voice from the back of the church. Richard whirled and peered into the dimness. "This building has crappy acoustics so I have to assume that remarkable sound was produced by whatever it was you threw on the floor." The voice was getting closer.

A stocky figure dressed in faded blue jeans but topped with a black shirt and the white collar of a priest came rolling down the aisle. The candlelight gleamed on his bald pate and reflected in the deep-set eyes.

"I'm Charlie," the man said and thrust out his hand.

Richard shook it. "Father."

"Just Charlie," came the correction.

Now that the priest was in the pale circle of light provided by the candles Richard could see the gray fringe of hair just above his ears and the seamed face.

"You seem to be a man in need of a conversation," said the older man.

Richard glanced back at the embroidered altar cloth. "Yes, but God's not talking."

"Maybe he's just coming in on a different frequency," the priest said placidly. He hesitated, then said, "Look, how about coming over to the rectory for cup of something warm?"

Richard glanced toward the altar and as if the priest had read his mind he added softly, "If God can't find you next door he's not much of a God, is he?"

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Angela pulled on her coat, left the penthouse and punched the elevator call button. There was a distant clunk and whine as gears began to move. She leaned her shoulder against the wall. A muffling blanket of exhaustion fell across her head and neck. The elevator arrived with a sharp ding. The doors slid open and she staggered inside. The doors were almost closed when a slender hand was thrust in. The doors bounced apart and Rhiana joined her.

The girl leaned against the wall opposite Angela. The vivid green eyes were hard and a frown disturbed the perfect line of her brow. "Why are you here?" she demanded.

Too many times in her life, in medical school, in police forces, in morgues, Angela had met resistance and handled it. This time she was pretty confident it was coming from more than just a protection of territory.

"Because Richard needed a coroner," she said placidly.

"You don't bring us anything," the girl continued. "You're just an ordinary person."

"And you don't think an ordinary person might be of help?" Angela asked and reminded herself that Rhiana was very young and you treat the young tenderly.

"No," Rhiana said bluntly.

On the other hand not too tenderly, Angela decided.

"Look, sweetie, Kenntnis can talk all he wants about using any tool to win," she said with a tight smile. "But let's remember what winning entails—banishing all magic from the world. So I'd suggest you polish up your ordinary human skills in preparation for the time when you're no longer Super Witch, and remember that politeness is one of them." There was a faint jar through the soles of her feet as the elevator came to rest on the ground floor.

The doors opened and Angela headed for the front doors fully expecting Rhiana to come in pursuit, but she heard no answering footfalls. She looked back. Rhiana slumped against the doors of the elevator. Tears leaked slowly from beneath her closed eyelids.

Two quick strides brought her back to the girl and she wrapped

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her arms around her. She expected resistance, but there was none. Rhiana slumped against her, crying harder now.

"I wanted to be special," came Rhiana's muffled voice. "But nobody likes smart, and now this is wrong too."

Angela knew all about being smart and female in American society, and being a bright, ambitious Hispanic woman in a culture that rejected both attributes when displayed by women.

"What happens when they take it all away from me?" Rhiana continued.

"They can't take it *all*. You're a frigging physicist. That makes medicine look easy." Rhiana shook her head. "And you're beautiful," Angela added.

"That shouldn't matter," Rhiana sniffed.

"Well it does, and if anyone ever told you otherwise . . . well, they're an idiot." Angela paused. Her joints seemed to be grinding together with weariness. "Look, there's a twenty-four-hour Carrow's just down the road. How about we get a cup of coffee and talk? I could use a crappy cup of coffee. I've spent years drinking hospital coffee or morgue coffee. Kenntnis's is just way too fancy for my plebeian tastes." Rhiana gave a watery chuckle. "That's better. Come on."

Chapter

FOURTEEN

IT feels like my faith is shriveling,” said Richard as he sat huddled at the breakfast table, hands cupped around a mug of tea.

The rectory was a 1950s cracker-box house and it looked like neither the cabinets nor the appliances had been replaced since then. The residual smell of boiled peas and pot roast hung in the air. There was a guilty niggling at the back of Richard’s mind telling him he ought to go back into the church and recover the sword. But he didn’t want to face the cold . . . or the sword.

“Why? Because of a profound disappointment? A tragedy?” the priest asked.

“No, because this man I’m working for . . . with . . . is shining a brutally cold light on it.”

“Challenging faith with logic,” said Charlie. He canted his chair onto its back legs and balanced his cup on his paunch.

“Yes.”

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"But you can't apply logic to faith. I've talked to you long enough to tell that you're a more sophisticated believer than that."

Richard hunched forward, dropping his eyes so he didn't have to meet the priest's gaze. "Recently the words haven't been able to drown out the hundreds . . . thousands of years of atrocities."

"Men commit the atrocities," said Charlie.

"Guided by religions," countered Richard.

"Religions aren't about God," said the priest.

"So they're only for crowd control? Setting a standard of behavior and demanding people obey under pain of Hell? God as daddy?"

Charlie lifted his cup and blew across the top of his coffee. "At their best. At their worst they're about influence, manipulation and power."

Richard shook his head. "You're the strangest minister I've ever met. I actually think you could talk to Kenntnis." He paused for a sip of tea and as the liquid hit his stomach he realized he was achingly hungry. "So what do you believe?"

"That faith is transcendent, exalting. It calls you to service, worship and duty," replied the priest and his face was alight with fervor. "And I also think that religion is a deeply and totally personal experience."

Richard sunk his chin into the collar of his turtleneck and tried to think how to frame the questions. But it always came back to the same question. *Did God exist?* A real God, not these masqueraders. He stared at the stains on the heavy wooden table.

"It seems like you come from a more dogmatic tradition," Charlie said.

"Meaning what?" asked Richard a bit defensively.

Charlie tapped his chest. "I teach and have always believed that Jesus wasn't kidding when he said the kingdom of God is within you. Other sects have a more arm's-length relationship. I think every human is capable of Godlike behavior, so if you believe in yourself you believe in God."

"So, by celebrating humanity . . .," Richard said slowly.

"You celebrate God," finished Charlie.

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“So it’s all about people.”

“For me,” said Charlie simply.

“Very like Kenntnis.” Richard stood and carried his mug over to the sink. He turned, resting his hands and back against the counter. “So you set no rules?”

“Only one,” said Charlie. “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you. Everything else is pretty much just noise.” They regarded each other for a long time. “This man who has you questioning your faith, what does he say?” Charlie asked gently.

Richard sighed and took a drink of tea. “That it’s all about people, but unlike you, he demands that I reject God.”

“And that would be a mortal sin.”



The Carrow’s was nosy and lively from the invasion of a post-football game high school crowd. A large corner booth was bursting with four enormous young men whose necks were wider than their heads. Acne bloomed across their cheeks and chins. Wedged between them like slender white beeches growing among boulders were the cheerleaders still dressed in their perky little gold and white uniforms and showing a lot of skin and goose bumps.

The rest of the room was filled with exuberant fans, and at a far corner a couple of young male shitkickers were trying to set the brims of each other’s cowboy hats on fire with lighters. The waitresses looked harried and the manager, a kid just a few years older than his customers, kept setting his hand on the phone as if trying to decide whether or not to call for help.

Rhiana and Angela sat next to a broad window that gave them an uninspiring view of the cars flowing past on Montgomery Boulevard. Rhiana couldn’t help it; her lip curled as she regarded the chattering teenagers running between cliques at various tables with tosses of long hair and tugs at the waistbands of absurdly baggy jeans.

“Oh come on,” came the coroner’s voice. “You aren’t that far removed. You’re what, eighteen? Nineteen?”

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"Eighteen . . . almost. And I only went to one football game in high school."

Angela shook open the paper napkin and placed it in her lap with a flourish. "Sounds like a traumatic experience."

"Do you always have to make fun of me?" Rhiana asked tightly.

The older woman glanced up at her quickly and looked abashed. "I'm really not. It's just my manner. I come across glib and aggressive even when I don't mean to. It was a survival technique in the family and in medical school. So what happened at the football game?"

"I took a book," said Rhiana shortly and glared at a pimply boy whose lank hair hung well into his eyes. "The popular kids grabbed it and tore all the pages out."

"You realize, of course, that we are twin sisters separated by seventeen years and nine hundred miles. I was the kind of geek who took a book to a ball game too," and Angela smiled to remove any sting.

A waitress arrived. They both ordered coffee and handed back the menus. The roar of conversation created an odd dissonance with the music leaking from the stereo speakers. The smell of frying hamburgers filled the room, adding to Rhiana's nausea.

Angela played with her utensils for a few seconds then she rushed into speech. "So, according to Kenntnis I've got a little bit of magic," said Angela. "And after watching you in action it made me wonder . . . well, if you could teach me how to do what you do. I'm really curious."

"As an experiment?" Rhiana asked.

"Yes . . . maybe . . . no. For a lot of reasons," the older woman confessed.

"It can't be tested. I've tried. Remember, I was a scientist before I became a, well, a witch for lack of a better term," said Rhiana.

"Kenntnis called you a sorceress. It think that fits you better," said Angela, and in answer to Rhiana's questioning look she elaborated. "I've got two visions of witches. One formed at an early age from watching *The Wizard of Oz* every year, and the other from the pagan

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communities that were around during college. You don't fit into either category."

"I don't think Kenntnis would like it if I teach you," Rhiana said slowly.

"So, do you see me asking his permission?" came the quick response.

"It could be dangerous," said Rhiana.

"We'll hide behind Richard," said Angela. Their eyes met as they considered the diminutive stature of the policeman and they both started laughing.



To be a musician it helped to have good hearing. Richard's was exceptional, so even over the whistle of the teakettle and the east winds howling through Tijeras Canyon he heard the crunch of tires on snow and the snick of a car door closing. He checked his watch—a few minutes past midnight.

"Do you often get people this late?" he asked Charlie.

Holding a tea bag in each hand, the priest turned and looked at him. "Huh?"

"Somebody's just pulled into the parking lot," said Richard as he crossed to the window and barely lifted a curtain to look out.

A couple of darkly clad figures were hurrying toward the main door of the church, and Richard realized with a sick lurch in the pit of his stomach that he should have gone back after the sword. He'd wanted a physical break from from Kenntnis's world, and tossing away the sword seemed like the best way to accomplish that. Now it just seemed foolish.

Charlie had brought them over to the house through the door in the sacristy. It wasn't immediately evident from the parking lot. "Stay here," Richard threw back at the priest as he ran out the kitchen door. He nipped across the snow-covered gravel of the southwestern style landscaping toward the side of the church.

The wind had the snow blowing horizontal. The fat, wet flakes of

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earlier in the evening had become ice pellets that stung the exposed skin of his face. He reached the door and slipped into the robing room beyond. He heard the creak and clunk of the heavy front doors opening and closing. For an instant he mentally struggled, then drew his gun.

The parking lot of the Carrow's had become a skating rink. The snow was now covered with a thin coating of ice. Angela and Rhiana linked arms to help balance each other and headed for Angela's robin's-egg-blue-Thunderbird.

Rhiana felt Angela stiffen and she looked up from her feet. The older woman was staring at a man seated on the hood of one of the parked cars. The man lifted a hand and waved, but all his attention was focused on Rhiana. She had the impression of a narrow face with upswept eyebrows. A gust of wind carried a squall of snow. When it passed the man was gone.

Carefully Richard opened the hidden door of the sacristy and looked out. Two men were hurrying up the aisle toward the altar.

The altar was directly across from him, perhaps ten feet away. The sword hilt lay on the concrete floor in front of it. The candles he had lit were still burning. Richard blinked, wondering if exhaustion was causing the room beyond to dim. Then he realized the flames on the altar candles were sinking. They dwindled to tiny sparks and were extinguished. Richard glanced down at his right wrist, the luminous dial on his watch was also going dark. But the darkness wasn't complete. A nimbus of white light hovered around the sword hilt as if a swirl of stars surrounded it.

Knowing from his experience with Rhiana that his pistol was now useless, Richard holstered the Firestar. The smaller of the two men was pushing through the gate at the railing, hand outstretched

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for the hilt. Fear was forgotten. Richard flung himself out the door running full out. It was going to be close. Memories of summer days, the ping of a metal bat on a ball, home plate shimmering before him in the heat haze, inspired him. Richard threw himself into a dive and went sliding across the floor. The other man's fingers scraped across the back of his coat. Richard swept up the hilt, tucked and rolled to his feet. The moment his hand closed around the hilt the swirl of lights spread to encompass his body.

The man Richard had beaten out for the sword stood staring at him. His panting breaths were loud in the cavernous room. He was skinny and angular and not much older than Richard. Brown hair flopped into his eyes. The eyes stopped Richard. They were flat and utterly without expression. Blackboard dark and just as daunting. His pants were shabby and despite the cold he wore only a nylon windbreaker.

The other man was younger, burlier, with a big sagging belly, and he seemed to be in charge. He wore an expensive ski parka and fancy hiking boots. Swinging loosely in his right hand was a riding crop. It was so incongruous that for an instant Richard's attention was distracted from the skinny man.

The metallic rattle of a butterfly knife opening, and the glint of light on the blade was his only warning. Richard sprang back, sucking in his gut as the tip caught on the material of his sweater. Spinning, he swept his hand away from the hilt, summoning the blade. The spin brought him around 360 degrees to face his assailant. Grimly Richard gestured with the thirty-inch blade of the sword against the six-inch blade of the butterfly knife. "Set it down and back away," he ordered. Richard kept his eyes locked on Skinny's eyes. Fencing had taught him that the eyes telegraphed the physical.

Not surprisingly the skinny man didn't respond. The burly one suddenly swept his crop through the air, crying out in a strange language. But Richard had heard it before. It was the language that Rihanna had used in the alley. Fire arced from the end of the crop heading

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toward Richard. He didn't have a lot of options. The knife-wielding thug blocked one direction and the heavy stone altar the other possible avenues for retreat.

Richard braced for searing pain and parried with the sword. The fire touched the black, black blade, a deafening series of chordal overtones filled the church as if ten thousand organs were playing one profound bass note. The fire vanished into the blade, but the knife man saw his opportunity and took it. He rushed Richard, knife held low and ready, the point angled up to do the maximum amount of damage to Richard's gut. Muscles do learn and remember. Richard pivoted to the side to offer a smaller target to his attacker and pushed the knife hand away. The man spun, trying to once again face Richard, but the wet soles of his shoes slipped on the polished concrete and he crashed into him. They both fell back against the altar. Richard's head rang and spun as the back of his skull connected with the stone lip of the altar.

Fingers closed around Richard's left wrist. The bones ground together under the unrelenting pressure. Fighting back nausea and the throbbing in his head, Richard head-butted his opponent in the face. Blood splattered warm and sticky across him. Struggling desperately, he flung himself from side to side trying to dislodge the man. Panic yammered in his head as he heard the approaching footfalls of the second man.

A new sound entered the equation: the harsh rasping slide of a pump shotgun being cocked. "Church or no, if you don't back off I'll blow a hole through you," came Charlie's bass growl.

The skinny man rolled quickly off Richard. "No, stupid, it won't fire," yelled the burly young man at his associate.

"Charlie, it won't work," Richard yelled at the same time.

But it's hard to believe something so outlandish, and Charlie squeezed the trigger anyway. Skinny's chest sunk in as if anticipating the pellets. Charlie stared with grim anticipation and nothing happened.

With a braying laugh Skinny threw himself toward Richard. There

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was a blur of motion as the wooden grip of the shotgun swept past Richard's face and smashed into the side of Skinny's head. The impact drove the attacker sideways into the altar. He sank down onto the floor moaning, one hand nursing his head, the other his ribs. The butterfly knife lay forgotten. Richard kicked it aside.

"Yeah, but inertia sure as hell works," grunted the priest.

Richard vaulted over the railing. The other man ran backward, the crop outstretched as if warding him off. The edge of the sword cut through the crop, severing it. But that wasn't the extent of the damage. The leather twisted, writhed and liquefied.

With a sob of fear the man whirled and bolted for the door. Richard pounded after him, each step sending a jar of pain through the back of his head. *If you touch a normal human it will render him or her incapable of performing magic*, Kenntnis's words filled his mind. They were at the door, the man scrabbling at the handle. Richard adjusted his grip and laid the flat of the blade across the sorcerer's back. The tearing scream echoed around the church. His arms thrust behind his back, hands reaching for the area where the sword had rested.

Charlie lumbered down the aisle. "Stop it! What are you doing to him?"

The man sank onto his knees and vomited. The smell of bile now joined the smell of sweat and incense.

"Call the police," Richard said, pulling out his cell phone, but then he realized that the flames on the candles had not returned and his phone was dark and inert. "Oh dear," Richard whispered.

There was a whisper of sound from the altar.