

*The Longer
the Fall*

Praise for ***Mortal Touch***

Book 1 of the The Vampires of New England Series

“...a wonderful fictional treatment of the authentic vampire tradition in this region... has the honesty and local color that brings the characters and their towns to life and makes the plot palpably real.”

Michael Bell, author of *Food for the Dead: On the Trail of New England's Vampires*

“I think you'll be genuinely surprised by some of the twists. Regan is a sympathetic heroine, and Arthen's variation on traditional vampire lore is fresh and well thought-out. The story riveted my attention throughout.”

Margaret M. Carter, author of *Dark Changeling*, *Child of Twilight*, *Sealed in Blood*, and *Different Blood: The Vampire as Alien*

“*Mortal Touch* is an intriguing vampire adventure. Regan has worked hard to get her life back on track, but somehow trouble has found her once again. In this tension filled paranormal tale, Ms. Arthen develops a nicely detailed world with captivating characters and fascinating twists on vampirism. With a touch of mystery, suspense and passion, this is a wonderful escape from the ordinary.”

Kimberly Swan, Darque Reviews

“The story comes alive, riddled with just enough creepiness to enjoy but not so much as to keep the reader awake at night...Inanna Arthen explores vampires in the modern world, attempting to account for both the mundane details and the supernatural, and she does so with relish. She makes vampires seem real, even approachable. That's what is so creepy about this book. You finish it and think—Oh, man! That is too real! I did not want to put *Mortal Touch* down until I had finished it.”

Tonia R. Montgomery, Curled Up With a Good Book

“Having read so many vampire novels as I have, it is seldom that I find one that surprises me or that strays enough from the vampire conventions to appear original, and this is why I was pleasantly surprised to read *Mortal Touch*...this is a work that is well written and that at times gets quite suspenseful and horrific...*Mortal Touch* is definitely a novel vampire fiction aficionados will want to add to their collection.”

Mayra Calvani, Dark Phantom Reviews

“*Mortal Touch* builds slowly to a swift and exciting end. The visceral violence of the story makes it feel quite personal and in some ways shocking. You can't help but feel the betrayal and powerlessness the characters experience. It's very well written. I also enjoyed that the New England area is like another character in the story.”

Vicky London, Vampire Genre

The Vampires of New England Series

*The Longer
the Fall*

Inanna Arthen



*By Light Unseen Media
Pepperell, Massachusetts*

The Longer the Fall
The Vampires of New England Series
<http://vampiresofnewengland.com>

Copyright © 2010 by Inanna Arthen and By Light Unseen Media. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the prior written permission of the copyright holder, except for brief quotations in reviews and for academic purposes in accordance with copyright law and principles of Fair Use.

Cover and interior design by Vyrdolak, By Light Unseen Media.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Hardcover Edition
ISBN-10: 0-9793028-9-7
ISBN-13: 978-0-9793028-9-3
LCCN: 2010900623

Published by
By Light Unseen Media
PO Box 1233
Pepperell, Massachusetts 01463-3233

Our Mission:
By Light Unseen Media presents the best of quality fiction and non-fiction on the theme of vampires and vampirism. We offer fictional works with original imagination and style, as well as non-fiction of academic calibre.

For additional information, visit:
<http://bylightunseenmedia.com/>

Printed in the United States of America

0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

❧ 1 ❧

Diana got on the road before sunrise that morning, taking US Route 1 up the coast from Boston. Although it was a weekday and school was still in session, the roads were already beginning to fill with vacationers. North of Brunswick the highway veered inland from the shoreline, passing through long expanses of deep fir forest interspersed with a bit of cleared farmland now and then. Occasionally the road crossed long wooden pile bridges that spanned tidal rivers on their way to the sea. The country seemed wild, empty and lonely.

She had been driving for six hours by the time Route 1 passed through Rockland and began working its way along the west side of Penobscot Bay. Caught up in the momentum of her adventure, Diana had stopped for fuel only once, and had snacked on an apple midmorning rather than take the time to sit down in a restaurant. Gas was running at a disgraceful \$0.32 north of Portland, three cents more than the city. But at least it was plentiful. In the post-war economic boom, filling stations were appearing everywhere.

On the outskirts of Camden she spotted one of them on the south side of the road, two pumps in front of a small building with a single open bay and a faded Texaco sign over the peeling office door. A piece of plywood leaning against one of the pumps bore a cryptic “25.9” in runny red letters that looked like they’d been written with a blood-soaked finger. She pulled into the station next to the pumps, limestone gravel crunching loudly under the car’s wheels. No one was in sight, and after a moment she tapped the horn and turned off the engine. The sudden quiet felt eerie—her ears were humming from the constant noise of the motor.

A young man in grimy blue coveralls emerged from the bay and hastened to her car, smoothing down his close-cropped red hair with one hand. He leaned his arms on the sill of the open driver’s side window and peered in at her. “Fill it up, miss?”

Diana drew back an inch or two—his breath had a whiff of Wrigley’s Spearmint that was almost obliterated by the intense fume of motor oil and sweat surrounding him like a cloud. “Yes, please. Just regular.”

The young man brought the hose around to the side of the car and began pumping. The sharp smell of gas filled the air. "So, you on vacation?"

Diana glanced back at the young man and was amused to see him striking a pose, one hand on the pump, one tucked into a back pocket of his coveralls. "In a manner of speaking."

"You all by yourself?"

"No, my husband's in the trunk." Now there was a satisfying fantasy. The young man laughed, a little too loudly.

"Where you headed?"

"Pepperell."

"Oh, I know Pepp'rell. I got an aunt lives there. That's just the other side to Camden Hills State Park."

"I know."

He finished pumping and went briskly around to raise the engine hood, hissing at the cloud of hot air that stung his face. "You should be careful," he said, giving up on his attempts to open the oil cover. "Your radiator'll boil over. Lady stranded alone on the road, that's something to worry about." He shut the hood forcefully and produced a squirt bottle and long-handled squeegee from next to the pumps.

"In Maine?"

"Well..." he squirted copiously from the bottle. "You might have a long walk, getting help."

"This is a pretty reliable car. I've never had the radiator boil over."

"Ayeh, it's a Chevy. A forty-eight, isn't it? Good car. So, you staying in Pepp'rell?" The young man grunted as he stretched to squeegee the far side of the windshield.

"Yes, for a while, anyway. Anything I should be sure and take in while I'm here?"

"Well...not too many tourist attractions in Pepp'rell. They got summer people, but most of the doin's are in Camden. Nice place, Camden. We got a park down on the harbor, an outdoor theatre—Shakespeare, they do there, and concerts. And an opera house, all kinds of shopping, I know how you girls like to shop..."

"It sounds lovely. But I'll be staying in Pepperell."

"Lots of peace and quiet in Pepp'rell, if that's what you're after." He straightened up, absently wiping beaded sweat off his forehead. "But come to think of it, there is the Hermit of Pepp'rell Hills. Might be worth writing a postcard about, if you saw him."

Diana's mind and eyes had wandered off toward the woods across the road, but at Brent's words, both instantly snapped back to attention. "The Hermit of Pepperell Hills? Who, or what, is that?"

"No one knows, for sure. He owns this big piece of land back of the town, five hundred acres if it's a foot, with some old houses on it, and he lives in one of them. Comes into town sometimes, but mostly you never see him. Grows all

his own food. Not an old guy, either. My aunt says he's real good looking, but he must be a vegetarian or something, 'cause he's dead pale and thin as a hoe handle. My aunt thinks he must be one of those...fairies, you know."

"He grows his own food?"

"He must, 'cause he never buys anything from Thornton's—that's the grocery in Pepp'rell. Mr. Thornton would deliver too, anything he wanted, so beats me where this guy gets his food if he doesn't grow it."

"Maybe he shops in Rockland or someplace."

"Sure, except he doesn't have a car. Can you figure that? But I guess he's got a big garden, herbs and everything. And he's got money, too. It's crazy. You want me to check your tires?"

"What?" She blinked, and shook herself. "No, I'm sure they're fine. They're brand new. Tell me, does this hermit have a name?"

"Yeah. Yeah, let me think." He peered off down the road, frowning. "Morris? Morton? Something like that..."

"You don't mean Morgan? Thomas Morgan?"

"Yeah! That's it." He looked down at her and his face suddenly fell. "Oh, gee...gee, I'm sorry, miss. He's not a friend of yours, is he? 'Cause I only know what my aunt says, and she can really get going, you know—"

"It's okay. I've just heard of him. What do I owe you?"

"Uhhh...that'll be two thirty two."

She rummaged in her handbag and gave him exact change, which he accepted with a look of regret.

"Thanks, miss. Stop by again, any time. I'm always here. You have any trouble with the car, you bring it here, nothing I can't fix. Brent Crothers, I'm in the book. Oh, and I do bodywork, too." He turned and gestured toward a car parked on the side of the station, its dark blue finish glistening in the sun. "Matt Taylor got himself rear-ended but good in April, I had to replace the trunk lid, both rear fenders, rocker panels, six coats of paint..."

"It looks brand new." Diana was sincerely impressed. "Well, Brent, if I have the bad luck to get rear-ended, I'll give you a call."

Brent's cheeks turned pink. "Wouldn't want that to happen, no," he said, stammering.

"Of course you wouldn't. Thanks, Brent. My name's Diana, I'll probably stop by again." Chuckling, she pulled back onto the road, her fatigue driven away by her growing elation.

Pepperell was one of those tiny New England towns you could easily miss if you sneezed at the wrong time on US 1. Like its sister town in Massachusetts, it had been named after Sir William Pepperell, the Kittery merchant who had won his baronetcy and his fortune by commanding the siege of Louisbourg in 1740. But no statue of Sir William posed on the town green—indeed, the community had no town green at all. The intersection of Main Street and School Street, which literally ran into Penobscot Bay with a pair of boat ramps, marked the

center of town. Small businesses and commercial buildings lined Main Street for about a half mile, ending with the Schooner restaurant, which attracted diners from as far as Bangor year-round. From there, Route 1 hurried on to Lincolnville, which had an even more famous restaurant and a prettier beach, and on to Lincolnville was exactly where most vacationers went.

The Holliston House Inn, built in 1888 and boasting a full three stories of spacious suites, occupied the entire upper echelon of Pepperell's accommodations. Its dining room looked out over a rocky waterfront lined with commercial wharves, but along the horizon stretched the misty silhouette of Isleboro Island, like a bank of heather green fog.

The Inn's stateliness prompted Diana to take extra care in fixing her face and wind-snarled black hair before she peeled herself off the seat of her car and went inside. She tucked her black leather portfolio under her arm, unwilling to leave it in the car even for a few minutes. The front hallway was cool and dim, with carpeted oak floors and a wide curving staircase leading to the second story. Behind the desk stood a gray-haired man, suit coat on and buttoned despite the warm temperatures. "Excuse me...Mr. Wilkinson?" Diana said as he glanced up. "I'm Diana Chilton, I telephoned you yesterday."

"Oh, yes. I have a room all ready for you. Did you just arrive?"

"Just, from Boston. I hope you're still serving lunch, because I'm ravenous."

"Lunch is served until three. After that you'll have to settle for dinner," he said, smiling. "Why don't you register and I'll steer you straight for the dining room." He set the open guest book before her. "Are you traveling alone?"

"Yes," she said, thinking irritably, *why does everyone ask that? Do they think I'm hiding someone in my suitcase?* As she took the proffered pen, she added casually, "By the way, I'm supposed to be meeting someone here in town, and I'm not sure exactly where he lives. He wrote to me, but his return address is only a rural delivery number. I was hoping someone could give me directions."

"I'm sure that I can. Who are you looking for?"

"His name is Thomas Morgan."

Mr. Wilkinson pulled his head back, his eyes guarded. "Ah." He put a myriad meanings into that one syllable. "You mean our Hermit."

Diana paused for a moment as she considered the abrupt chill in Mr. Wilkinson's affable expression. "Yes, someone mentioned that you called him that."

"Um-hm. He's a little strange, that one. I'm not sure a young lady should be going out there all by herself."

"Why? Is he dangerous?"

"Who knows? But he's peculiar, no doubt about it. Lives back there all alone, never sees anyone except three or four times a year when he comes into town for something...keeps his hair long, too. He's got a tail right down in back, like he was one of the Founding Fathers. Very peculiar. And he's not too friendly to folks who go poking around up there."

"You mean he shoots at them?"

“Lord, no! We couldn’t have that! But once or twice someone has needed to go up there and talk to him about town business, and he all but slammed the door in their face.”

Diana signed her name in the guest book and handed back the pen. “I appreciate the information, but I really would like to see Mr. Morgan. Could you tell me how to find him? He is expecting me.”

Mr. Wilkinson set the guest book back on its shelf and put both his hands on the desk, facing her squarely. “If he’s expecting you, I’m surprised that he didn’t give you the directions himself.” His voice had a suspicious note.

Diana hesitated, caught, and Mr. Wilkinson raised his eyebrows in an infuriatingly smug way. “Look. I planned this trip at the last minute, and Mr. Morgan doesn’t have a telephone. I didn’t think it would be so hard to find his house, that I needed to have him draw me a map. He owns five hundred acres, doesn’t he?” She rummaged in the leather portfolio and pulled out a small vellum envelope, hand-addressed in neat, angular script. “You see? Here’s his letter to me. Note the postmark? And the return address?”

Mr. Wilkinson took the envelope and studied it long enough for Diana to become acutely aware of the soft tick of the antique clock hanging on the wall behind the desk. He had the look of someone who is reluctantly conceding a point, and Diana guessed that he recognized the handwriting. He returned the envelope to her with a shrug. “Take School Street straight back out of town for five miles. You’ll come to a crossroads with a big chunk of gray granite by the side of the road and a wood fence to the other side. There’s no sign, but everything on your right there is private property. Turn right and follow that road until the first turnoff on the left. There’s a big stone house at the end of it. That’s where he lives.”

She smiled, to take the edge off her minor victory. “Thanks. I really appreciate it. I’m not just trying to annoy him, I promise.”

Mr. Wilkinson only shook his head. “People do have a right to be left alone, if that’s what they want. Every now and again some antiquarian comes in here wanting to take a look at that house, because it’s the oldest one left in the county, built in 1715. I don’t think many of them have gotten much of a look at it.” He handed her room key to her, frowning.

Diana sighed. “We’re both grown-ups, Mr. Wilkinson. If Mr. Morgan doesn’t want to meet with me, I’m sure he’ll tell me that. Now didn’t you say something about lunch?”

Mr. Wilkinson’s directions proved accurate. The lush green, thickly wooded countryside mixed second-growth forest with older patches of tall fir and pine. The air smelled richly of new foliage and there were more birds than Diana had ever seen. The bumpy, curving asphalt road dipped and swooped over the hilly terrain, growing steeper and higher as it wound up into a region unofficially known as Pepperell Hills.

At the granite boulder, Diana pulled up the car and hesitated, peering

down the narrow graveled way on the right uncertainly. Finally she made the turn, the crunching stones under her tires sounding painfully loud. She almost missed the driveway Mr. Wilkinson had mentioned, little more than two ruts curving around through the tall grass. She guessed that the property had been cleared and farmed up to a more recent date than most of the surrounding area.

The drive came to an end in a broad open space directly before the house. Diana stopped the car, turned off the engine, and got out, being careful not to let the door slam. Shading her eyes, she gazed up at the building for several minutes. Lichen gave the tightly fitted granite walls a dusky marbling, but the masonry was in good repair. A broad central chimney rose above the hipped slate roof. The front door faced north, and the upper windows must have allowed a long view in all directions at one time. Long meadow grass nodded in the light breezes, mixed with rustling saplings of oak and maple, and the occasional squat little spruce.

She saw no external signs that the house was occupied—no car, no landscaping, no outbuilding, no artifacts or belongings anywhere in the vicinity, and not a scrap of rubbish or debris. The second floor windows appeared to be covered with heavy draperies. Under the mid-afternoon sun, the insects of early summer droned, and in the distance, she could faintly hear the trill of small amphibians in some unseen pond or brook. Behind the soft natural chorus yawned a profound silence, undisturbed by any human sound.

Yet the stillness was not empty. She could *feel* someone inside the house, with her inner senses tuned by years of training—there was a presence there. But as hard as she concentrated, she couldn't determine whether the person she felt was asleep or awake. The ambiguity of what she sensed puzzled her.

Finally she pocketed her car key and walked up to the front door of the house, where a flat wide stone set into the earth marked the threshold. A wrought iron knocker in the shape of a crescent moon was attached to the door. With a deep breath, she took hold of its hinged hammer and knocked smartly three times.

A whip-poor-will rose from the garden behind the house, keening its three-note cry. She detected no sound or movement within the house, and no change in the consciousness that she felt. She knocked harder, then impulsively grasped the door handle and depressed the old-fashioned thumb latch. There was no lock plate or keyhole, but the solid oak door didn't budge when she pushed, and seemed to be bolted or barred from the inside.

After a minute of indecision, Diana stepped back from the door and began to walk around the house. She paused to look furtively into one of the front windows. It belonged to a sort of parlor, with several pieces of nondescript furniture. A large braided rug hid the floor and a corner fireplace connected to the central chimney. She saw no lamps, papers or bric-a-brac, but no cobwebs or dust, either. A tabletop shone like glass where a long sunbeam touched it.

She continued on around the house. At the back of the house she paused, looking around in amazement. Almost two full acres remained entirely clear of

saplings, and while meadow grass and tall weeds stood knee-deep, it was obvious that this area had only recently been neglected. Brent had mentioned a garden, but no food grew here. As her eye ranged over the clumps and lines of wild growth, she detected some sort of pattern, and fascinated, she walked forward. She felt one of her flats step on something loose and gritty, and looked down.

As far as she could tell, someone had used some sort of tool, like a garden hoe, to make precise ditches in the soil about four inches wide and deep, then filled the ditches in with gravel to create an outline. She followed this one, packed with locally quarried pink granite, and found that it made a great circle, encompassing an area almost three hundred feet in diameter. She paced it all the way around, more and more intrigued. Inside the large circle a series of progressively smaller concentric ones had been mapped out with a draftsman's precision and filled with different sorts of stone—black granite, gray granite, and white limestone. Mystical sigils, meticulously outlined in the same way, filled the spaces between the circles. Diana didn't recognize a few of them. The smallest circle, about one hundred feet across, contained a geometric design too complex for her to analyze. It seemed to be a seven-pointed star with an elaborate and irregular pattern laid over it. The entire garden was a vast mandala, traced out in chipped stone and solidly planted with herbs, what survived of them.

She got her bearings and slowly walked to the center point of the design. Here only a few wisps of grass struggled through a deep layer of pale green stone that she couldn't place at first. She knelt down and rubbed some between her hands, and gasped. He had filled the entire center space, some seven feet across, with crushed jade, a small fortune's worth. Jade symbolized longevity in some traditions, she knew. At the very midpoint of this *medeolenum*, this sacred center, an unpruned wild rose bush erupted in a tangle of brambles, surrounded by yarrow, ginseng, and life-everlasting.

She knew instinctively that the geometric design had a deep meaning that she was failing to interpret. What was he trying to accomplish, and why had he given up? As she gazed around the open expanse, another puzzle arose. Where did Thomas Morgan get his food? She could see no sign or smell of livestock, no vegetables, not even a fruit tree. Most of the surrounding land appeared heavily overgrown with woods. *He has to eat—doesn't he?* Of course, he could have foodstuffs shipped from almost anywhere, if he wanted—but that begged the question of why he would bother.

A beaten track led to the back door of the house, and Diana intuited that Thomas Morgan used this entrance more than the front. It also was bolted, and her cautious knocking failed to evoke a response from inside. She squinted through one of the windows and saw a deep soapstone sink attached to one wall and a long table. For all the clues the room offered, the house might have been vacant and abandoned.

She returned to her car and stood by it for a few minutes, studying the curtained upstairs windows for a sign of movement. But nothing stirred, and

the presence she felt remained as serene as a still pool. With a sense of disappointment, she got into the car and left. She decided not to return to Holliston House just yet, and drove instead to nearby Camden Hills State Park. She walked along the trails aimlessly, thinking—the black flies made it necessary to keep moving, but nevertheless the peace of the woods helped to clear her mind. The sun sank behind the steep hills, and in the twilight she saw several deer come to the shore of Lake Megunticook to drink. Finally exhaustion from her long day and a growling stomach prompted her to head back to Pepperell.

The Inn's windows glowed with warm yellow light, and a rich scent came from the dining room. Diana walked slowly around the wide veranda that completely encompassed the first floor, and stopped to lean against the railing and stare out at the Bay. Closely moored fishing boats now lined the docks. The Bay glistened softly in the moonlight, but a chilling breeze blew off of the water, and she turned to go inside. Then she realized that several men sat at the other end of the veranda, in heavy wooden Adirondack chairs set in pools of light from the first floor windows. She walked down to the men and their low conversation ceased, replaced by a chorus of "evenin', miss." Then she heard Mr. Wilkinson ask, "So, did you find your Hermit?"

All the men turned to look up at her with avidly curious expressions. "No," Diana said, feeling a bit self-conscious. "No one was home this afternoon."

One of the men, who wore a thick knitted vest over shirtsleeves, chuckled. "Fred, did you send this poor little girl all the way out there in the middle of the day?"

All the men except Mr. Wilkinson now laughed, and Diana glanced among them, perplexed and irritated. "Why?" she said, a bit too sharply. "Is there something I should know?"

"Well, now, missy, everyone knows that you can't raise the Hermit of Pepp'rell Hills in the daytime."

"You can't? Why not?"

"No one knows why not, but you can beat on the door and yell yourself hoarse and never get a stir. Don't know where he goes, but he won't answer the door." The speaker looked over at Fred Wilkinson, grinning. "Fred, don't you recollect when Alma Patton needed him to sign that paperwork for the lien he paid off when he bought the Schuller place? She must've traipsed up there six times altogether. Lord, I never seen Alma so mad. Then she went up 'bout suppertime one night, and there he was, cool as mackerel. Got a piece of her mind, he did, but he never apologized or even blinked, she said. Alma's got no use for him, you can bet on that."

"I remember that," said a man with receding sandy hair. "Then when the census man come in two years back, everyone told him, go up there after supper, but would he listen? He musta been from Boston, that feller, 'cause he made four trips before he figured it out. College boy, I betcha."

All the men were chuckling now, even Fred Wilkinson who looked at her

with a shrug. "I'm sorry, Miss Chilton. I truly forgot. I've never had a reason to go see Mr. Morgan, and the daytime business just slipped my mind."

She couldn't stay angry before his sincerity, but she grumbled, "It would have been nice to know this before. Are you sure he's still there?"

"Oh, he's still there, no doubt about it. Someone's keeping the place up, and we see him around now and then."

"But what can he possibly do during the day?"

The man with the vest grunted. "Sleep, I s'pose."

"Sleep? When people like Alma are hammering his door down?"

The sandy-haired man leaned toward her. "Sister, let me tell you something. I know a man name of Tim Evereaux, likes to hunt nights up back of the hills there. He told me once that he used to cut down through your hermit fella's property, oh, two, three in the mornin' if he'd had a good night. He said no matter how late it was, he'd see lights on in that house. Just dim lights, mind, 'cause Morgan's never run the electricity in there, and he's still burnin' kerosene. But the lights are on all night, and when you burn kerosene, you don't go to bed and leave the lamps on, not in a house like that one, you don't."

The other men all assented, with nods, and Diana looked from one to another of them. "Okay, so he sleeps. He must be a deep sleeper."

"Or a deep drinker, maybe," said the man with the vest. "At least, that's one idea that's struck folks here."

"Now, I wouldn't be so quick to repeat that kind of thing, Walt. No one's got any reason to believe that," Fred Wilkinson said. But Diana considered this possibility. Much as she disliked the idea, it was a plausible explanation for the odd impression she'd picked up out at the house. "Thank you for the information, gentlemen. I think I'll go in now before it's too late to get dinner."

"Oh, you've got plenty of time," said Fred Wilkinson. "The special's roast lamb tonight."

"Yes, it smells wonderful. Good night."

As she walked on around the veranda to the front door, she decided she was far too tired to go back up to the stone house that night. *I'll go tomorrow night, right at dusk*, she thought. *I'll find out if this man has a drinking problem or not, whatever happens.*

2

As the high clouds trailing across the sunset had promised, the next day it rained. Diana slept in as late as she could, took a long bath, and spent the afternoon restlessly prowling around the Inn. She lingered over her dinner, and was startled to realize that it was full dark out. She went to her room, got her raincoat, and reviewed the contents of her portfolio. If no one answered the door this time, she decided, she would wait—all night if need be.

The drive seemed shorter than the day before. The rain beat so hard on her car's roof, it almost drowned out the thump of the windshield wipers. As she turned in by the granite boulder, her heart started pounding, and she consciously slowed her breathing, to keep her anticipation under some control. She followed the drive around its long curve and pulled up in front of the house. She could barely see the stone façade in the dark. As the downpour reduced to a light sprinkle, she started to get out of the car and froze, catching her breath. A faint light showed in one of the front windows of the house. Moreover, the presence she had felt the day before was now quietly alert. He knew someone had come.

Hugging her portfolio tightly under her arm, she felt her way to the door and knocked. Seconds ticked by, and she heard no approaching footsteps. Just as she was wondering if she should knock again, she started at the sound of a heavy bolt being shot back. The latch clicked, and the door opened.

A figure stood silhouetted against the dim light that spilled into the other end of the tiny entrance hall. She could make out nothing of his face or clothing, only that he was medium height and lean. She waited for him to ask her what she wanted, but he didn't speak, and finally she cleared her throat awkwardly. "Excuse me...are you Mr. Thomas Morgan?"

In the pause that followed she felt that he was taking in every detail of her appearance, although she couldn't imagine how he could see her. "Yes, I am. May I know your name, and your business here?" He spoke in the melodic baritone voice of a trained singer or actor, with the faintest trace of an accent.

"I'm Diana Chilton, I wrote to you, and you replied that you'd be willing to speak with me..." She fumbled in her coat pocket for the small envelope, but

he stepped back, opening the door wide.

“Yes, of course. You’d better come inside, before you catch your death.”

Somewhat incredulous, Diana walked past him into the house. He shut the door and shot the thick iron bolt, while gesturing toward the wall behind her. “You can hang your wet coat on one of those pegs.” She took off her dripping coat and groped for a peg in the dimness, surreptitiously wiping moisture off her face with her sleeve.

“Come back into my study, I have a fire going there.”

She followed him through the doorway on the left, which led to the twin of the front room she had spied into the day before, appearing just as unused. Her host ushered her through a door in the back wall of this room into a space that seemed cluttered and crowded. Two armchairs stood before the corner fireplace, and a sweet fragrance seemed to radiate from the fire itself. Shelves lined three of the walls, mostly filled with books, along with glass and ceramic jars, ledgers, and some unidentifiable items. An immense old desk of carved oak occupied the corner opposite the fire, with two kerosene lamps illuminating a jumble of papers, writing implements and books. As the light came entirely from the lamps and the fire, she couldn’t make out a lot of detail.

Thomas straightened up from removing something from one of the desk drawers, and as she finally saw him in the full light of the two lamps, Diana caught her breath. She knew that face better than her own by now—pale, high-boned, with large dark eyes and heavy brows. His dark hair was pulled straight back from his forehead, and just as Fred Wilkinson had told her, he did have a ponytail, tied back with a narrow black ribbon. He obviously selected his clothing, dark trousers and a heavy fisherman’s sweater, for comfort rather than appearances.

She realized that he was returning her appraisal with a lifted eyebrow, and she blinked, embarrassed to have been caught staring so rudely. “I hope I’m not being too forward, just dropping in on you like this. You did say...oh, thank you.” She accepted the folded handkerchief he handed to her.

“Not at all—I don’t think you’re forward, that is, merely a bit precipitous. Did you pack your bags as soon as you received my letter, or before you mailed yours?”

Diana looked at him sharply, but his expression was almost solemn. “Well, I...there wasn’t much point in passing more letters back and forth. Some things have to be discussed face-to-face.”

“Very urgently, it seems, if you didn’t even have time to send me a telegram with advance notice of your arrival.”

His tone was so deadpan, Diana wasn’t sure if he was teasing her or not, but he didn’t sound irritated. “It’s not that, really. Some personal...things...just made this a good time for me to get away.” She daubed at the water that was still dripping from her hair down her forehead. The threadbare handkerchief was stiff linen, coarse and knotty with faded embroidery in one corner. She had

a guilty sensation that she was wiping her face with something that belonged in a museum.

"If you piqued my curiosity before, you're certainly intriguing me now." To Diana's confusion, Thomas leaned toward her and sniffed. "It was you who walked around the house yesterday afternoon, wasn't it?"

"Yes, I...I didn't mean to pry, I just thought..." She could feel her cheeks flush. Had he really *smelled* her, or had he seen her wandering around on his property? She hoped he hadn't sensed her psychic attempts to detect his presence, since some people took a very dim view of such things.

"I'm sorry that I missed you. In point of fact, Fred Wilkinson told me today that you were here and looking for me. I thought you might try again tonight."

"He did?" For a moment, Diana felt a surge of anger, but then she recalled her first conversation with the Inn's proprietor. "Oh. I guess I shouldn't be surprised. Of course, he neglected to tell me that you're best contacted in the evenings."

"Yes, I'm well known to keep odd hours. But why don't we sit down?" He gestured at the armchairs, and she sat in the one nearest her, carefully putting her leather portfolio by the side of the chair. She noticed his eyes following it as she did so. The warmth of the fire felt delicious, and she sighed, relaxing in spite of herself. Thomas sat in the chair opposite her, crossing his legs in limber European fashion. "It's been quite a few years since I've had an opportunity to speak with a fellow initiate of the Order. But perhaps we should test each other before we say anything more along that line?"

"By all means, let's go by the book." Diana couldn't keep a bitter edge out of her voice, and she smiled weakly when Thomas gave her a quizzical look. "You're right, that's what we're supposed to do. Shall I start?"

"I'd like to hear you speak the words you wrote in your letter. Can you?"

"You mean, do I really speak Welsh?" She paused a moment to collect her thoughts and make sure she had the consonants at the right angles, then slowly repeated her own translation of one of the Order's password phrases. "*Y golau arian yw'r golau byd a'r golau gwir a'r golau bywyd.*"

A somewhat distant expression crossed Thomas' face. "*Rydyn ni'n sefyll llaw yn law yn y golau bywyd, y golau gwir, y golau byd, ac uwch pob, yn y golau arian.*" The words of the response curled from his tongue with the natural grace of a native speaker. He was silent for a moment afterwards, as though savoring a delicate flavor. "I hate to think how long it's been since I heard that language spoken. Why on earth did you learn it?"

"It wasn't actually my idea, but I like it, it's different. I've got some Welsh in the family tree, and I was interested in the myth cycles."

"So the Order is still full of Celtic romanticists, trying to re-invent the Druids?"

She grinned for a moment. "Yes, I think there are just a *few* of those left."

"And still holding the Beltene revels, in this day and age?"

"As enthusiastically as ever. Dr. Kinsey would have a coronary." Her smile

faded. “Not that I’ve been to one for a couple of years.” At his inquisitive look, she said apologetically, “I’ve been going through a pretty nasty divorce.”

“I’m very sorry.”

“Yes, well, probably for the best. It was all over in March, anyway. But I wasn’t about to go to Beltene and run into my ex-, that’s for sure. So much for the best thirteen years of my life.”

“You can’t be serious. Your husband must have taken a child bride.”

“Don’t be silly. I’m thirty-one—yes, I don’t look it, I know. But I’m over the hill. Pointless to lie about it.”

“That’s a very young age to be so cynical. You must have divorced your husband for mayhem and cruelty.”

She laughed out loud at that. “Oh, no. Stephen wouldn’t have the guts to raise his hand to me—just his voice, early and often. Besides, I’d hit him back, and he knows it.”

“I’ll certainly keep that in mind.” This time he did show a hint of a smile. “But I don’t think this is the personal thing that put you on the highway to Maine, is it? Let’s talk about why you are here. I’m rather eager for an explanation of all those mysterious allusions and hints in your letters to me—as I’m sure you intended. You said you’d learned a great deal about me that made you believe we could be of help to each other. Now that we’re face to face, could you elucidate on those statements?”

“Yes, of course.” But despite her crisp reply, Diana hesitated, frowning down at the hearthrug between them. “I’d like to fill in some of the back story, though.”

“By all means.”

She drew in a deep breath before she started speaking, fighting down a sudden attack of what could only be called stage fright. Moving from casual banter to the meat of the issues was a bigger step than she’d expected. “I’ve had a pretty...unconventional life, even by the standards of the Order of the Silver Light. I was raised in the Order, to begin with, and my parents are...wealthy Bohemians, I guess is the simplest way to describe it. I never even went to school, I was educated at home, and in the Order. I came into a lot of money when I turned twenty-one, and I started up a charitable organization to help the working man and the poor, it’s named Bread and Roses. Maybe you’ve heard of us?”

Thomas only nodded. He was concentrating so intently on her words that Diana had to restrain herself from fidgeting in the slightly lumpy chair.

“We had our tenth anniversary this year, and we’re doing very well. We run boarding houses, a soup kitchen, job training programs, we help in emergencies—Bread and Roses employs twenty-two full-time staff now, and we’ve got about eighty dedicated volunteers.”

“And you manage all that yourself?” He looked amazed.

“Oh, no, the Director runs the day to day operations. I was Chairwoman of the Board, but...I’ve stepped down, temporarily. Oh, they’ll chug along just fine without me—better than fine, I suspect. The staff runs the programs, the

volunteers do the work, all they need from me is the signature on the checks, and I've turned that over to the trust now. I'm completely superfluous. I was just underfoot hanging around all the time."

"Hanging around? You mean you actually worked in the kitchens?"

"Among other areas, yes, about thirty hours a week until recently. To tell you the truth, I was just keeping myself busy, not that it *helped* my marriage, but...Mr. Morgan, don't mistake me for some Boston Brahmin dilettante. Some of my funds are in long-term investments, but most of my money goes to various causes, and so does a lot of my time. I'm not suited to a life of leisure, and frivolous luxury bores me. I don't believe that my social responsibilities begin and end with throwing money, just because I have a lot of it."

"That sounds most commendable. But why have you stepped down from your own Board of Directors?"

She sighed heavily. "I guess I feel like I've come to a kind of crossroads in my life. It's 1952, we're more than half way through the century. In a couple of years I'll be officially middle-aged, and I have nothing to show for it but a failed marriage and a Sisyphean vocation. No matter how much we do, it seems like things just keep getting worse and worse. There are scores of organizations like Bread and Roses, and we might as well be fighting the Chicago fire with teaspoons and atomizers. Look at the twentieth century so far. We've already had a global depression, epidemics, two world wars—how many people have been killed in this century alone? And there's going to be another big war. This thing in Korea...I can feel it. Truman as much as said so."

"And many thoughtful people agree with him. I'm not sure I do. After all, if you take a long view of history—"

"A long view of history consists of an unbroken landscape of wars, Mr. Morgan, everywhere in the world except Antarctica."

"If that's all that you choose to look at."

Diana stiffened. "Oh, yes, it's all how I look at things, isn't it? I shouldn't be such a doomsayer, see the glass half-full instead of half-empty—" she stopped when he raised a conciliating hand.—"

"Miss Chilton, I'm very impressed by your dedication, but working whole heartedly on solving the world's problems does tend to be overwhelming. I can see why you'd need a sabbatical. Trust me, I speak from long experience on this, and I don't mean to sound unsympathetic."

Diana's shoulders sagged. "I'm sorry."

"No need to apologize. But I am wondering how this relates to your needing my help."

"I'm getting to that. You see, despite the fact that I'm a third generation member and was practically born in a ritual room, I'm not exactly the golden girl of the OSL. In fact, six years ago, I managed to get myself into a lot of hot water."

"What on earth for?"

"Insubordination. I wound up formally censured for being such an agitator."

“Ah.” From the look on Thomas’ face, Diana thought he was favorably impressed rather than otherwise. “What were you agitating for?”

“I was convinced, at the time, that the Order had a hidden element, an upper level that was working to influence change in the world politically. I wanted in on it.”

He looked sincerely perplexed. “A hidden element...are you talking about a sort of Illuminati, or White Brotherhood?”

“Something like that, but in a benevolent sense, not just some kind of power cabal or secret conspiracy. I thought, you see, that this was the rationale for the rank of Magus being restricted to men—because it was involved with all those gritty realities like finances, and war, and government, that women are considered too delicate and irrational to be trusted with.”

“But you don’t think that now.”

“No. I reluctantly concluded that there is no such shadowy upper group within the OSL. I was an idealistic idiot. The Council is made up of the same fallible human beings as every government on earth. The only difference between us and the Vatican is our ideology, and they ran the Inquisition. We probably would, if we could afford it. We just have a different definition of heresy. The Order doesn’t involve itself with the world, at all. We learn how to be magicians and transform ourselves, but not how to use the magic for anything practical.”

Thomas frowned. “Doesn’t the Order still teach that the essence of magic is to change the universe by changing yourself?”

“As a theoretical doctrine, yes. Do you believe it?” He hesitated, as if he wanted to say yes but couldn’t quite do so. “I’m not saying that I don’t accept that in principle, Mr. Morgan, but I’ve come to feel that individual accomplishments aren’t enough. What we need is something that combines true power with real continuity, the kind of focused Intention that doesn’t change with every new Director or Board or Council. Left to itself, the world is trapped in this insane repetitive cycle—a dark age, a period of enlightenment and then a fall back into barbarism or fascism, over and over. People today talk as though scientific knowledge and modern medicine are equivalent to progress, but progress is an illusion. We spend more money and ingenuity on building bigger armies and more powerful bombs than anything else.”

Thomas was starting to smile. “I can’t argue with your description of human history—or your opinion of its futility. But you’ve just given incontrovertible evidence that there are no hidden influences pulling the strings, for humanitarian reasons or otherwise.”

“Maybe not. Or maybe there are and we simply can’t imagine how much worse it would be without them.”

“That sort of argument could be offered in defense of almost anything. If the Order of the Silver Light did have such a politically active wing, just what do you think it would be doing? Contrary to all the paranoid fantasies about secret conspiracies, working entirely behind the scenes has severe limitations. You can’t

effect real change in the world without being fully involved in it. How could the Order, or any such organization, be invisible and still make a difference?"

Diana was quiet for a moment, looking down at the shadows beyond the firelight. Then she straightened up in the chair and very deliberately met Thomas' eyes with such an intense look, he blinked. "That's one of the things that I was hoping you could tell me."

"I?"

"You see, Mr. Morgan, I realized that the only way any such organization could achieve real continuity is if its members are able to maintain that continuity as individuals. By-laws and traditions and histories only go so far. Each new generation brings in its own perspectives and concerns, so you get the same cycles on a local scale. The only way to transcend the cycles is to outlive them. I'm talking about physical immortality, Mr. Morgan, something I've been researching for the last five years. That's what I'm here to talk to you about."

There was a long silence. Thomas didn't look away from her steady gaze, but his expression had become wary and guarded. "I see."

"I fully expected you to be discreet, but please don't be disingenuous with me. I'm an Adeptus in the Order of the Silver Light, Mr. Morgan, and so are you. I'm convinced that we have a great deal more in common besides that. You can trust me, I swear. You wanted to know what I was talking about, when I said I'd learned things about you. Let me show you."

For a few moments, Thomas appeared ambivalent as to how he would answer. At last he shrugged. "All right."

"May we use your desk? I need a little bit of space." He nodded, and they both got up and went over to the oak desk. Thomas scooped his papers and paraphernalia into a loose pile and set it on one of the bookshelves, while Diana moved the kerosene lanterns to each upper corner of the broad surface. She opened her portfolio and removed a sheaf of photographs, which she lined up in neat rows. The eight by ten black and white photographs included enlarged details of old paintings, engravings, and one drawing, and then copies of old photos, a few of them rather blurry. In each one was a distinctly similar face, sometimes appearing as the main subject of the picture and sometimes merely a figure in the background. Diana glanced at Thomas, who was studying the photos with a stunned expression. "I'm assuming that you recognize most of these? You may not have known they still existed."

He opened his mouth as if to reply, but closed it without saying anything.

"I was initiated to Adeptus rank seven years ago—"

"When you were twenty-four?" She wasn't sure if Thomas was disbelieving or just startled.

"I'm not bragging. I had a very early start, remember. As you know, that's the highest grade that women can attain. After I was censured, I started working with a mentor within the Order, and at that time, I encountered something that proved there were certain, possibilities, that I hadn't previously understood.

My investigations began mostly from curiosity but I'll admit that I became somewhat obsessed by what I was learning." Thomas frowned slightly but only nodded at her to continue.

Clearing her throat, she went on, "At first, most of the information I found wasn't really verifiable. It consisted largely of anecdotes and second hand reports and somewhat dubious accounts of sightings, that sort of thing. But then I found a body of historical information deep in the OSL archives. That gave me a number of leads to a handful of specific individuals. With those clues to go on, I was able to trace most of them in conventional records, through a series of identities. Some of them had been members of the Order and some had not. All of them eventually disappeared from the public record, which only means that the paper trail dead-ended, or picked up someplace that I couldn't find it. But there was one that I managed to trace right up to the present day." She glanced at him again. "Shall I tell you the specifics?"

"You can't just leave me in suspense after all this." Thomas' tone didn't have a trace of flippancy.

Diana pointed to the first photograph, a close-up of an old painting. Unlike the others, its subject was a boy about twelve years old. "Dafydd Morgynne, born in Cardiff, Wales in 1723, as far as I've been able to confirm. He seems to have been something of a prodigy. His parents were fairly well-to-do, although they died young and left no other living children. They had him educated, however, which wasn't common in Wales at that time. Dafydd went to Oxford at the age of fourteen and read the law, and became a barrister in London. He then used a lot of his time and money to campaign for the civil rights of British subjects in Wales, Ireland and Scotland. After a while, his nationalist views attracted so much negative attention from the Crown that he had to go live in France for over a decade. By that time, he already seems to have been involved with the OSL. He came back to London and resumed a law practice, but reportedly was suffering from some kind of illness that limited his activity. In 1765 he abruptly left the Order and Britain. But whatever his illness was, he didn't die from it."

"How can you be so sure that he didn't die?"

"There's no record of it. Dafydd Morgynne, Esquire was wealthy enough that his death and funeral would never have gone unnoted, but he wasn't so wealthy or well-connected that it could have been completely covered up. He had to leave his estate to somebody. The laws at that time were absolutely rigid about inheritance."

"Granted." Thomas heaved an almost imperceptible sigh. "Please continue."

"From then on, he seems to have moved his money, and himself, from place to place assuming new identities—very skillfully, I might add." She pointed to more of the photos as she went down the list she had memorized so carefully. "I found him back in Paris in 1784 under the name of Michel Bouchard, in Cardiff in 1820 as Michael Davies, Inverness in 1862 as John David Morse and Nottingham in 1888 as Morgan Bruneaux. He first appears in New York City

in 1916 as David Michael Brown, where he has a somewhat more prominent career thanks to the attention he attracts from the tabloids. There are numerous photographs of him from that time, as you see. David Michael Brown simply drops off the face of the earth in 1929, and in 1937 he turns up again in Philadelphia.” She paused a moment, but Thomas gave no hint that he was prepared to verify her theories. He reached out and touched one of the photos gently, as though testing to see if it was real.

“How can you be so sure that all of these names belong to the same man? Physical resemblance only implies a family relationship, if that.”

“Well, there’s no way to be absolutely sure. But there is some fairly persuasive evidence—with plenty of gaps, but it all tends to add together. There are some surviving financial records, transfers from one bank to another. There is similarity of handwriting and signatures, and of writing styles. All of them were lawyers, or worked in legal fields in some way, usually for some kind of leftist social or political cause. Also, each one of them sought help from the OSL at some point—that was a major factor tying them together, bits of information in the OSL archives. Belonging to an underground organization definitely oils the wheels when it comes to transferring funds and getting out of difficult situations—like France in 1789.” She saw him wince at those words, but so subtly, she wouldn’t have noticed it if she hadn’t been watching for it. “I don’t think anyone without access to the OSL archives could have found the critical links. And finally, there are...fingerprints.”

“Fingerprints?”

“In at least three cases, as I examined some of the original documents, I realized there were partial fingerprints. They wouldn’t hold up in court, they don’t have enough, I think they call them points, to be considered a one hundred percent match, but what there is of them, do correspond.”

“Good Lord. So, you’re not only a crack detective, you analyze fingerprints?”

“Of course not. But I can afford to pay people who do. Along with graphologists and textual analysts, all of whom are firmly convinced that I’m nuts.”

“What did you say when they asked why you wanted the analyses done?”

“That it was none of their business. The graphologist decided that I’m trying to establish inheritance rights to some abandoned Swiss bank account. He asked me rather rudely whether I didn’t think I had enough money already. But the others just cashed their checks. That’s what people do, mostly.”

“You might be surprised...what can take hold of someone’s curiosity, that is.” Thomas glanced down at the palm of one hand with a perplexed frown for a moment, then sharply closed his hand and looked back up at Diana. “So, in 1937...”

“In 1937...you, Thomas Morgan, appear in Philadelphia. Before that, there isn’t any record that you ever existed.”

There was a long pause then, as Thomas studied Diana soberly. “With all of that sleuthing, I’m surprised that you didn’t turn up my birth certificate.”

“Oh, of course I did—the copy on file, that is. March third, 1912, Laurel, Maryland. But it’s a forgery. Your parents’ names are listed as Gwyneth and Robert Morgan, but their names can’t be traced further back, there’s no record of their owning or renting a home, paying taxes, or holding a job in Laurel, and no Gwyneth Morgan was a patient at any lying-in hospital around that date. They don’t seem to have any relatives, and no friends recall the Morgans, or their son, who was never enrolled in school.”

She reached into the portfolio again and took out several more photographs, each one a close-up of a document. “Birth certificate, and baptismal record, although your baptism is not noted in the parish record of any church in the district. Your passport lists your religion as Methodist, but then, your passport itself is a phony. Oh, and this one is truly brilliant—your current law degree. 1936, Quincy College in Maryland, but Quincy College’s administrative offices burned to the ground in 1937, destroying all records and therefore all chances of verifying your degree—except through the memories of faculty or staff, and no one formerly associated with Quincy College has ever heard of you. You never tried to pass the bar in Pennsylvania, either. The only bona fide documents I found for you there are related to your buying this property, from Philadelphia. Then you moved up here, and you’ve been here ever since.”

His expression was now darkly thoughtful, and he gazed down at the photos lined up before him as if he wasn’t really seeing them. “I’m amazed that you were able to find such a clear trail,” he said slowly. “Many a genealogist would be seething with envy at all this documentation—five countries, and more than two hundred years.”

“I don’t think you have to worry that anyone will duplicate my research, if that’s your concern. The most crucial pieces of information are only available in the OSL archives. Without them, I wouldn’t have had a starting point. And the archives are only accessible to initiates above Adeptus grade.”

He nodded, pursing his lips, and Diana suddenly found herself wondering what he was thinking. He wasn’t reacting as she had expected and prepared for, but she couldn’t read his expression. Finally he straightened his shoulders. “Would you like a brandy? Because I definitely would.”

It took a moment for her to answer. For just an instant, as he raised his face toward the ceiling and the amber lamplight limned his profile, his image seemed to shimmer, and she saw him dressed in the garb Dafydd Morgynne might have worn on the streets of London. The illusion was gone in an eyeblink, but Diana felt disoriented, as if she’d been looking down a portal through time itself. She gave her head a small shake. It was his long hair, and the photos they’d been staring at, and the dim flickering light. “I’d love a brandy.”

He got a decanter and snifters from one of the shelves and poured two generous shots. They returned to the armchairs by the fire, and Diana watched Thomas as he downed half his glass in one swallow, then sat utterly motionless, eyes closed, for quite a long time. She might have worried about an ordinary

man, but he simply appeared to be entirely concentrated on the taste and sensation of the brandy. She took a sip of her own drink and it was extraordinarily good cognac, but it didn't rivet her to the spot.

At last he drew in a deep breath and opened his eyes. "Who was your mentor in the Order?" he asked, almost absently, as he watched the light playing on the balloon snifter.

"I'm sorry, I—I'm not allowed to reveal that."

"I understand. Wasn't your married name Winthrop?"

She gaped at him. "Yes, but how...?"

"I still have contacts in the Order, Miss Chilton."

"Contacts? And they've been talking to you about me?"

"Not to any great extent, and not just idle gossip, I assure you. By the way, I was initiated into the Order while I was still at Oxford, and I never formally left."

She was still so flummoxed by his question about her married name that it took a moment for his last statement to register. When it did, she felt as though a lump had been dropped into the pit of her stomach. "You mean...you're admitting that it's true? You're not just going to deny it all and laugh at me?"

"If I wanted to do that, I should have done so long before this. Denials now would be, as you so rightly put it, disingenuous. Yes, I admit it. I was born in 1723. Your names and dates are accurate, although you've missed a few here and there. But does my admission really prove anything? I might just be humoring you, after all."

She sat back and looked at him, too overwhelmed to speak. He had just confessed to being over two hundred years old, and there he sat in his sweater and scuffed shoes like a slumming college student. But the illusion she'd seen a few minutes ago suddenly clicked into place, and she had no doubt at all. His features, his slight build, his inflection and words, the odd grace of his movements, all supported the truth. He didn't belong to the twentieth century. He was as much an image of the long-vanished past as the portraits and photographs spread on his desk. "No, you're not humoring me, Mr. Morgan. Your admission is self-evident. All I have to do is look at you to know that."

She saw a shadow of something like surprise in his expression for a moment. "And what is that to you, Miss Chilton? If you've spent most of your life in the Order, and attained the rank of Adeptus at such a young age, I have no doubt that you've confronted many things at least as remarkable as I am. Just what do you hope to accomplish by proving your case?"

"Not what you're assuming, Mr. Morgan. You're probably right about what I've witnessed, although I'm not convinced that I really know just how remarkable you are. But I didn't come here to blackmail you or make demands, or even to crow about figuring out your secret. As fascinating as I'm sure your story is, I don't have to know what you are, and why. I'm here to ask you—no, to implore you—to share your knowledge, to put me in touch with people who are really doing something meaningful with their power. I've learned enough about how

things work to understand that I need an entree, someone who can vouch for me. Whatever I need to do to prove myself, to you or to them, I'll do it."

He looked down at the snifter in his cupped hands for a moment. "Miss Chilton...you must believe me in this. If I knew of something, and was forbidden by oath to reveal it, out of courtesy to you as a fellow Adeptus, I would say that much. But your conclusions about the Order of the Silver Light are correct. They have no politically active secret wing manipulating governments or influencing the course of history, and I'm aware of no other lodges or secret societies that do."

As Diana slumped back in her chair with a heavy sigh, Thomas said curiously, "Did you really believe that I was part of some such mysterious inner circle? You never found a hint of such a thing in all your research, did you? If it had been true, why would I have gone to the OSL every time I was in dire straits? For that matter, why would I have been in dire straits so often?"

She smiled weakly, because his tone was humorous. "Oh, I don't know. I suppose I thought that if any groups like that existed, you at least would have encountered one, or heard of one. Not just because of how long you've lived—because of the work you've done throughout your life, and the causes you supported."

He shook his head slowly, his eyes somber. "I've never heard of one that didn't prove to be a fraud, or that actually achieved anything. I entirely sympathize with your quest, don't mistake me. It's easy, and so tempting, to convince ourselves that someone, somewhere, must have control over the chaos that is human history. I searched for such shadow organizations myself, for much of my existence. That was how I encountered the Order in the first place. But I've come to accept that we must trust to God's hand for guidance, and for what you call continuity."

"Too bad God couldn't save the Jews in Germany."

Thomas frowned unhappily. "God's influence in this world is often obscure to us, I admit."

"To say the least. But I think that we're here as emissaries, that we're meant to be doing divine work for the gods, not passively sitting back and submitting to the will of a higher power."

"You're preaching to the choir, Miss Chilton. But look at your own dilemma. It's obvious that you're doing as much with your resources as any single human being could, yet you're still frustrated to the point of despair. I understand completely. I also have a sense of obligation to the oppressed. I've always fought for their causes, in any way I could."

"I know. You even have an FBI file for it."

"I do?"

"From the 1920s, all that pro bono work you were doing in the New York ghettos for the Russian Jews—and other immigrants, but it was the Russian ones that had J. Edgar worried."

“Yes, and the Negroes. I knew the authorities were worried—that’s why David Michael Brown had to disappear in 1929. You see, that’s precisely why immortality is no advantage. You end up with less continuity, not more. How can you stay in one place for more than two decades and not age? I had difficulty staying for as long as one.”

Neither of them spoke for a few moments. Diana took a sip of cognac and savored it slowly, considering what Thomas had said. “If there are no such groups...have you ever thought about starting one?”

She flushed when he laughed out loud, but he wasn’t mocking her. “Yes, I have,” he said when he recovered himself. “But an organization with one member is rather pointless.”

“But surely you—I’m sorry, but it’s hard to believe that you couldn’t find anyone who would have been willing to join you. Bread and Roses has volunteers who make me look jaded.”

“Their willingness was not the fundamental issue,” Thomas said quietly.

Diana puzzled over this reply for a moment, then she realized what he meant. “Your immortality was the fundamental issue.” She looked at his dark expression, and he simply inclined his head once. “You didn’t want to pass on the secret of how it’s done? So how *did* you accomplish it?” He looked down, and Diana suddenly felt abashed, as though she’d accidentally said something offensive. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to just blurt it out like that—”

“I was wondering when we’d get here, actually.”

“Mr. Morgan, I didn’t come here looking for the secret of immortality. At least, not for its own sake.”

He studied her soberly. “I’m inclined to believe you, Miss Chilton. If you were only interested in pursuing immortality as an end, you would have asked me very different questions. I know, because I’ve heard them all before. You’re after something else. But you wouldn’t be human if you weren’t tantalized by the potential. I would have been.”

Diana only shook her head. “It is tantalizing, but this isn’t my first bite of the apple. I said earlier that I began my researches because I became aware of certain possibilities. I can’t say more than that, but trust me, I’ve had several years to consider the pros and cons of an extended lifespan, on a very practical level. I’m still not sure what I think.”

“Then you wouldn’t accept immortality, on any terms, if it was offered to you?”

“On *any* terms? No. On the right terms...” She was silent a moment, brooding. “I’m still not sure. But I do know I wouldn’t want to be immortal and alone. That’s partly why I’m trying to find some kind of organization, or group. The hints have been maddening, but obviously they’re all just false leads and misdirection.”

“Suppose you did find exactly what you’re looking for, and the offer was made? What then?”

She couldn't meet his hard unwavering stare. "I can't answer that hypothetically. I guess it would depend on a lot of things."

He relaxed slightly and leaned back in his chair. "A wise answer."

She stiffened a little. "But you accepted it, obviously. What terms did you find persuasive?"

"I wish I'd been offered some. I did nothing to attain immortality, Miss Chilton. This was done to me. I never chose it."

"Then...your state is involuntary, not something you consciously maintain?"

"Oh, it has its maintenance. And I have reason to believe that the state can be passed on. But I will not do that."

"Why?"

He was quiet for a moment. "For one thing, it's a rare aspiration. It's often said that everyone would like to be immortal. But few humans have the stamina to survive even one lifetime of grief and labor without becoming exhausted and cynical. Very few of those would choose to continue outliving everything and everyone around them."

"I'd agree with that. Is that how you'd describe yourself—exhausted and cynical?"

He looked startled. "Why would you think that?"

"I could never understand why you went into complete seclusion here. After so many years of public service and civic engagement, and all your passion for social justice, you didn't even try to pass the bar in Maine. What happened?"

He looked down at his snifter pensively. "I suppose I was tired. I'm no reactionary about change, and novelty, and progress, indeed, I relish them. But every innovation means losing something comfortable and familiar. Eventually the sheer weight of it begins to bear down. I meant to continue my profession, or I wouldn't have bothered to"—he almost smiled—"forge yet another law degree. But when I got here...I decided to pursue other things."

Diana felt that he was evading the real answer, but she wasn't sure she had the right to press him. "I am curious, though. What do you mean by saying you have reason to believe your state could be passed on? If it isn't something another person could attain through a magical discipline, then, hypothetically, what would be involved?" When he paused, looking down again, she said, "I understand if you don't want to reveal that—"

"I do want to," he broke in. "But it would be impossible to convey it to you with mere explanations. This is beyond your experience—the words would mean nothing to you."

She felt a surge of irritation, although she knew she was overreacting. "I'm not stupid, Mr. Morgan. If I'm stepping over any lines, you can slap me down any way you like. But don't condescend to me."

"That's not my intention, believe me." He rose and walked over to his desk, and stood there for a few minutes, leaning with both hands on the desktop, apparently lost in deep thought. Rivulets of rain water cascaded down the

windowpanes, catching golden threads of light from the kerosene lamps. She wondered what he was thinking about—his expression made her a little uneasy. Finally he straightened up, sighing, and looked at her.

“Do you believe in destiny, Miss Chilton?”

She frowned, wondering what this change of subject meant. “Up to a point. I think we make our own destiny.”

“Then you don’t see the guiding hand of the Almighty in unforeseen events?”

“Sometimes, but Aesop said the gods help those who help themselves, and it’s still true.”

He came back to the fire and sat in his chair, but on the edge of it, leaning toward her. “I agree. God gives us opportunities, and it’s our part to act on them. But surely you can see a guiding hand in the very fact that we’re speaking tonight? Think about this: for five years, you’ve been searching for me. And for those same five years, I’ve wondered how to approach you to ask for your help.”

“My help? But why—” she broke off as he indicated he had more to say.

“And now you’ve appeared on my doorstep, moved by impulse and fate, on the night of a full moon...is there not at least a shade of destiny in that?”

“Well, I...” She could see the truth in what he was saying. The significance of the date had not even occurred to her, but then, she’d had no idea that he knew she existed, let alone wanted to get in touch with her. “You speak of my helping you, but I don’t understand. If destiny has brought me here to help you, then what is it that I can do to help you? Or is this something else that there’s just no point in trying to explain?”

“I can’t explain, because it must be shown.” He got up from his chair, took her empty glass from her and set it aside. Then he grasped both her hands and pulled her to her feet. She was startled to realize how strong he was. “Don’t think I underestimate you, Miss Chilton. I know the level of endurance and fortitude it takes to achieve Adeptus rank, even in the twentieth century. This won’t be easy, but it’s necessary. You’ve journeyed five years and hundreds of miles to find me. This is your choice. Do you want to see what you really came here to find?”

Diana stared up at him, her mind too flooded with questions to voice any one of them. She had no idea what this demonstration involved or why endurance and fortitude might be required, but her confusion and apprehension were overwhelmed by devouring curiosity. “Yes,” she whispered, abandoning caution and sense. “Show me.”

He let go of her hands and deftly untied the loose silk scarf she wore around her neck. Startled, she reached up and took the scarf from him. Before she could speak, he caught her shoulder with one hand and her jaw with the other, pulling her close against his body. “Hold still,” he said softly. “This will hurt a little, but don’t move.” Before she could think he had tipped her head back and bent down to put his open mouth against her throat, where the vein pulsed close to the skin. She felt the wet sucking pressure of his mouth, and squeezed her eyes shut, her heart pounding. She gasped at a sudden jabbing pain and a sensation

as though her skin had simply broken open, and a wave of vertigo made her stomach turn over. Thomas let go of her jaw and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her tightly against him. She could feel his mouth moving against her throat, a sense of slippery warmth, and a small trickle soaking into the edge of her sweater and making it stick to her skin. *He's drinking my blood*, she thought incredulously, for she could feel him drinking in rhythmic swallows. Her only emotion was sheer awe at the surreality of what was happening.

After a few moments, she wanted to push him away, or at least protest, but she couldn't. The tension in her muscles dissolved, as though she had been injected with some kind of drug, and her body sagged loosely against his. Seconds became minutes, and she began to feel dizzy and lightheaded. Her stomach started to turn over and lurch with nausea. He went down on his knees, still holding her and still drinking, allowing her to fold up beneath him as though she were a garment he was wearing. She couldn't get enough breath, and her heartbeat felt strange—now rapid and shallow, like the running footsteps of a small animal, then pounding, then almost imperceptible. Her eyes were open, but she couldn't see anything, and her hands and feet were so numb she couldn't feel them at all.

She could sense something portentous surrounding them on all sides. It was as though they were kneeling on the back of some great beast, so huge and so ancient that they had climbed up on it thinking it a mountain, and now it was coming to life, heaving and thrusting upward to throw them off. Suddenly it cracked open and caught fire. Raw power seethed beneath and around her. A great, coiling vortex of energy, powerful enough to reshape the world with no more effort than thought, tensed and focused into a point above her. She recoiled desperately as it poised itself to lance through the center of her being and transform her—body, soul and mind—into something alien and inhuman. She realized that Thomas somehow had control of this power and was holding it back with all of his will. Fervently she prayed to him, as she had never prayed to anything, not to release that vortex into her. It began to withdraw, slowly, and she thought she must be dying, because she couldn't breathe at all. Smothering black tendrils covered her face and tightened. Then something ice cold touched her neck, and that was the last thing she remembered.

The chickadees awoke her—a pair of them, singing their two note call and response from some distance away. The long notes seemed to cry sadly, “love me...love you...” over and over. She lay quietly in bed for a time listening to them, feeling a soft breeze on her face, full of the smell of warm wet grass. She wasn’t sure she was truly awake, since she felt so insubstantial.

She opened her eyes, finally, blinking at the uncomfortably bright light. She was lying on a four poster bed in a room she had never seen before, coarse linen sheets and a piecework quilt smoothed tidily over her. A bureau stood against one whitewashed wall on a worn braided rug. The light breeze billowed frayed calico curtains and a dazzling square of sunlight gleamed on the broad plank floor. Puzzled by this, she turned her head to look for a bedside table that might contain a clock. A sharp twinge of pain in the side of her neck made her wince. As she reached up to touch the spot in puzzlement, she remembered. Like a blurry slide snapping into focus, everything that had happened the night before came back to her.

She lay very still, her heart beating quickly. She realized that she was in bed fully dressed, except for shoes. That was somewhat reassuring, although she thought she would have forgiven his being bold enough to take off her stockings. She felt very weak. Even attempting to reach her hand out made her breathless and dizzy. After a moment she pushed the covers down to her waist, braced her hands on either side, and tried to sit up. She barely raised her head from the pillow before her heart was laboring so heavily it frightened her, and she sank back down, gasping for breath. She closed her eyes, fighting down panic at her helplessness.

She tugged the quilt back up to her chin and huddled down under it. In her wildest imaginings she had never anticipated this. Her principal associations with vampires were folklore compendia and blood fetishists, or the likes of Aleister Crowley and his *Serpent’s Kiss*. As a novice, she had studied Dion Fortune’s chapter on psychic vampirism, and of course, she had read *Dracula*, but...the memory of Thomas’ mouth against her throat came to her, and she

shuddered, although the memory evoked ambiguous feelings. It seemed that the venerable Auntie Dion had omitted some critical details.

With nothing else to do except lie there and wait, she tried to keep her thoughts from running out of control. *What does he want with me?* kept pushing itself to the front of her mind, and she kept pushing it back, because there was no way to answer that question, and she didn't want to speculate. She thought now of every vampire legend or story she had ever heard, trying to compare them with the man she had met, wondering what, if anything, might be factual. Where was Thomas now? Was he sleeping in the next room, or did he go someplace hidden during the day? Would he awaken at the moment of sunset? Was he awake now, somewhere around the house? Was he going to keep her here?

Was he going to kill her?

Stop it, she thought, angry with herself. *Stop it*. She closed her eyes and began breathing in the five-two-five pattern of the Annwfn meditation, carefully, so she wouldn't hyperventilate. She induced a light trance and went through the figures of the pathworking, methodically and painstakingly visualizing each detail, each movement, as vividly as possible. Her trance deepened, and she walked through a great shadowed room, with fan vaulted arches high overhead, and torches flickering in sconces on the walls. Ahead of her was a golden throne raised on a high dais, and sitting on the throne was a woman, her face shining with light so brilliant Diana couldn't make out her features. The woman extended a hand in a slow gesture, indicating a crystal globe that stood at her feet. Diana walked to the globe and knelt at the woman's feet, peering into the rippling center of the crystal. She saw a small building explode into a ball of flame, drops of blood soak into a hard dirt floor, blinding snow that seemed to fly from every direction at once, a field full of dandelions going to lacy balls of seed. The crystal went black, and from its depths a coiling vortex of energy suddenly appeared and began twisting up toward her with incredible speed, contracting and focusing into a point like a lightning bolt. She flung herself backward, falling, and opened her eyes with a gasp, her fingers clutching at handfuls of linen sheet.

I was dreaming. She had fallen asleep during the meditation, which was rather sloppy of her—novices got the soles of their feet switched for that. Her physical state explained that lapse, but if anything, she felt even worse now. The room had grown far dimmer, and flat black night pressed against the panes of the windows. She turned her head to find the source of the room's light and a shock ran over her. There sat Thomas by the bed, so still that the old wooden chair had not given the slightest creak to reveal his presence. He looked down at her with an expression that was thoughtful and a little sad, and she slowly recovered her equilibrium.

"I didn't know you were there," she said, because she had to say something to break the silence, or she might have to just scream. "Have you been sitting there long?"

He shrugged. "A little while. I didn't want to wake you." He leaned over and touched her forehead and cheek with the backs of his fingers, like a mother with a feverish child. He didn't seem to like what the touch told him. "How do you feel?"

"How do I feel? How do I *feel*?" She turned her face back up to the ceiling. "I can't even sit up. And I'm so thirsty..."

"Yes, you need to drink." He got up and went to the bureau, where Diana saw a tray with a pitcher and crockery, and several lighted candles. Thomas filled a glass with water and sat on the bed next to her. He put his arm around her shoulders and raised her to a half sitting position. She expected to flinch from his touch, but instead she felt his arm around her indefinably comforting. He held the first glass for her as she drank—cold well water, with a sweet earthy taste. She drained the glass and he poured another for her, then another, until the pitcher was empty. By then, she could sit up by herself, and with great effort, she pushed herself back so she could lean against the headboard of the bed.

She touched her throat, where she could feel an odd puckered bump, hot and painful under her fingertips. "You almost killed me, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Was that your intention?"

"It was the only way to show you what you needed to see. I would had to have done so, sooner or later. I saw no reason to let you go on feeling...condescended to."

Reminded of her irritable remark the night before, Diana looked away from him. "You might have given me some warning."

"You wouldn't have—"

"—understood, I know. Well, I have to confess something, Mr. Morgan. I still don't. Last night, you said you had been wishing you could meet me, that you wanted me to help you. And now you talk about showing me what I needed to see. Can you possibly clarify any of this in some way that doesn't render me unconscious?" She struggled to keep emotions of fear and outrage in check. Both were alleviated by the expression of shame that shadowed his face.

"Perhaps I was a bit too...hasty. But I feared that if you decided I had nothing more to offer you, you'd simply leave, and I wouldn't be able to find you again."

"So much for destiny? Believe me when I say I'm a hell of a lot easier to find than you are."

He smiled faintly. "That depends on one's resources. I'm not the only one of us who has changed names."

Diana let her head fall back against the headboard. "I'm not planning to rush off anywhere. I've burned too many bridges behind me for that. But Mr. Morgan, right now I've got to get back to the Inn. They're going to think I've skipped town."

"Oh, no, you don't have to worry. I've taken care of all that for you."

"What do you mean?"

"I stopped by the Inn a short time ago and spoke to Fred Wilkinson. He was quite concerned about you, but I assured him that you were fine."

"But how did you explain why I didn't come back last night?"

"I simply said that we had gotten to talking so late into the evening, you decided to stay overnight here rather than risk disturbing the other guests."

"And they believed that?" The idea that such a facile explanation would be accepted without question disturbed her.

"I've lived here for quite some time, you know. I have some credibility. And it's well known that I have no telephone, so you couldn't have called." He paused for a moment as Diana thought about this, recalling Mr. Wilkinson's protective attitude toward the Hermit the day she arrived. "I also informed Mr. Wilkinson that you'll be staying with me for the next few days."

"You what? I will? Wait a minute—"

"You'll need your things, so I picked them up for you." He nodded toward the doorway, where Diana recognized her own suitcases set neatly against the wall.

She stared at Thomas, aghast. "So...what's the story here?" she said, trying to keep her voice steady. "Are you keeping me a prisoner? A private blood bank, perhaps, and you'll make sure I'm never quite strong enough to get out the door?"

He looked genuinely shocked. "Good God! What an appalling idea!"

"Then what am I supposed to think?"

"It should be obvious that you can't go back to the Inn until you've fully recovered, in any case. I had to say something to the Wilkinsons, immediately, or they'd have sent the authorities to look for you. Miss Chilton, you have absolutely nothing to fear from me. I want you to regain your strength as soon as possible."

"Why? What do you want from me?"

He sat back, rubbing his face with his hands wearily. "I'm afraid I've made a dreadful mess of this."

"Non-responsive answer, counselor."

He blinked, then half smiled. "Sustained. Miss Chilton, what I am proposing is a magical collaboration—a working of such magnitude that...well, I couldn't think of any way to describe it unless you first saw for yourself what we'll be up against. I tried, believe me. But I could find no words that even approached the reality, and I couldn't possibly ask you to make a decision on second hand information—not about something like this."

"Well..." her curiosity was piqued, but she hated to let him off too easily. "You still might have prefaced your demonstration by saying that."

He looked down. "I concede that. But..."

"It's a moot point now, isn't it?" He didn't answer, and Diana sighed heavily. "Can you explain your proposal, or do I have to go through something else? I'm sorry, but I don't have any idea what I was supposed to have seen."

His head jerked up. "But you must have seen it. That's why I went so far, to make sure. That's the only way it can be seen—I saw it."

She could only shake her head. "I didn't see anything. I couldn't feel anything,

I couldn't breathe..." but even as she spoke, a memory was returning, and with it a fear so deep that her hands started to shake.

"Think back to last night. Think back to the last moment you can remember."

She closed her eyes, and it came to her, as it had a few moments ago in her dream: the coiling, fiery vortex, bearing down on her. She shuddered and opened her eyes with a gasp. "I remember...it was like something alive, but made of such power..."

"Yes," he whispered.

"You mean that thing is real? Not just...not just some kind of deathbed hallucination?"

"It is the most real thing that you will ever encounter."

"What is it?"

"I call it the dragon, because that's what it resembles. I don't know if it has a name of its own."

She remembered the terrifying feeling from last night, that the thing, whatever it was, contained the ability to utterly and effortlessly transform whatever it touched. "That power...is what makes you immortal."

"Yes."

"And what does your proposed magical collaboration have to do with *that*?"

His face twisted, as though he was struggling with a profound emotion, although Diana couldn't interpret it. "I am its slave, and I want that partnership ended. I want to master the dragon—or break free of it. That is why I need your help."

"You must be joking, Mr. Morgan."

"I most definitely am not joking."

"But I wouldn't know how to challenge something like..." she fumbled into silence, cold fear gripping her body. The thought of encountering, let alone combating, what she had perceived last night was enough to make her break into an icy sweat. "I'm not invincible, or omnipotent. Nobody anointed me God, Mr. Morgan—I know when I'm outclassed. I could no more face that thing down than I could wave a wand and stop a hurricane in its tracks."

He took her shaking hands and squeezed them tightly. "I understand your apprehension—more than you know. But don't allow your fear to magnify your adversary. I believe this thing can be defeated. I can't do it alone. I have not the skill or the native ability. But you do. I was told..." he paused, as if catching himself just in time. "I understand that your native ability is unprecedented, and your skill almost its equal."

She stared at him, caught between her emotions and the flattering content of his words. "Don't believe everything you hear."

"My source is unimpeachable."

"Who?"

He only smiled, shaking his head. Frustrated, Diana looked down at the colorful quilt. "If you're its slave, how can you act against it? Doesn't that mean

that it controls you?”

“It does not control me. It tries. It wants me to...” he glanced at her uneasily. “Don’t get angry again, but...explaining what it wants will require a long story. Which you will hear,” he added firmly as Diana opened her mouth to speak.

“But, Mr. Morgan—if, beyond all probability, we succeed in this...doesn’t that mean you’ll die?”

His gaze didn’t waver. “Quite possibly. I have no idea. But I’m prepared for that.”

“Is that what you want?”

“No. I’m not seeking death, or simple release from my immortal state. I don’t know if our success would achieve either one. But death would be preferable to the alternative—and the alternative is becoming harder and harder to resist.”

Diana drew back against the headboard, thinking about her arrival the evening before, their conversation, Thomas’ admission, and finally what had happened after she so recklessly looked into his face and said, “show me.” In her imagination she saw again that blinding coil of pure power, and she hugged herself tightly. “Mr. Morgan...I’m sorry, but...I just don’t know. This is all so...I didn’t come here for this.”

“Yes, you did,” he said softly. She looked up at him, startled, but he went on before she could speak. “This is exactly what you came here for. Miss Chilton—I’m asking you to attempt a great working with me, something that transcends the boundaries of this world. In all your years with the Order, have you ever been offered such an opportunity? Haven’t you always longed for a challenge that would truly test your skills, push every limitation you’ve ever met? Isn’t that why you’ve left the Order’s circle now, your frustration with them for holding you back, for refusing to allow you access to their deepest Mysteries? Don’t you welcome a chance to prove what you’re capable of, to yourself if not to the Order?”

She stared at him, suddenly feeling self-conscious and exposed. “How do you know—”

“I’ve seen it. I told you last night that I knew what you were looking for. For five years, you’ve been seeking this. Are you just going to walk away from this chance now? The woman who was brave enough to come alone to my door, to enter my home, not knowing what manner of creature she was trusting her life to...that woman could not be afraid.”

“Stop. Stop talking for a moment.” He sat back, looking down at the floor, as if to give her privacy to think without being watched. Diana felt so shaken, she wasn’t sure how to react. *They say that knowing someone’s true name gives you power over them, she thought bleakly, but it’s not so. It’s knowing their deepest, most secret desire...that’s how you conquer them.* He was right. The very idea of approaching a work so ambitious, of attaining such power, awakened a temptation in her so intense it was almost a raw lust. All of her years of training warned her that such a temptation was the greatest of magical traps. Yet she felt it gripping the very core of her soul so deeply that she knew she could not

refuse this chance without regretting it for the rest of her life. The seven years since her final initiation, her formal censure, her most recent humiliation, the despair that she was forever excluded from advancement in the Order because she was a woman...all of these suppressed resentments and yearnings suddenly welled up uncontrollably. Her feelings of anger and violation at Thomas' actions faded into hazy inconsequence before this desire. After all, hadn't she walked right into this situation, almost as presumptuously? And now her reward was a chance to work with a magical equal, with no rules, no hierarchy monitoring them, no limitations...

"Mr. Morgan," she said, and he looked up, almost startled, as though he had been lost in thought as well. "I'm going to need a great deal more information before I can make a decision like this."

"I know, and I'm ready to answer your questions. You need only ask."

We'll see about that, she thought. "But first, there's one thing I need to know now. *If* I consider your proposal, carefully and thoroughly, and if I decide that I cannot, or will not, help you—will you accept that, and let me go?"

He stared at her, struck, for a long moment, and she saw him swallow. "Yes," he finally said, almost inaudibly, and then looked down. "I don't know."

"Good. You're being honest."

He looked back up sharply. "I wouldn't keep you here in this house against your will. You are not a prisoner, Miss Chilton..."

"But...?" When he didn't answer, she said, "You won't give up trying to persuade me to reconsider, will you?"

He closed his eyes for a moment. "Don't think so ill of me. You're my only hope now. I've tried everything I could do on my own. If this fails, there is no hope. I know that."

She knew that he touched her pride by calling her his only hope, and tried to stifle that additional weakness. "All right. No promises, but I am considering. Are you willing to tell me the truth—the whole truth? With no more you-couldn't-understand nonsense? And fair warning before any practical demonstrations of the indescribable?"

"I swear." He stood up, reaching for the empty pitcher. "This is likely to be a long conversation. Are you hungry?"

She hadn't eaten since dinner at the Inn the night before. At the mere thought of that meal, which she'd scarcely tasted, her stomach rumbled. "Starving."

"I have some food for you, and I'll get some more water. You can eat while we talk." Diana listened carefully after he left the room, wondering where in the house she was, but his footsteps were so quiet, she couldn't even tell when he went down the stairs.

He returned with a tray containing a fresh pitcher of water and a variety of food—bread, butter and cheese, fruit, and a paper plate of homemade cookies covered with waxed paper. He set the pitcher on the bureau and put the tray on the bed. "You needn't stand on ceremony," he said, filling up the water glass.

"Bon appetit."

"What a charming little picnic," Diana said with amusement as she spread a piece of bread with butter and added slices of cheese. "But I guess you wouldn't have a lot of food around if you never eat it, would you?"

"Oh, I eat ordinary food sometimes. It doesn't taste the same as it once did, but I even get cravings occasionally, especially for sweets. Unfortunately, I can't cook—I can barely boil a kettle of water. All of this is from a little farm stand I sometimes visit."

"It's delicious." She chewed a bite of sandwich thoughtfully. "But...you're a vampire, that's the right word, isn't it?"

He shifted uneasily in the chair. "Yes."

"That means you have to drink blood to, to sustain yourself, to continue existing?"

"I assume that's true. I only need a comparatively small amount of blood every few days, and it needn't be human. But food doesn't nourish me. What the blood actually does for me, I don't really know."

"What happens if you don't get blood? Can you starve?"

"If I try to abstain for too long, I...lose possession of my faculties. That is not something I dare to risk. But theoretically, I don't think I can starve."

"Why not?"

"Because in order to starve, I would have to be able to die. I can't. I'm bound to this world. I heal from any injury, although it is rare for me to incur one. I'm immune to illness. I'm not affected by heat or cold. In the strictest sense, my body isn't physical."

"Now what does that mean? You felt pretty physical to me."

"Well, among other things, I can...dematerialize."

She stared at him. "You're kidding. Just like that?"

He nodded.

"Oh, come on, I have to see this."

He looked embarrassed. "I feel like a fool doing it."

"Don't be silly! You can't make a claim like that and—" she stopped, open mouthed. He was gone, just like that. "Wow." There was a shimmer in the air, and he was back. "Clothes and all. That's quite a trick."

"I seldom use it. I dislike feeling so...ephemeral."

It took Diana a few moments to recover from her amazement. "So does this mean," she finally said, trying to think what else fell among the parameters she'd reviewed that afternoon, "you can't be killed by anything? So much for all the folklore about stakes and beheadings and whatnot?"

"That's more or less correct. Even if I'm faced with something very destructive, my body will simply dematerialize to avoid it. It seems to be a sort of reflex."

She tried to imagine this, and couldn't evoke anything that didn't belong on the pages of a comic book. Still..."That sounds somewhat enviable."

"Do you think so? It has its disadvantages."

“Such as?”

“Sometimes I can’t control it.”

She decided to let that one go for now. “Last night, you seemed to be looking at me when you answered the door, even though it was pitch dark. I gather that your night vision is rather extraordinary.”

His smile was bitter. “That’s something of an understatement. It’s never dark to me anymore. There are times when I miss darkness, as strange as it seems. It lends an illusion of privacy.”

“In town, people told me that you’re never around during the day, and won’t answer the door. Do you sleep all day?”

“My fellow citizens have selective memories. I don’t see well in sunlight, but I’m often awake on dark days. Sometimes I don’t answer the door because I just don’t want to be bothered.” He gave her a quick glance. “That was not the case when you were here, though. I think you must have been nervous about disturbing me.”

Recalling how gingerly she’d padded around his house, Diana smiled sheepishly. “Yes, I was, silly me. So, Bram Stoker got it all wrong—you don’t spend your days lying like a corpse in a coffin somewhere.”

He stiffened his shoulders. “Certainly not. I sleep anywhere you might—usually in bed in the room next to this one, in fact. I’m no revenant, Miss Chilton.”

“But even so...you’re not really *alive* anymore, are you? You don’t need to eat food. You vanish and reappear like a ghost. You don’t really breathe. I don’t think you have a heartbeat, either.” Her voice fell to a hush. “Did you die?”

“Yes, I died.” The bitterness in his voice was not directed at her. “But I’m not some reanimated cadaver. I detest graveyards, and I can’t bear being in the same house as the dead—I never could.”

She offered no argument, since he didn’t seem corpse-like to her, either. Unearthly, yes, but nothing like the descriptions in nineteenth century Gothic literature, or the folklore collected by Summers or Wright. In the silence that followed, she thought over what he’d told her, trying to fit it together into a coherent picture.

Thomas eventually relaxed in the chair and looked slightly abashed. “Forgive me. I’m not used to talking about myself so frankly.”

“I seem to have hit a nerve, of some sort. But Mr. Morgan—you say you died, but you’re not dead. You say you’re not physical, but you’re solid and you need solid sustenance. Just what, exactly, are you?”

“I don’t know. I wish I did. I never had anyone to explain it to me.”

“Are there others like you?”

“Exactly like me?” He shook his head. “Not a one, of which I have ever been aware.”

The way he phrased his answer sparked her curiosity. “Other vampires, then?”

He hesitated before he spoke. “They’re very rare, and they’re not our concern. I feel that I should respect their confidentiality, beyond that.”

How tantalizing...and how frustrating, she thought, but immediately shelved her regret. She had plenty to occupy her with just one vampire for now.

“So...you said last night that this was done to you, and you didn’t choose it. But now you say you’ve never met another vampire like you. What happened to you? How did you meet...that thing?” She felt uncomfortable naming the dragon aloud even by Thomas’ invented term, it seemed so formidable.

He looked down, smiling slightly. “It’s a long story—and something of a confession. You could say that I got exactly what I deserved. But I’ll let you decide that.” He got up and went to lower the window sash a few inches, since the evening air was becoming quite cool. He stood looking out of the window for a minute, apparently collecting his thoughts. Then he came back to the chair and sat down.

“I’d like to begin with a caveat. I don’t know if everything in this story actually happened the way it seemed to. In all the times I’ve relived it in my mind, I’ve never found a single thing out of place, or the most trivial missing detail, to suggest that my memory was a vision, or a dream, or a delusion. But I scarcely believe it myself, and I would never credit this account if I heard it from another person. I want you to know that I realize how incredible some of this is going to sound to you.”

“I’ll consider myself duly warned. But the boundaries of what I’d hold to be possible have pretty much been eliminated in the last twenty-four hours.”

He nodded. “Then I’ll begin by asking you a question you probably will find odd. Would you consider me a handsome man?”

She was taken off guard by this query. “Well, yes. You’re a bit pretty for my tastes, but you’re certainly good looking. Why?”

His smile was grim. “When I was twenty, I would have called that response damning with faint praise. God, I cringe now just to think what a vain little monster I was. You see, it was no advantage to be *Cymro*, a Welshman, in London in those days. As far as the English were concerned, the Welsh were dwarfish, homely, stupid, primitive, dishonest, shiftless, cruel, and illiterate. Do you know that on March first, Saint David’s Day, it was considered great sport to hang effigies of Welshmen from makeshift gibbets in London?”

“I never heard that one, no.”

“Since I had a handsome appearance, education, and wealth, I wasn’t satisfied to defy the English bigotries. I set out to avenge them, and not only in Parliament and the courts. I dressed in the costliest and most fashionable clothing I could find, just so I would outshine any Englishman I met. And I was a ruthless rake when it came to women—especially the *Saesnesau*, the fair-haired, blue-eyed darlings of the peerage. Virgins, wives, or widows, it didn’t matter to me. I could get any of them into bed, and once I had them, I treated them worse than any procurer treated his whores. It wasn’t just for political reasons that I had to flee to France.

“But God was paying closer attention to me than I supposed. As I grew

older my face stayed youthful, which only made me vainer than ever. But one day when I was in my late thirties, I noticed a small sore on my cheek. I thought little of it, but it didn't fade as such blemishes normally do. It stayed there, month after month, then turned angry red, and then black. It began to spread."

Diana let out a long soft breath. "Cancer."

"Cancer it was, and despite all the physics and medicines I was offered, within three years I had but half a face. The sore grew until it ate away my cheek and left a gaping hole, so you could see my teeth grinning out at you, what teeth were still left. My eyelid developed a great wen which closed the eye, and the disease was getting into the bone and misshaping my jaw. Yet the damnable thing refused to kill me, and I imagined the day would come when I would look in the glass and see nothing but a fleshless skull looking back at me, and yet I would still be alive. And I knew this was God's punishment on me for the manner in which I'd used my looks to debauch and deceive, and the worth I'd placed on them."

"So, what happened? There's not even a scar on your face now."

"Yes, and you see the price I was willing to pay for it. I finally returned to England. By then, resuming my law practice was out of the question. I wore a tight leather mask over my face, which supported my rotting flesh and hid the ravages of the disease. Of course, I could only eat in private, since half of what I tried to swallow ended up running down my neck. I went back to the Order then, seeking desperately for some resolution. I thought I would have welcomed either death or healing, but I was far too craven to just take my pistol and finish the matter. No one would have cared. My parents were long dead, and I had never married. But I said, as often as I could and to everyone I could, that I would do anything for a cure, would pay any price to have a face again. I wish someone had warned me. Never, never say that you will pay any price. There will always be someone listening to take up your bluff."

He paused, his eyes distant. Diana said softly, "And who was listening to you?"

"I never knew who she was. I thought at the time that she was a high-ranking member of the Order. She visited my chambers late one night and told me that she'd heard of my promise and could help me. She was tall, a head taller than I was, exquisitely dressed, but she veiled her face, and she was not a young woman. Nonetheless she was beautiful, even seen through her veil. When I asked for her name, she only smiled and said, 'You may call me Your Ladyship.' At one time I would have laughed her out of the room to hear that. Now I didn't care. I called her Your Ladyship—as well as I could pronounce it with half of a mouth.

"She didn't name a price. She gave me a time and a place to meet her, and I did everything she instructed. It was a great house on an estate in Windsor. I was told to come alone, so I traveled there on horseback. When I arrived, there were no servants, no dogs, no signs of life anywhere. I tied my horse by the front door with my own hands. The door was standing open, and I went inside. The

house was completely dark and silent, and I had no idea what to think. But I could see a glimmer of light and smell burning tallow, so I walked up the stairs and down a corridor until I reached a ballroom. Every chandelier was ablaze with new candles, freshly lit, but the room was completely empty except for one figure—Her Ladyship, dressed all in white, standing in the center of the room.

“I walked forward to face her. She was smiling, and her long fair hair flowed loose down her back. She looked to me like an angel. ‘Do you come of your own free will to pay any price in exchange for your face?’ she asked me, and I said, ‘Yes, I do.’ She told me to remove my mask, and I undid the straps and peeled it away. She reached out and laid her hand over the gaping hole that had been my cheek, and she said, ‘Then, Dafydd Morgynne, I grant your request. I give you a pretty face, one which neither age nor scar nor illness shall ever touch, and you will grace Middle-earth with your beauty until the end of time.’ Before I could think about what this meant, she said, ‘Look above you,’ and I looked up, and I saw...”

He broke off, his eyes haunted. “How can I describe it? But then, you saw for yourself. I thought it was a dragon, the way it writhed and twisted. It was alive, yet made of fire. It shot down at me and penetrated my body, and instantly I was aflame, every part of me, and never had I felt such agony. I lay on the floor, screaming, suffused with this pain that would ebb a little, then return with greater strength, like the incoming tide. I have no idea how long this went on, but it seemed unending. I found myself at Her Ladyship’s feet, and I kissed her slippers and begged her to kill me. That’s all I wanted then—not beauty, not healing, only death to deliver me from that terrible flame. She knelt down and said...”

He paused, and Diana whispered, “As you wish.”

He looked up, startled. “How did you know?”

“This is so familiar...I don’t know why, it’s like a fairytale.”

“Yes, it is. Because you see—but I’m getting ahead of myself.”

“Did she kill you?”

He shook his head. “The pain was ebbing then...I think it had come three times, and I could feel it gathering for a fourth assault. She was wearing a dagger at her waist, and she took it from its sheath and handed it to me. I cut my own throat with it.”

There was a long silence, and finally Diana let out her breath explosively. “My *God*. So what happened then?”

“I awoke in my own chambers.”

“But...”

“My face was whole...indeed, there was not a scar left anywhere on my body, save one. I looked as you see me now—as if twenty years had been taken away. Even my hair was raven black once more. But I never saw Her Ladyship again. And I quickly discovered that there were a great many conditions in the compact I’d made which I had not bothered to ascertain beforehand.”

“Did you ever go back to the house and try to find her?”

“Oh, yes. The house belonged to a duke, and when I passed by there only a night or so later, it was filled with serving staff, horses, dogs, guests, the duke and his family, and none of them behaving as though anything untoward, such as a lake of blood on the ballroom floor, had ever been discovered.”

Diana shook her head slowly, her imagination forming a vivid picture of the candlelit ballroom, of Thomas putting the knife to his throat and...she shuddered. “Were you taking opiates? Laudanum?”

He nodded. “But I’ve thought of that. I didn’t take any physic at all for three days before this occurred. Her Ladyship so instructed me. My mind was clearer than it had been in some time, although I was in quite a bit of pain.” He smiled bitterly. “I told you that I would find your skepticism wholly forgivable. Notwithstanding my involvement with the Order, I never thought of myself as a fanciful man. I was schooled in Aristotelian reasoning, law and rhetoric. I would have thought the entire incident was a dream, or a vision, myself—except that there were several substantial pieces of evidence to the contrary.”

“You had your face back, to start with.”

“To start with, yes. And then there was the complete transformation of my essential nature into something...inhuman. Realizing that I had to drink blood for sustenance, that simple sunlight would sear my skin to blisters in a matter of hours, that wounds closed themselves in seconds...my existence was about to become a series of shocking discoveries. But before I knew any of this, I awoke in clothing stiff with blood, and still holding Her Ladyship’s dagger. My hand was clenched around it so hard I had difficulty loosening my fingers.”

“Do you still have it? I’d like to see it.”

“I’ll show it to you. Perhaps you’ll find some meaning in it. It’s quite curious.”

She suddenly recalled another detail from Thomas’ story. “What about your horse? If you awoke in your chambers, what happened to your transportation?”

“Ah, yes...” his face darkened. “I’d hired him, as men without households usually did at the time. He was in the stables behind the building where I was living. When I finally remembered the poor beast and went down to see to him, I discovered for the first time how overwhelming my new thirst was. I had known I wanted *something*. Until I smelled living blood, I wasn’t conscious of *what* I wanted.”

Diana swallowed uncomfortably. “You drank your horse’s blood?”

“I couldn’t stop myself. I’d seen horses bled, there are veins close to their skin, very easy to find. I’d been given a steady, patient chestnut gelding, and he’d been standing saddled and bridled all day, unnoticed by anyone. He nickered to me when he heard me approach. I walked up to him blindly, carried along by the smell of him, and I simply...” He fell silent for a moment. “That’s when I knew exactly what kind of a bargain I’d made—when I came to myself and realized that I was standing beside a trembling animal slaking a thirst for blood. Then I finally comprehended the depths of my own stupidity, not merely the night

before, but through all of my life...and it was too late.”

Diana reflected that drinking blood didn’t seem like an unfair price to pay for immortality, although she decided to keep this opinion private. “You said all your scars had disappeared, except one?” Her guess was confirmed when he pulled down the collar of his sweater so she could see the thin ragged line running from below his ear to his collar bone. It hadn’t been a clean cut.

“The last one,” he said very quietly, and Diana had to swallow hard.

“Who do you think that woman was? Do you have any idea?”

“Oh, I have an idea, think of it what you like. In *Cymru* I had heard of a people that lived under the earth—a people perilous and beautiful, with the power to grant wishes to those fool enough to ask for them. They are the people who listen when we speak those words best left unsaid. They are the ones who hold the glass up to our own follies. The Tylwyth Teg, they are called.”

“The Fair Folk.”

“Yes. Because who else would have damned me to Middle-earth? It was a strange phrase to use. In Medieval times, Middle-earth was the name for this world, the land between Heaven and the underworld, the realm of the faery folk. That’s where I think she was from.”

Diana pondered this darkly. A few days ago, she would have had a more dubious response. She’d thought the myths of the faery realm were archetypes and psychological symbols, possibly inspired by some kind of truth, but not to be taken literally. But after last night, and seeing Thomas dematerialize before her eyes, she was far less confident about her interpretation of myth.

“I guess there’s just one major question left to ask,” she said finally. He waited expectantly, and she met his eyes. “Just what, exactly, does...the dragon...want you to do, that is so terrible, you’re going to such lengths to avoid it?”

He looked away from her uneasily, but by now he knew better than to evade the question. “It wants me to...pass it on, to release it into other human beings.”

“And make them vampires like you?”

“Presumably. As I’ve never succumbed to the temptation, I don’t know for sure what would happen. I don’t want to know.”

“Why? Is your existence so unbearable, that you’d rather be dead than share it?”

“It’s not that, although...” he was quiet for a moment. “You can’t imagine the agony of that experience. There are no words strong enough to describe it. Saying that it’s like being burned alive only conveys a dim shadow of the reality. I couldn’t possibly inflict that much pain on another, especially someone who I cared for, or respected, enough to want them to share my immortality. You see the dilemma, don’t you?”

Diana reluctantly thought back to last night, when she had realized that Thomas was restraining the dragon from reaching her, and how desperately she’d prayed to him not to let it go. “I think so...as you say, I can’t really understand it the way you do.”

“That’s part of it. The other part...that ordeal is fatal. Anyone who is devoured by the dragon dies, and dies horribly. I’ve never caused the death of another human being—not once.”

“Never? Not even in your law work?”

“I was never a prosecutor. I lost cases, and that was bad enough.” He smiled wryly. “I’ve been a fugitive from more than one death sentence, myself. I long ago wearied of seeing death inflicted for any reason. I don’t want to be responsible for that.”

“But...all initiations follow a death and rebirth pattern, and you’re never prepared for what it’s really going to be like. If you were, it wouldn’t be a true initiation. If someone sincerely wanted it...”

He gave her a keen look. “Do you?”

“Well, no, I’m not saying that, I’m just trying to get a clear picture, that’s all.”

He smiled but didn’t argue. “Initiations are metaphorical. Really, Miss Chilton, think about it. Imagine saying to someone, ‘I love you and want to be with you forever, so pardon me while I let you be raped and tortured to death.’ That’s the analogy. It doesn’t seem like an auspicious beginning for a partnership, does it? Especially when I can’t even offer certainty of the outcome.”

“But what other outcome could there be?”

He shrugged. “Who knows? What do you think that power would *not* be capable of? But I can never forget that the Good People are renowned for their tricks.”

“But...if you don’t want to pass your condition on—why go to such lengths? Why not simply refuse to do it?”

“The dragon isn’t a passive force, content to have done its work on me and let be. It has been pressuring me for many decades now to continue what it started.”

“Pressuring, how?”

“Every time I drink from a human being—and I do so infrequently—I perceive the dragon, tempting me, pushing at me to continue past the point of no return. At first, that wasn’t the case. But once it started reappearing, it became more and more insistent. Now...I dream of it. I find myself falling into long brooding spells, thinking about it. Last night...it required every shred of will that I possessed not to release it into you. For a moment, I thought I would lose control of it.”

“I was...aware of that, believe it or not.”

“It has long been a maddening obsession, Miss Chilton, and I can’t risk madness. My capacity for doing harm is much too great for that. This is why I’ll do anything to break the dragon’s hold over me. I can’t choose death by any other means, no matter how noble my reasons.” He glanced at her sharply. “Not that I wish for death. You asked if my existence was unbearable. I would never say that. But...there is an intensity to it that is wearying. Every sense is acutely tuned, every experience is heightened, my awareness of the emotions and reactions of other living things is nearly preternatural. I’d always lived in

cities, I loved being in the midst of humanity. But the twentieth century has brought a cacophony of industrial noise and stink that modern man no longer even notices. Unlike mortals, I can't shut it out."

"That's why you moved up here."

"I had to, to keep my sanity. You can see my dilemma. I have peace here, but I'm no longer able to do the work I pursued so passionately for my entire existence. Without that, what is the point of continuing?"

"There must be some solution, Mr. Morgan—there must be."

"Perhaps there is. There's much about this world that I would miss, but I've had more than my share of life. After all, death is part of the natural order of things. How long can I expect to cheat it?"

After that, Diana could think of nothing more to ask, and Thomas seemed to feel no need to fill the silence. The room was very still. The moon had risen, lightening the night sky outside. Earlier there had been crickets and other insects singing in the fields around the house, but now Diana couldn't hear them. The candle flames burned straight and steadily. She could feel her heart beating rapidly, and a chill of fear tightening her stomach. But it was her own decision that frightened her—the decision that had already been made by some part of her Will above her rational mind and ego.

"Thomas," she said softly, and he looked up at her. "I'll do it."

He blinked, looking not so much surprised as incredulous. "Are you sure?"

She closed her eyes for a moment, gathering her thoughts. Thomas, sensing what she was about to do, waited motionless. Finally she opened her eyes, and took Thomas' right hand in her own. "I will help you, Thomas Morgan. I will join you in this work and see it through to its conclusion. I swear by the silver light."

He must have been holding a breath by habit, because he suddenly released it in a long sigh, as his grip on her hand tightened. "And I swear by the silver light to complete this work with you, regardless of its end."

As he spoke, Diana felt a vertiginous sense that time had stopped, like a movie when the projector is halted. For one moment, it seemed as though the very walls of the room were paying attention, and even inanimate objects paused with bated breath. *And who was listening to you?...They are the people who listen when we speak those words best left...* but suddenly the surreal feeling had vanished. The candle flames flared in a breeze from the window, and the trilling of crickets filled the night outside. Diana sighed, her shoulders sagging. "I think it's time we got onto a first-name basis, as fellow initiates and peers, if nothing else."

"I am not sure," Thomas said with an uneasy smile, "that I would quite consider myself your magical peer...Diana."

She gave his hand a comradely squeeze and let it go. "I'll give you credit for seniority, at the very least." Her humorous tone was slightly forced—the full import of the oath she had just made was slowly sinking in, and she felt a bit stunned. *Ab, Mother Goddess, what have I done?* But it was too late for doubts now. She had stepped through the door and there was no going back. She felt

exhausted, and she sensed that Thomas, as well, was only beginning to appreciate the meaning of the agreement they had just made.

He rose and gathered up the food, refilled the water glass and placed it next to the bed. "You should get some sleep now," he said, and she didn't argue, because she could barely keep her eyes open. "If you need anything, call for me. I promise, I will hear you. You'll be recovered in two days. Then we can begin our work."

“We’re definitely going to need an athanor.” Diana sat back and flexed her stiff shoulders. Thomas, who was feeding kindling into the massive iron cook stove, glanced up with a look of brief surprise. It was the first time Diana had spoken all evening, and he had become accustomed to her studious silence.

A week had passed since the rainy night when Diana knocked on Thomas’ door. For the past three nights, she had spent most of her time in the large brick-paved kitchen at the back of the ground floor. She had covered the entire surface of the long trestle table with papers and ledger books filled with the notes and records Thomas had made of over a century of magical workings. For days, she had been poring over one failure after another, until she felt somewhat depressed by the sheer cumulative effect. Thomas had explained the garden out back, his most recent effort, as an attempt to create an earth grid that would contain the dragon’s energy and possibly send it to ground. That scheme, five years in the planning and building, had proven just as fruitless as all the rest. Since then he had been evolving a completely new approach, a direct confrontation with the dragon itself.

Thomas left the cold stove and came over to join her at the table, leaning over to study her own pages of notes and diagrams. “Do you really think it will succeed?”

“I think it *could* succeed. Only the completion of the working will unequivocally answer that question. But the concept is sound and your outline seems like a very good one. What it needs is a focal point, something that can contain the level of power we’ll build up over time. That’s what the athanor will do for us.”

His brow furrowed in slight puzzlement. “I thought that an athanor was simply a furnace.”

“It is. But there are other ways to use one than processing alchemical compounds. You might not be familiar with this technique, I was taught it by Le—by my mentor. The athanor maintains a steady heat and pressure for the duration of the working. This mirrors on the material plane what the magical energy is doing on the etheric one. Do you follow me?”

“I believe so.”

She rummaged for an unmarked sheet of paper and a pencil. “Look, this is how it’s built,” she said, sketching quickly. “Two walls of thermal brick, sealed, with a layer of silicon sand in the middle. The furnace underneath works like this, very simple, it’s a closed firebox like the stove there...and it’s vented so... and that will burn as long as forty-eight hours at a time, not that you want to let it go longer than twenty-four or the temperature won’t stay level. Then inside you have a sealed chamber made of three layers of metal—copper, brass and iron—like so, and inside that there is a glass vessel. The vessel contains the energy, and *that* is the focus of the working.”

He tugged the paper toward himself and traced the pencil marks with a finger. “I see...it just burns wood, not coal?”

“Yes, hardwood, like oak or maple. We don’t want it getting too hot, you see. I assume we’ll have no trouble getting seasoned firewood around here.”

“None at all. I own four hundred acres of woodlot. But I’m curious—what is inside the glass vessel?”

“Well...we may have a slight challenge with that. Can we shelve that detail for a moment?”

He hesitated, then gestured that she continue.

“Now, I like your ideas for the structure of the working itself. Structure is always arbitrary, anyway, since it’s only a focusing device. I agree that the charge and incantation can be in Welsh, because of its being your native language and all, but that means you’ll have to write them. My Welsh is shaky, and besides, ritual script is best composed solo.”

“But you know the cadences,” he said urgently. “That was one of the reasons I needed your help to even plan the working. I was never trained in using the cadences.”

“Yeah, I know the cadences.” She rested her forehead on her hand, suddenly tired. Even after a week, her levels of endurance were not quite up to their usual vigor. “Look, I’ll give you the syncopation patterns and the syllable counts for the lines. The rest of it is all in the melody and inflection, and it won’t hurt if the word emphasis is a bit odd here and there. We could sing nursery rhymes as long as the cadences are correct. Can you work with that?”

“I’m sure I can.” He bent back over the notes. “So, we build the athanor and begin the working. Every day?”

“Without fail. I wanted to suggest that we time the daily working to correspond with the season. That would mean we work at midday during the summer. Will you be able to function, staying up all day when it’s hot and sunny?”

“I’ll see to it that I do. You might be wise to avoid annoying me, however. I can be a bit prickly during the daytime.”

“I’ll remember that.” She got up from the table and went to the deep soapstone sink attached to the kitchen’s west wall. The house had running water as long as the five hundred gallon cistern was hand-pumped at intervals to keep it

full. She drew a glass of cold well water and drained it. The weather had been hot and clear, and she was thirsty almost all of the time. She leaned back against the sink and watched Thomas as he read over her notes again, her eyes following the lines of his lean body, thrown into contrasts of light and shadow by the dim kerosene lamps. Until she was on her feet, he had cared for her as solicitously as a parent, but her feelings toward him, as ambiguous and complicated as they were, included nothing in the least filial. She shook herself before he could notice what she was doing and returned to the table.

“How long do you estimate this is going to take, all told?” he asked as she sat back down. “I gather you were doing quite a bit of calculating.”

She picked up her pencil and tapped the tabletop nervously with it for a moment. “Based on planetary cycles, and what I’m estimating for the tipping point...about eighteen months.”

Thomas sank slowly down onto the bench, blinking. “A year and a half. And working every day.”

“And feeding the athanor and monitoring it. That won’t take a lot of time, but it will have to be done every day.” He was so quiet for so long that she finally said, “You’re not really surprised, are you? That seems short to me, but one mistake we really can’t make on this one is timing the ending. It will peak when it peaks, and we can adjust as we go along, but I’m estimating at least eighteen months.”

He shook his head finally. “It’s just that...you’ll be here all that time.”

“Well...that would be the most practical arrangement. There’s already enough curiosity about us to make things awkward if I live in town and constantly travel back and forth. With the scope of this project, I really need to be right here.”

He finally gave a dismissive shrug. “I’ve never lived with anyone for so long, especially not since...but you understand why.”

“I understand what you told me, but...Thomas, you were able to hold back the dragon that first night. I have trouble imagining a more extreme situation arising than that.” He only frowned without answering. “If I’m going to trust you, you have to trust yourself.” Finally he sighed and nodded. Diana turned briskly back to her notes. “We do have a pretty tight squeeze around the exact time we commence the working. We need to begin on the Winter Solstice. That means everything constructed and ready to go—everything. If we can’t do it by this Solstice, we’ll have to wait at least six months, possibly a year.”

“*Can* we finish by then?”

“It depends on how quickly we can assemble the materials. With all the lime burning kilns here on the Bay, we shouldn’t have trouble getting the materials for the athanor. I know a place where we can have the metal parts for the chamber forged for us. They’ve done it before. We’ll need to have them welded together, but that can’t happen before the glass vessel is ready. And the athanor can only be built so far before we’ll need to have the metal chamber. The hardest work will be constructing the athanor itself.”

"I presume this is a formal construction?"

"For this? Are you serious?" She laughed. "Every brick consecrated individually. Each one set in ritually. Every component of this entire device will have to be consecrated, re-consecrated, ritually sealed, ritually set into place, ritually sealed again. And it all has to be done by Winter Solstice. Are you still game?"

He smiled. "It will be quite an adventure. I've lost the knack of racing against time. What were you saying about the glass vessel? Maybe we could get back to that."

"Oh, that." She sighed. "It needs to contain a compound, which has a particular combination of magical and chemical properties—something that has been made by an alchemical working. I could create a compound that would have the qualities we need—maybe. But it would take time, and chemicals I don't have, and another, ordinary athanor which I don't have access to easily. And alchemy is not my forte. But I know someone who...well, he used to be a member of the Order."

She paused, as Thomas studied her expression. "Not your former husband, I hope?"

"Oh, no! Goodness...Stephen could never do anything like that. He'd push his alchemical skills sugaring his coffee. No, I'm talking about Gregory Fitzhughes. He's brilliant, a genius in some ways, but...I feel honor-bound to warn you. He earned a rather cruel nickname in his last years with the Order. Some people called him the Mad Hatter."

"Because he made hats, or he was just mad?"

"Because he went mad for the same reason the hatters did—he got careless with his mercury, and several other highly toxic materials. He's not really mad, of course, that was just a nasty jibe. He was always eccentric, and he had radical political views, so he struck people as being pretty far out all along. Then after he poisoned himself, his mind sort of...splintered, I guess. It was like he had three trains of thought going on all the time. If you knew him well, you could keep up, but for newcomers, and casual acquaintances, he could be a bit off-putting, I'm afraid."

"I'm surprised that someone so skilled would have made that kind of mistake, especially when it led to such severe consequences."

"He was pushing it. He always did. He said it was impossible to achieve the results he wanted without directly contacting the chemicals. People stopped kidding about it when it became apparent how serious it really was."

"But he's still able to make his compounds."

"I trust his compounds, absolutely. I'd trust him with my life. The main problem is negotiating with him. He was never the sort of person who would work for hire, as it were, and he was much too iconoclastic to play well as part of team."

"I'm willing to pay any amount he asks."

"Money was never something that Gregory considered a priority. You

know how they say that everyone has a price, if they're offered enough? I think Gregory is the only person I've ever met for whom that isn't true. But that doesn't mean we can't strike some kind of a deal. I'll just have to try and get in touch with him. I'm afraid he didn't leave the Order voluntarily, and I haven't talked to him since then."

Thomas sat for a moment mulling this over. "You also mentioned welding."

She shifted uncomfortably. "Yes, and that's going to be the trickiest part. We'll have to be working ritually as the pieces are welded, and it will take at least a few nights to finish. It will have to be done here, in our magical working space, and whoever does the welding will need to know something about what's going on, so we can coordinate the practical aspect with the magical one. The welder doesn't have to be a magician, but...it might be hard to find anyone around here that wouldn't be spinning tales all over the place, and that's if they didn't run for their life the first night and refuse to come back. We'll have to pay someone a lot of money, and even then we could have confidentiality problems."

"I may be able to solve the confidentiality question, at the very least."

"Really? How?"

"I have some ability...a very minor ability...to influence."

"You mean, like hypnosis? That can be unreliable." She had seen members of the Order pull off some amazing feats, on completely unaware subjects, but sometimes the subject rejected the suggestions, or the conditioning wore off.

"It's not as simple as that. It's definitely reliable."

Diana put down her pencil and crossed her arms. "Thomas—this is important. Don't be so damnably vague."

"All right! I can blot out memories, when I am...when I am deeply connected to other people."

"You mean, when you're drinking their blood."

"Yes. It's very crude—I'd get about the same effect by bashing in the poor soul's head with a hammer. The person almost always faints dead away on the spot. And it's very limited. I can only make an individual forget the most immediate events and experiences. But I can sometimes use the same connection to exert a sort of enhanced persuasion—arrange his thoughts so that he will cooperate, and won't reveal anything we ask him not to."

"What if that doesn't work?"

"Then I can blot out his memory, and we may have to try someone different, someone more receptive to being influenced."

"You can't influence them and also blot out their memory at the same time?"

"Unfortunately not. It's one or the other."

She stood up abruptly and went over to the stove. "I'm just not sure about this, Thomas. It seems awfully risky, and..." she touched the spot on her throat where there was still a contusion, almost faded by now. "You have to be taking their blood to do it?"

"Yes, I do. Why? Do you have someone in mind?"

She wavered, angry with herself for judging Thomas, but struggling with both guilt and discomfort. The thought that she was helping to trick an unsuspecting person into a coercive arrangement made her squirm. Finally she sat back down on the bench. "I think I met someone who can do it, on my way here."

"Who might that be?"

"There's a little Texaco station just below Camden—a young man runs it, alone as far as I can tell. I got the feeling that he'd appreciate the extra income. I think he could do it, if he'll take the job."

"He sounds like a likely candidate. I know that little filling station. Young people are usually more open to influence."

"It would be easier to hire someone local. He seemed rather fascinated by you, he told me all about the Hermit of Pepperell Hills when he heard I was coming here."

Thomas chuckled. "My notoriety reaches as far as Camden."

"I just hate to actually...I mean, he's only a kid, I don't even think he's old enough to vote."

Thomas shook his head. "It's the only solution that really makes sense. Diana, we can't proceed if we're going to shrink away from every hard exigency. No one will be harmed—not substantially. But as you yourself just said—what would happen if our plans did become public knowledge?" He moved closer to her and put a hand on her shoulder, making her straighten up suddenly. "Imagine how much trouble could be caused just by curiosity seekers, let alone those with hostile motives. We can't possibly take such a risk."

"You're right." She shifted away from him, because his touch was distracting, and gave him a resentful scowl. "You must have been one *hell* of a lawyer."

He stifled a laugh. "So I was told. Offer him whatever payment you wish—be exorbitant, if that makes you feel better. When can you speak to him?"

"Any time, but before I do that, I need to go to Boston for a few days. I need to close up my apartment there, and meet with the trustees and Board of Bread and Roses. I need to order the parts for the metal chamber, and I'd prefer to do that in person. And I need to find out where Gregory is—I'm not sure where he's living now. I know he's not in the city anymore."

Thomas nodded. "Perhaps I could arrange for the bricks and other materials for the athanor."

"Well, one of the things I'll be getting is the plans for that, but I can write out what you'll need. That's a good idea, actually." A sudden thought occurred to her. "You know, I haven't even considered where we'll build this thing. Is there enough headroom in the cellar for an athanor? It's going to need a chimney of some kind, too. We might have to cut through the floor."

"We won't build it here. But we do have a perfect place for it." He got up and went to the wide workbench that ran along one wall of the kitchen, and took up one of the kerosene lamps that stood there. "Come on and I'll show you."

They went out the kitchen door and around the house, Diana carrying the

lantern because only she needed it to see. Thomas walked quickly ahead of her, never once stumbling on the rough ground, despite the darkness. The waning half moon had not yet risen and stars glittered coldly overhead, the Milky Way arching across the sky like a veil. A few hundred yards down the gravel intake road, Thomas turned onto a narrow path that cut through the woods. He moved almost silently between the high bush blueberries and thick saplings. After some ways the path widened and then emptied out, like a river delta, into a large clear area. Dimly visible in the starlight loomed a white farmhouse, its windows boarded with plywood. Thomas walked halfway across the clearing and stopped, gazing at the house in silence. Diana caught up with him, slightly out of breath.

“You own this?”

“Yes, this is the Schuller house. It came with the last parcel of land I purchased. It dates back to 1895.”

“It’s...” she tried to think of something complimentary, but the boxy house was small, unremarkable and in poor condition. Trash and debris was scattered around the back dooryard, including an ancient washing machine and a number of old tires.

“It’s a wreck,” Thomas said cheerfully. “But it’s structurally sound, and has a very useful feature. Follow me and watch your step.”

They picked their way across the lumpy, littered yard to the back stoop, where a screen door hung from one hinge, rough holes punched in the screening. Thomas pushed the screen door aside and produced a small key from his pocket, which he used to unlock a steel padlock securing the back door. The door swung inward with a long squealing moan, stopping when it scraped into a curving track worn into the floorboards. Thomas stepped inside, turning back to beckon Diana in with the enthusiasm of a welcoming cocktail party host. Gingerly, she stepped over the threshold.

The lantern’s wavering flame made more shadows than light. Stray litter and dead leaves stuck to the creaking and badly warped floors, and Diana’s footsteps echoed off the bare walls. Smells of damp plaster, rotting wood, and wet soot from the chimney filled the stale air. Flat graying plywood pressed against the cracked glass of the windows. Diana could feel her skin crawling, and kept as close to Thomas as possible without risking an accident to the lantern. They went into the kitchen, where empty cabinets gaped and an old bottled gas stove stood with one oven door fallen permanently ajar. Thomas went to a door in the kitchen’s interior wall and quickly opened it. Cold, clammy air poured out and swirled around them like fog, heavy with the odor of stone and damp earth, and Diana took a step backwards.

“Thomas, you’ve got to be kidding.”

“Don’t be so squeamish! What’s a cellar after everything you’ve been through? Come on!”

She followed him down the cellar steps, holding onto the iron pipe railing fixed into the lath-and-plaster walls. The steps, at least, seemed sound, and she

was surprised at how long they were. At the bottom of the steps she held up the lantern and looked around. "Amazing."

The cellar had a clearance of at least eight feet and seemed larger than the exterior of the house. The foundation walls were tight mortared granite field-stone and despite the damp smell, appeared dry. But Diana immediately saw the feature that most interested Thomas.

"Why on earth did they put a huge fireplace like that in a cellar?"

"Soap."

"Soap?"

"For decades, the Schullers made soap and sold it. They built the house with this cellar so they could keep up their business during the wintertime. There was a lot of soap making paraphernalia here, but it all got sold to collectors when the house was closed ten years ago."

"Soap...no wonder the floorboards are so warped."

"And doubtless replaced entirely more than once. Still, it was a going concern, while it lasted."

"Is there a bulkhead to the outside?"

"Over there."

She walked over to it, examining the stone steps leading up to the slanting wooden doors. Then she took a closer look at the fireplace, her jitters of a few minutes ago completely forgotten. She peered up the wide flue, and saw stars winking back at her from the night sky overhead. "You're right. It's perfect. There's more than enough space, and we can vent the athanor up this flue. There's plenty of leeway for the dampers."

"So I should have the bricks delivered here?"

She looked at him, suddenly realizing that as of this moment, they were committing themselves to the plan she had so roughly sketched out over the last three days. *Maybe we should think about this...do a divination, take some dreamtime...* but no. *If this fails, there is no hope*, and she knew, instinctively, that Thomas was right. Perhaps they shouldn't even acknowledge failure as a possibility. Perhaps that was the only way to even approach a working of this magnitude.

"Yes, do that, as soon as possible. I'll leave for Boston in the morning."

At sunset of the Wednesday after Independence Day, Diana lay on top of the granite boulder by the turnoff, listening to the crickets chirping in the long grass beside the road. The day had been hot and humid, and the evening coolness was a relief. She knew Thomas was probably awake by now, and she was hungry, not having eaten since morning. But she was exhausted, and discouraged by the contents of the letter she had taken from the weather-beaten rural mailbox a few minutes ago. Although she and Thomas had certainly been making progress in the past three weeks, not everything was going as smoothly as she would have liked.

She'd had no difficulties negotiating an early termination of her Back Bay apartment lease, given the acute housing shortage in the city. The landlord had actually seemed rather delighted for the chance to raise the rent when he listed the property. She'd put most of her things in storage and hired a moving service to drop off several dozen cartons of books, magical supplies, and clothes at Holliston House Inn to be picked up when she got back.

Maurice, who co-owned the South End artists' foundry with his long-time partner Conor, had asked no questions when Diana presented him with the plans for the metal core components. The foundry had done projects for the OSL before. He did mutter unhappily about the price of copper since the war. By that time, Diana had been out of sorts and irritable. Her morning had been spent in a lengthy meeting with the Board of Directors of Bread and Roses. The Board and trustees had all been so cheerful in their confident assurances that they would keep the foundation thriving in her absence that Diana almost expected to be presented with a gold watch and ushered out the door. Still stinging from a sense of feminine uselessness, she'd pulled out a fifty dollar bill and handed it to Maurice without another word. He stared at the bill blankly as though it was an encrypted message. "I didn't mean I couldn't get it," he finally said, sounding hurt.

"This is a rush job, and I know you can always use cash," she'd told him, and he'd pocketed the bill without thanks or further comment, as befitted the

recipient of a good old-fashioned Boston bribe.

“Bronze is high too, it’s all going for war monuments.”

“Well, you just bill me for whatever’s fair, Maurice. Four weeks?”

“That’s awfully fast. Make it six. You don’t want me to cut corners, right?”

“As if you would.”

“Umm, flattery. I’ll try for five.”

Diana couldn’t help laughing. “I’ll call you to check how it’s going.”

It was only after every other errand had been taken care of and every possible loose end tied that Diana made the final stop on her itinerary.

Like the organization it sheltered, the Motherhouse of the Order of the Silver Light presented a deceptive appearance to the outside world. From the sidewalks of Beacon Street, passers-by saw the well-kept façades of two four-story Boston brownstones, their high granite steps flanked by tiny trim gardens behind wrought iron fences. But one entrance was a false door, and what appeared to be two buildings was in fact one. The walls it shared with neighboring houses on either side were heavily soundproofed, and along with its other architectural oddities, the OSL’s HQ sat atop a three-level-deep basement.

There was no one on the first floor when Diana let herself in with her private key. Grateful for that, she took the somewhat rickety manual-control elevator down to the lowest basement level. The archives were warm and a little stuffy, since the air conditioning was only turned on while ceremonies or meetings took place. The OSL adhered to a Naturist and somewhat Luddite philosophy, like that of Thomas Jefferson or William Morris, both of whom had been initiates in their time. The file cabinets containing records of inactive and former members stood in a row near the archive entrance.

The most recent of several address changes on Gregory’s record sheet listed an apartment in Brighton. Diana knew that was five years out of date, because she had gone there to investigate why her letters were being returned undeliverable. Stephen had found out, somehow, and this had led to one of their biggest fights ever.

She thumbed through the folder without finding any other notations that postdated Gregory’s departure from the Order. As she started to return the folder to the drawer, she noticed a small card almost slip out of the side. She pulled it out and saw a jotted note: “Box 62, Manchester, New Hamp.” There was no clue as to when the card had been added to the file or even whose address the box number was, but she made a note of it, intending to mail a short letter that very day. As she locked up the archives, she felt her shoulders tensing. She had an appointment to keep before she could leave, and she wasn’t looking forward to it.

Roderick’s fourth floor study door hung slightly ajar and there were no lights on inside, but Diana knocked anyway, just as a courtesy. When she heard no response, she went in and closed the door behind her. She walked behind the desk and stood looking down out of the handsome oriel window at the evening traffic creeping along Beacon Street. The gaslight street lamps of an earlier age

glowed weakly in the stronger glare of their taller electric descendents. Their light glittered in the protective sigil that had been cut into the glass of the center window, supposedly by L. MacGregor Mathers. Diana had always wondered what Mathers thought would try to get in.

When the door behind her opened, Diana didn't turn around. Reflected in the window, she could see Roderick's tall form hesitate in the doorway, backlit by the crystal globed sconce in the hall. Then he pushed the button on the wall switch and the twin lamps on his desk came on. Diana squinted a little at the flush of warm light, but kept her gaze on the window. "Magus Vale. How good of you to come."

Roderick Lowell Vale, Presiding Magus of the Order of the Silver Light, closed his study door and walked over to sit wearily in his expensive executive desk chair. Lean and raw-boned, he was sometimes mistaken for Michael Rennie, the film actor, but his voice was deeper and had the low soothing tones of a practiced hypnotist. "I'm sorry, I didn't expect to be so long. Daniel Cobert caught me just as I was leaving, and I had some difficulty getting away from him."

Still studying the traffic below, Diana said dryly, "I can just imagine. That little windbag is going to be the next P.M."

"He's welcome to the post."

Diana turned to look at him. "Really? You know, some people say that making others wait for them is a way of expressing power and dominance. The longer you make others wait, the more you enjoy the control you have over them. Or so I've heard."

Roderick's smile was thin. "Are we going to talk about you, Diana, or are we going to have another argument about politics?"

She shrugged. "What's the difference?"

Roderick extended a hand toward the chair facing his desk. "Please."

With a sigh, Diana left the window and sat in the deep upholstered armchair, which doubtless would have given another man a feeling of clubbish camaraderie. She felt like a little girl sinking into it, and shifted a bit to keep her feet firmly on the floor. "I'm here because you asked me to meet with you. I'm not sure just what it is that you want to discuss. The Council accepts my reasons for taking a leave of absence. My affairs are in order. I'm a free woman now, in every sense. Are you going to try to talk me into staying, Roderick—or are you speaking for your cousin Stephen here?"

"I am certainly not taking Stephen's side, any more now than I have done for the past several years," Roderick said stiffly. "And as for talking you into anything...I do want to make sure that there's nothing more I could say, Diana. If you need any reassurances as to how highly we value you as an active member of the Order...if, perhaps, I've assumed that you realize that you're..." he hesitated, appearing uncertain at her reaction to his words.

"Realized what? You're not implying that I've distinguished myself somehow, are you, Roderick? In what way?"

“In what way? Diana—let’s begin with your level of dedication, the hours you put in, the amount of time you’ve spent working with apprentices—”

“All very easy for me, considering that I don’t have to support myself and I don’t have children.” She snapped off the last words more sharply than she intended.

“You founded and oversee a philanthropic organization that serves three states and employs more than twenty full-time staff.”

“And I spent so much time on it that my marriage went to hell.”

“Your marriage would—” Roderick stopped, obviously not prepared to go further in that direction. Diana had always suspected that Roderick would like to have proposed to her himself, and was glad she’d never been forced to turn him down. “It’s perfectly understandable that you’re feeling bitter, but it’s only been three months. These things take time.”

“They take less time with more distance. I’m sure you can appreciate that. Meanwhile, the Order will chug along perfectly well without me, just like Bread and Roses will. They both have plenty of fine, upstanding *men* at the helm.”

Roderick leaned back in his chair, frowning unhappily at the glossy oak surface of his desk. This was ground that had been well-churned between them. “I hope that you don’t seriously doubt that your abilities are recognized and acknowledged, Diana. You were the youngest initiate to attain Adeptus grade in history, I believe.”

“But that was seven years ago, Roderick. And fifty years from now, I will still be just an Adeptus. I will never be a Magus. I can’t hold office, I can’t preside in ritual, I can’t initiate, I can’t even serve on the Council. All the dedication, talent and precocity in the world can’t outweigh the fact that I’m female.”

“I know you hate hearing this, Diana, but there are reasons for these rules.”

Diana made a rude sound. “Of course there are, there are *reasons* for everything. But they’re lousy reasons, and they’ve been obsolete for centuries, if they were ever valid at all. But I can’t challenge the rules, Roderick. Only a Magus can do that.”

After a pause, Roderick said, “You know—you’re not the only one with cause to be envious. I was certainly never offered a chance to work with Levoissier. Maybe you don’t fully appreciate how far above the rank and file that places you. Grades above Adeptus are chiefly administrative, there’s not much more training. But what you’ve been doing for the past five years—what does Levoissier think about your leave of absence?”

Diana abruptly got up from the chair and walked across the small room to stare unseeing at the bookcases that lined the wall from floor to ceiling. Watching her, Roderick’s brow creased. “Have you even discussed your plans with him?” he finally said after the silence had stretched for nearly a minute.

Diana slowly turned to face him. “I’m not working with Levoissier any more.” It was the first time she had spoken the words out loud to anyone. It wasn’t merely the humiliation of admitting it. As long as she didn’t say it out

loud, she could almost pretend that it wasn't true. "From the look on your face, I'm inferring that you didn't hear about this from Levoissier."

"I—no, I had no idea that—when did this happen?"

"Just before I went to Maine." It almost soothed the sting, at least for a few minutes, to see Roderick rendered so speechless.

"But...did you...did he...was there any explanation?"

"How nice of you not to immediately ask, 'what did you do wrong?'" Diana walked back to the armchair and dropped heavily into it. "That's the first thing I asked."

"What did he say?"

She forced a smile and raised her hands in an exaggerated shrug. "You know Levoissier."

"I *don't* know Levoissier—certainly not the way you do."

"All he would say was something vague about our having gone as far as we could go at my present stage of development. Made me feel like something he was growing in a jar in his laboratory."

Roderick shook his head, still appearing stunned. "But the two of you were—it doesn't make any sense."

"I'm sure it makes sense to him. I'm not as surprised as you are, Roderick. After all, Levoissier isn't exactly a normal man, is he? He doesn't operate by the same rules as the rest of us. Time means nothing to him—and neither do feelings and loyalty. Look what he did to Gregory Fitzhughes."

Roderick winced at the name. "That was a completely different situation, Diana. I know you were angry about that, but..."

"There were good reasons. Naturally. But he was working with Levoissier, too. And Levoissier never came to his defense, not a single word." She looked at Roderick soberly. "I'd appreciate it if no one else knew about this."

"Of course." After a moment, Roderick said quietly, "Are you coming back?"

Diana's gaze wandered around the shadowy room. For the first time, she imagined never seeing the OSL's Motherhouse again, and a cold pang went through her, as if she had been stabbed by a ghostly icicle. "How could I not? The Order is all I know, it's my life. I'm not leaving forever, Roderick. I just don't know how long this will take."

Thinking back to this conversation as she turned the letter over in her hands, Diana sighed heavily. Bats flitted overhead in the deepening twilight sky, and the mosquitoes were starting to bite right through her denim jeans. After a few swats, she sat up, jumped to the ground and began walking up the gravel roadway.

The whip-poor-will rose, keening, from the garden as she came around the back corner of the house. The lamps had been lit in the kitchen, so Thomas was awake. He had no need of the light himself unless he was doing close work, but he always lit the lamps for her if she was out. She pushed open the heavy door and entered the kitchen.

“There you are.” Thomas looked up from feeding the fresh fire in the cook stove. “Where have you been?”

“Out getting the mail.”

“Anything interesting?”

“Well, yes and no.” She perched on the edge of the table, her feet propped on a bench. “I called Maurice today, and they’ve finished casting the copper and iron. The bronze has just been shipped by his supplier, but he thinks they’ll have it in a week, and as soon as they cast it, they’ll ship everything to us.”

“Can’t they ship what they’ve got?”

“They want to make certain everything fits together properly. We can’t do anything until we have all the pieces, anyway.”

He nodded. “Is there any more information about the compound?”

“Well...” she removed the letter from her pocket. “This came today.” She handed it to Thomas without further explanation.

“From Mr. Fitzhughes.” He unfolded the letter. The scrawling penciled handwriting evoked no comment—this was the third letter they’d received. Thomas read aloud, “Sorry cannot negotiate by mail, will only deal in person. Cannot confirm availability of compound or discuss price by mail due to security concerns. Please make arrangements to meet in safe location for further details.” Well. He’s obviously not budging from his position. Are you sure we want to deal with this fellow? He certainly doesn’t seem very...trusting.”

“I think the word you’re avoiding is paranoid.” Diana smiled weakly. “Yes, that had something to do with the problems he had in the Order. But—” She shrugged. “You want my honest opinion? I don’t think he’s mistrustful of us, and I’m not convinced he’s that suspicious of the United States Mail. He just wants us to meet with him in person before he’ll commit to anything, which isn’t unreasonable. But he’s not going to come right out and say that, because it just sounds too, well, businesslike for him. I did find out where he lives.”

“How did you do that?” The Manchester Post Office had refused to disclose a box holder’s street address.

“Oh, his name reverberates through the Manchester City Hall. He hasn’t paid his property taxes in four years. There’s a lien on his place.”

“You’d think he’d welcome a chance to earn some money, then. He can’t have many buyers for his alchemical concoctions.”

“He might not pay his taxes, anyway. He always used to rant away about the evils of government and the criminality of taxation. And that was before he got too much quicksilver under his nails.”

Thomas leaned against the table, folding his arms. “Well...what do you want to do? Time is passing, and we need to make a decision. Can you create a compound yourself?”

“Not without going to the Order for assistance, and I would rather not do that until I know I have no alternative. I guess I’m going to drive to Manchester and see Gregory in person.”

Thomas looked at her thoughtfully. “What is your history with him, if I might ask?”

“History? What makes you think there is one?”

Thomas chuckled. “I hope you don’t mean that question seriously. Every time we discuss Mr. Fitzhughes, you get this certain *look*—and that’s only half of it.”

“You don’t really need to ask, then, do you?”

“Don’t snap at me. A lawyer who can’t read below the surface doesn’t last very long, in or out of court. I have the sense that there’s more between you and this alchemist than fellowship—or even a few OSL Beltenes.” He handed Gregory’s letter back to her, and as she was replacing it in the envelope, added, “I’ve noticed, for example, how carefully you’ve put away each one of his letters. And don’t get angry at *that*.” Diana, who had opened her mouth to spit out a retort, closed it. “You really are a most volatile woman.”

After struggling with her reactions for a moment, Diana finally sagged with a resigned sigh. “It’s very complicated. Yes, there’s a history. Yes, it went beyond the accepted parameters of the Order’s circle of free love, at least the parameters that Stephen was willing to accept. He could handle Beltene, but...” She was silent for a moment. “That was one of the two things that finally broke up my marriage.”

“Your relationship with Mr. Fitzhughes?”

“Oh, Stephen was in no position to be jealous or judgmental about that. No, it was...” she glanced sidelong at Thomas’ quizzical expression. “Stephen always wanted children, and I just couldn’t seem to have any. I had four miscarriages and a therapeutic abortion, and after that...I never got pregnant again.”

“I’m very sorry.” Thomas’ voice was genuinely sympathetic.

“Thank you. But the real issue was...after Gregory was forced to leave the Order, Stephen convinced himself that the reason I lost the babies was that... they weren’t really his.”

“Ah, I see,” Thomas said wisely.

“It wasn’t. True.” Diana snapped the words off like she was cutting glass, suddenly angry beyond reason.

“I’m sure that doesn’t even come to close to being any of my business.”

“Yes, well...I guess you didn’t ask, did you? Sorry.” She paused and took a deep breath to regain her composure. “You see, Gregory just dropped out of sight after he left the Order. I’m sure he was very bitter. These are the first communications I’ve had with him in five years.”

“What actually happened? I haven’t heard about anyone being drummed out of the Order for nearly a century.”

“I wasn’t privy to everything, but the Council apparently felt...well, they *said*, that if Gregory’s mind continued to deteriorate, he might blab about the Order to outsiders, or invite strangers to ceremonies, or...who knows what kind of nonsense.”

“You didn’t agree.”

“That’s putting it much more politely than I did. I probably should have...” She broke off, her mouth tightening. “I don’t think I did Gregory any good. I went running around collecting medical documentation and making a case. I was sure his symptoms were reversible and he’d improve, not get worse, but I just got informed that I wasn’t a doctor. Poor Roderick, the Council had just appointed him Presiding Magus and the first thing they did was drop this into his lap. He finally told me to shut up before he had to discipline me, on top of everything else. I’d just been formally censured, so...I shut up.”

Thomas considered all this, looking thoughtful. “Was Mr. Fitzhughes raised in the Order, like you?”

“He was brought in as a teenager, by...by a mentor. I’d known him a long time. But you see, the worst of it is, I never got to talk to him about what happened. I didn’t know how he felt about his friends who were still in the Order, or me...I even wondered if he counted me among the enemy. I’m still not sure.”

“Is that why you suggested him for the compound—so you’d have an excuse to find out?”

“I suggested him because he’s the best, if we can get him. But...yes, you’re right. It does give me a plausible excuse. It’s not personal and...it’s not just me.” She looked up. “You know—you could come down to Manchester with me. I think you’d find Gregory very interesting. And likewise.”

“Oh, no, I don’t think so. You’re the one who knows him, and I suspect this tangle will take some sorting. I’d just be an additional complication. You’d better go right away—it’s getting late in the game for us to make other arrangements.”

She went to the stone cooler where they stored perishables, and took out a covered saucepan of soup. “I know. Especially because the bricks were delivered today.”

“That’s a week early!”

“Well, he said they had a load going to Bangor so they put ours in with it. Whatever, they’re here, all stacked in front of the Schuller house on flats. I put the invoice on your desk.”

“So we can begin building the athanor any time now.”

“We can lay the bottom and the firebox and bring the walls up about a foot or so. I’d rather wait until we can fit the chamber into it, but we can adjust the inner wall before we seal it.”

“But we’ll need to consecrate the bricks first.”

She set the soup pan on a burner and went to find a spoon. “Yes, but we can do those in batches. I mean, each brick individually, but we can consecrate a batch and then set them in.”

“Ritually.”

“Yes, but don’t worry. I’ve done this before, and it takes on a kind of rhythm of its own. Before long you’ll be putting on your shoes and socks ritually. It’s somewhat habit-forming.” She paused in stirring the soup to look over at him. “You do realize what kind of state this is going to leave you in psychologically,

don't you? We really haven't discussed that."

"I hadn't thought much about it, but it doesn't matter."

"Thomas, I think it matters a great deal. You're assuming a hell of a lot here. You've never done anything like this before, and it's going to demand energy and concentration in a way you've never experienced. You need—we both need—to be completely honest with ourselves about how we're being affected, at every moment."

"But you're my partner," Thomas said reasonably. "Isn't that part of a joint working, to be aware of one another's possible missteps and forestall them? Working alone, one doesn't have the same perspective, but partners look out for each other in a working." When she didn't answer him, he added, "isn't that so?"

"It can be, but...in this case, I'm not sure either of us will have the perspective to keep an eye on the other, especially as we progress. And there are still things you're keeping from me, critical things, about your needs, your habits, your nature—don't look like that, I'm not stupid. There are."

"Nothing that directly affects the working. I've told you what you need to know. I haven't demanded to know every detail about you, have I?"

Fine, whatever you say, she thought, turning back to her soup. She stirred for a few minutes as the fire crackled in the firebox.

"Do you think it may be time to talk to our welder now?"

She looked up at the soot-darkened oak beam above the stove, pursing her lips unhappily. "I'd rather wait until we have the parts to show him."

"Do I detect a hint of procrastination here, Diana?"

She was silent. Steam suddenly engulfed her hand and she jerked the spoon from the bubbling pan and reached for a kitchen towel to remove the pot from the burner.

"Diana? If you prefer, I'll talk to him. From what you've told me, I should make quite an impression on him."

"No, that's...that's all right. I'll do it." She took a deep breath. "As soon as I get back from Manchester."

Old Goffstown Road wound out of the outskirts of northwest Manchester, lined with postwar wood frame bungalows. Potholes and frost heaves pitted and bumped the asphalt surface. Children played in knots and clusters in the small front yards, their sneakers scarring grass baked to a yellow mat by the summer's drought. After a mile or so, Diana drew up before a lumpy two-story farmhouse with the tarnished brass numbers "904" barely visible on one of the front porch posts. It certainly looked like a mad scientist's lair. Paint peeled from the cracked and rotting clapboards, numerous shingles had shed from the roof and taped cardboard rectangles patched many of the windows. Aloud, she murmured, "This must be the place."

She pulled into the dirt driveway and got out of the car, regarding the sagging front porch with deep suspicion. Looking around, she noticed a sort of footpath beaten through the tall weeds from the driveway toward the back of the house. She followed it and came to a ground-level door that appeared to lead directly into the basement. Pausing a moment to collect herself, she knocked.

The door opened so suddenly that she took a startled step back, a hand over her mouth. For a moment, she was too overcome with emotion to speak. Gregory looked a little older and even thinner than she remembered, and he had let his hair grow. The silvery blond curls almost touched his shoulders in masses of ringlets. For a moment he only stared at her, as if he was unsure not only who she was but what she was. Then he broke into a slow smile.

"Hello, Gregory." Diana winced inwardly as her voice caught on his name.

"Diana," he finally said—perhaps she wasn't the only one who'd had trouble speaking. "It's good to see you."

"I would have written or cabled first, but we got your last letter, and I thought I might just as well drive down here." She gestured in the direction of her car.

"I knew someone was coming today, that's why I put on my best shirt." He brushed once at his shoulders, as though dusting off crumbs. The stained, threadbare dungarees and plaid flannel shirt did appear surprisingly clean. He peered behind her quizzically. "Is it just you?"

“Just me.”

His smile broadened. “That’s even better, then. I was sure there’d be someone else. But don’t stand there on the doorstep, come in! There’s not much on the outside worth more of a look than you’ve just had, but I’ll show you my shop, watch the steps now...” As she took his outstretched hand, she could feel that his long fingers were knotted and criss-crossed with small scars. He put his other arm above her head protectively, even though she was inches from needing to duck under the low door lintel the way he did.

The steps led down into a cellar-cum-laboratory. Gregory had shoehorned a small athanor, vented to the brick chimney, into the space by the hulking furnace. He led Diana around the spacious low-ceilinged room, pointing out and explaining each feature of his rather impressive workshop. A comparison of this meticulously kept area with the exterior of the house made it clear where his financial priorities were. But Gregory would always have gone without food and heat if he had to choose between those and alchemical supplies, and he’d never had much money to allocate.

Listening to him, and asking questions, Diana observed with a private sense of vindication that the obvious effects of the damage he’d suffered from his chemical recklessness were much alleviated. They ended up by the athanor, which was emitting soft ticking noises as it cooled, and Diana asked a number of questions about how he had constructed it and what its capabilities were. Finally, Gregory fell silent and looked at her for a few moments. “But this isn’t a social call, I know that much. You’ve come about your compound, have you?”

“That is the main reason I tracked you down now, Gregory, I admit it. But I don’t think a day has gone by these past five years that I didn’t think about you, and wonder how you were doing. I tried to get in touch with you after you left, but my letters were returned by the post office. You didn’t leave a forwarding address when you moved from Brighton, and no one seemed to know where you were. It wasn’t easy to find out where you’re living now.”

He only nodded, his expression resigned. “That was a bad time for me. For a long while I didn’t want to hear from anyone in the Order, or almost anyone. Banished to the outside like a cowan, after all those years, and no one speaking for me, not my best friend Jack, nor even *him*—I was too ashamed by it. I wanted to talk to you, Di, but—I was afraid I’d get you into trouble. More trouble that is than you already were.”

“I understand,” she said, inadequately. She tried to imagine what it would be like to be banished from the Order, and couldn’t. “Gregory, I’m so, so sorry, for all of it. I should have kept on looking for you, I shouldn’t have worried about trouble, but...I was trying so damn hard to make my marriage work.”

“I don’t blame you for that, Di. I’d expect no less of you, you never give up on anything.”

She had to look away from him. “Jack quit the Order, and he left the state right after that, as far as I know.”

“He’s in Colorado, I heard, that’s where his family lives.”

She reached out and touched his arm, and he caught his breath. “You seem better, though, Gregory, than you were six years ago—much better. Especially your speech, and you’re not—” she broke off, suddenly feeling tactless.

But Gregory didn’t seem offended. “You’re right, some things are better. I don’t shake nearly as much, and I hardly ever take a fall now. But I’m not always as well as this, Di. There are good days, and bad ones, and I don’t see so well, or hear so well, as people think I should. Bright light hurts my eyes, and my ears hum all the time. Too many bad days, too many mistakes, and the jobs I can get—they say thank you, good bye. I’ve had no luck since I left Boston, seven jobs I’ve taken and lost them all. I should have stayed in school, after all. All my time spent in the Order—and what did I get from that, when it was all over? Thank you and good-bye. I wasn’t good enough for them, all those Vales and Lowells and Winthrops, that was the truth of it. They wouldn’t have been so quick to show one of their own the door.”

“I know.”

Gregory looked surprised at the bitterness in her voice. After a moment, he said, “So...I heard that after I was gone, *he* took you on, is that right?”

“He...you mean Levoissier?” She drew in a long breath, feeling her cheeks reddening. “That shouldn’t have been repeated, Gregory.”

“I never repeated it. Not to a soul.”

“Gregory, I—what would you have done? It was two years since I’d reached Adeptus, I was going nowhere. I don’t know why Levoissier didn’t say anything in your defense, but...”

“I’m not accusing you, Di. I just wondered if it was true, that’s all.”

“Yes, it’s true.”

“I just thought that the next time you see him, you could ask him something for me.” He was watching her face intently, and he frowned at her expression, although she wasn’t looking at him.

“I’m afraid I can’t ask Levoissier anything, Gregory. He’s shown me the door. And I don’t know why.”

There was such a long silence that Diana finally looked up at Gregory in puzzlement, and was even more bewildered by what she saw. He stood motionless, gazing into the distance, his brow furrowed, as though he had just been presented with a clue to a dark mystery and was pondering its significance. “Five years and five years,” he almost whispered, as though he was talking to himself. “What can that mean?”

“Five years and...I don’t understand.”

He looked down at her, blinking, as though he’d forgotten for a moment that she was there. “Nor do I. He doesn’t see things the way the rest of us do, Di, all those centuries behind him. He’s always spinning patterns, and the rest of us are just the threads he uses.”

“It’s not like he’s God, Gregory.”

He shook his head slowly. "Now that is a true statement. God is merciful." She didn't know how to respond to this, and after a few moments, Gregory half smiled. "But this is a poor reunion, isn't it? We should be celebrating, Di, like old friends. But first, we have business to talk about, don't we?"

Diana cleared her throat. "It really is very important, and we're working against a deadline. Can you make a compound for us? We're willing to discuss any terms you ask."

He simply looked at her in silence, his expression enigmatic. But when Diana started to speak again, he reached out and put a finger on her lips.

"I have one more thing to show you, come over here." He walked toward the far wall of the cellar, beckoning. She followed, taken by surprise, to where a heavy wooden chest she had assumed was a tool box stood against the wall. He knelt down beside it, undid its complicated encoded latch and lifted the lid. Inside the chest, carefully nestled into a deep bed of gray fluff made from cattail rushes, was a heavy glass bottle filled to the brim with an iridescent liquid that appeared to glow with its own nacreous light.

"You made it already?" Her voice was hushed, partly from incredulity, partly from awe. She extended a hand over the bottle, feeling tiny prickles in her palm. The purity of the compound's magical nature was as close to perfection, she thought, as a mortal could have achieved—certainly closer than she ever could have accomplished on her own, if she had taken a year in seclusion to make it.

"Ay, after your first letter came, that's when I started it." He stared raptly at the bottle as well—as anyone would have who glimpsed it. The soft shimmering colors played like light on water. "This is what you wanted, then?"

For a moment she couldn't speak. "It's...it's perfect, Gregory. But—how did you *know*?"

"From what you said in your letter—and I *see* things now, Di. More than before, even, I can't explain it. But this..." he stroked the surface of the glass with one finger, and the colors moved and changed where the shadow of his hand fell. "It's the best I've made, or ever will. And it had to be, since it was you asking for it." He reached over and gently closed the lid of the chest, since the compound could not be exposed to ordinary light for long. Diana knelt silently before the chest, her hands folded on her knees, too overwhelmed to collect her thoughts.

Finally she said, "Your letters said...you would only negotiate in person. We should talk about a fair price, Gregory." She couldn't imagine attaching a dollar amount to what she had just seen, but a token exchange, at least, was required. "It's a basic magical principle, you know that."

"Ay, I know that. Can you stay for a bit, Di?"

"Of course."

"Let's go upstairs, then, and talk about it. I've some wine I've saved, would you like some of that?" He rose, extending his hand to help her up.

He led her up the inside cellar stairs to the first floor. The rooms were mostly empty of furniture and dim with a greenish light from the shaded windows,

as though they were at the bottom of a pond. Gregory's hand trembled slightly holding hers, and Diana remembered that this, like the occasional twitching in his face, was part of his illness that was unlikely to ever fully go away. An unexpected anger began to well up inside her. Did Roderick know what Gregory had been reduced to? Did Levoissier? Would anyone care?

They went into the kitchen, where cracked dishes lay drying on frayed towels. "I cleaned up a bit, for company," Gregory said, and the premises did indeed appear tidy, although the general impression suggested disuse rather than maintenance. Gregory took a dusty bottle of wine and two small wineglasses from a cupboard that contained very little else. She sat down at the table and watched him concentrate fixedly on removing the bottle's cork. When it was out, he set the bottle on the table between them, shifting it carefully this way and that until it was precisely centered. "Let that breathe a bit," he said, and leaned back in his chair studying her with the frank and somber gaze of a cat.

"You haven't changed, Di," he said softly. "and that's not the way of things. My sister now, she doesn't look the same as she once did. You watch women, you watch them get old. But not you. Why is that?"

She shrugged. "You haven't been watching me long enough, I guess. I'll get old, never fear."

"No, you won't. I can see it in you, you're one of the ones the Sidhe will touch..." She looked up sharply, feeling a sudden alarm. Whom the Irish called the Sidhe, the Welsh named the Tylwyth Teg...

"I hope not."

"Ah, be careful what you wish for, Di. Don't wish to get old. Tricky, the Sidhe are. They always know what you really want." He reached out and stroked her cheek with his hand. She closed her eyes for a moment, enjoying the sensation.

"Aren't you lonely here, Gregory? It doesn't seem to suit you, an old house out in the middle of nowhere. You always liked the city, or so you said."

"I didn't have much choice, after all. I inherited this place."

"Inherited?" She looked around the room bleakly, and Gregory chuckled.

"It wasn't me who let it run into the ground like this, and the tax lien was on it before I got here. But with any luck, the City of Manchester will throw me out on the street before the roof comes down on my head."

"Oh, Gregory..."

"It's the least of my problems, Di."

"Then what's the worst of your problems?" She retorted without thinking, but the anger in her voice wasn't meant for him. He seemed to realize that, because he smiled.

"There'd be places for me to go. I lived with my sister and her family after I left Brighton, till all the screaming children drove me out into the streets looking for my wits. I was welcome enough there, my sister's broad minded and she's fierce about family. But our aunt died, or great-aunt it was, and left me this house. I offered a share in it, but my brother-in-law doesn't want to move up

here, so I did, because it was better not left empty. It's lonely, yes, but anyplace would be lonely, Di, with all my old friends ashamed of me."

She caught his hand. "Gregory, that's not true. I was never ashamed of knowing you."

"Maybe not, but others were. I'm not so easy to talk to, strange Gregory, the Mad Hatter. That's what they say, isn't it?"

She looked down, suddenly remembering what she'd told Thomas about Gregory, and flushed at the memory of her own words. She forced herself to meet his eyes. "That's what they say."

He nodded. "Sometimes I can hear how I must sound, but sometimes I don't, so well. And that's my own fault, I never tried to say it wasn't. But I'd never have forgotten myself so much as to betray the Order, or my friends. They lied about that."

"I know." She was still clasping his hand, and she realized she didn't want to let go.

"That's what hurt so much, you know. Say I was a fool, say I was a poor example for the apprentices, say I brought my failure on myself...I couldn't argue with any of that. But to say I couldn't be trusted...that was a hard thing to hear. The quicksilver didn't twist me inside as badly as that."

She reached out and took his other hand, as well. "I was so angry about that," she said fervently, surprised at how emotional she suddenly felt now. "Roderick finally told me he'd have to discipline me if I didn't...ease up on what I was saying. And then there were fights at home, so...I just put my feelings aside. There was nothing I could do."

"Nothing I'd have wanted you to do," he said quietly. He made no effort to withdraw his hands from hers. "Do you remember Beltene, Di?"

She had to smile. "Which one?"

"Any one." His fingers curled around her hands, caressing the skin. "I miss that, I do, more than anything. Not once, you see, in all this time...did you go this year?"

"No. No, I didn't go."

"Mr. Tight-Ass-Folderoll Stephen Lowell Winthrop finally lock you up, did he?"

She smiled bitterly. "Not even Stephen could be that hypocritical. But neither of us went this year." She took in a deep breath and met Gregory's eyes. "I'm divorced from him, Gregory. So you see, I did give up, finally."

His blue eyes widened. "When?"

"This March. It's been a long time for me, too. Stephen and I hardly spoke for months and...there hasn't been anyone else. No matter what he thought."

"Ahhh..." he breathed, and he drew her hand to his lips and kissed the backs of her fingers, almost not touching them. She could feel a shiver run all the way down her arm until it coiled in her loins and poised trembling there. "We should celebrate then, Di. Our own Beltene, just ourselves, and then you

take your compound and go, and that will be payment enough for me. There's nothing else I could ask for."

"Oh, no, Gregory—you deserve more than that, really."

"Ay, but if I'm lucky I'll be spared what I truly deserve. Will you say yes, Di? I want to feel you, inside and out, like I have in my dreams..." he kissed her hand once more and she closed her eyes, her mouth dry.

"Yes," she whispered, "yes, I want to. But not for payment, Gregory, I won't think of it that way, not ever..." and he rose and pulled her out of her chair into his arms and kissed her. She pressed her body up against his, opening her mouth to his probing tongue, meeting it with her own, caught up in his sudden urgency, as if a dam had broken and released a flood that could not be tempered or stopped.

Finally he broke away, leaving her gasping, and tugged her toward a doorway, saying, "this way then, we've a place to lie down." She followed him into what evidently served as his bedroom. Rumpled sheets half-covered a mattress on the floor and piles of clothing filled every corner. They tumbled down together on the mattress, which settled the problem of their disparate heights.

"Just leave the work to me, then." Gregory began unbuttoning her shirt from the bottom up, kissing her bare stomach, so that she doubled up in giggles.

"Straighten out now, you're flopping like a fish on the bank."

"You're tickling me—oh! stop it!" He did, and she wiped tears from her eyes, gasping. She realized, dimly, that she hadn't laughed like that for months.

"I'll have to give you more than a tickle, if you're going to act like that."

They pulled her shirt off as a mutual effort and she tossed it aside. She sat up and unbuttoned his shirt down to his waist and buried her face in the warm blond curls that covered his chest, and he sighed, letting his head fall back. She kissed his chest, working along the curves of the muscles, noticing that she could feel the bones too easily, then her lips sought out his nipples and she traced them delicately with her tongue. He said something unintelligible and unhooked her bra, quite neatly considering how she was distracting him.

She shrugged off the bra and tossed it after the shirt, and then arched backward as Gregory cupped her breasts in his hands, his thumbs brushing the nipples until they perked up tauter than they already were. She fell back on the mattress and wrapped her legs around him as he stretched out his body on top of her without pausing his slow, deep kisses.

They finally broke off in wordless agreement that their remaining garments had become a severe hindrance. Diana kicked off her sandals, and Gregory undid the zipper of her slacks and pulled off all the rest of her clothing in one move, then slid out of his own dungarees with an undulating motion that resembled a caterpillar leaving its cocoon. He tossed off his shirt as an afterthought. They wound together, kissing more and longer, hands roving everywhere they could reach.

She'd refused to acknowledge how much she missed this, Diana realized, how much she'd ached just for the touch of Gregory's long boned body, all hard

knobs and sinews and taut muscle. She couldn't get enough of the feel of it, every bit of him, from the calluses on his feet to his pale curling hair, lighter than ever with a lacing of early gray. A scrawny scarecrow, he'd once called himself, but she'd never seen him that way. Besides, it would be a rare scarecrow that could boast of an endowment that had won locker room contests. But even as her hands found that feature now and affectionately fondled its length, making Gregory break off his kiss with a gasp, she had to push away the distracting thought, *but he's so thin now...*

They had to pause to catch their breath. "I can't wait, then," he said huskily. He gathered her in, cautiously, and sank against her, his long sinewy legs stretching off the mattress. It took him a moment to find his set, and when he felt it he pushed once or twice then quite suddenly braced both arms and thrust all the way in at once. She gasped and clutched at him, for it had been so long she was too tight, and he hurt her a little. After a few breaths she let herself relax around him, and followed the long waves of his motion against her, feeling the muscles of his back under her hands as they rippled from his shoulders down to his waist over and over again. The sensation of his skin flat against her, belly against belly, his sharp-boned hips rubbing her inner thighs, the hardness of him filling her, was intoxicating. But it was over too soon; after just a few minutes he shuddered and made a sound that was almost one of pain, and fell against her, his face buried in her neck and his hands twining in her hair. After a time he pushed himself up on his elbows and looked down at her, stroking her face with his hand.

"Did I hurt you then?" he asked, and she smiled sheepishly, embarrassed that he'd noticed.

"Not really. That was just the ice breaking."

His mouth curved into a slow smile. "Oh, I like that," he said softly and shifted off her to one side, where he lay for a time stroking her body with his fingertips.

"You have the softest skin, Di." She turned on her side to face him, and touched his belly, weaving small circles and figure-eights teasingly over the bare skin.

"So do you." He closed his eyes, occasionally catching his breath as her light hand trailed through the thatch of curly dark blond hair at the base of his belly. He gasped suddenly and half sat up, and she pulled back and sat up herself, laughing. "Now who's flopping like a fish? I'm going to have to hold you down, aren't I?"

"Oh, I'd like to see you—" he broke off as she sprawled luxuriously on top of him. He wrapped his arms around her and they kissed for a while. He became more purposeful, his hands cupping her buttocks and sliding down between her legs, and she kept breaking off her kiss to catch her breath. Abruptly, he sat up and shifted her off onto the mattress, chuckling.

"Now then, enough of lying flat as a cat, turn yourself around and put your

head down...” and he reached an arm under her hips and pulled her behind up in the air in a most undignified fashion. She grabbed at the sheets to keep her balance, remembering that Gregory had always had a taste for intercourse from this awkward angle. But he was good at it, unquestionably, for he was already sliding into her, pulling her hips up tightly against his stomach and thrusting so rapidly and forcefully that the side of her face was almost ground into the sheet. Taken somewhat off-guard by how fast he’d launched into this, she put her hands out onto the floor to brace herself and finally let out a squawk of mild protest.

“Slow *down*, you’re pushing me right off the bed here, Gregory.”

He chuckled, but shifted his grip a bit and slowed his attack significantly, saying, “sorry then darlin’, I’m just forgetting myself...” He found a long leisurely stroke that seemed to match breath and heartbeat at once, and Diana gave way to it, almost hypnotized by its pulse, even though he paused now and then to get his wind, and she felt herself relaxing more deeply than she had in months. But when he finished and sank back with a groaning sigh, she disengaged herself with a slight sense of disappointment.

Wearied for the moment, they curled up on the mattress, nestled together as comfortably as the old bowls in the kitchen cupboard. The sheets were twisted into a tangled ball at their feet, leaving the striped ticking bare. Late afternoon sun angled underneath the bottom edges of the drawn shades. Diana lay still, caressing Gregory’s arm and hand which draped over her to rest on her shoulder. She thought he might have fallen asleep. *I need to get back*, she thought reluctantly. Thomas would be eager to hear how negotiations had gone and whether Gregory would make the compound for them, and she certainly had good news as far as that went. But if she left now, she would be driving until nearly midnight. And she didn’t want to leave, at least not yet. She’d promised to go talk to Brent when she returned to Maine. When Brent came to the Schuller house, to see where he was to work, to hear all the details, to meet Thomas...a cold chill squirmed in her stomach. *It’s not the blood*, she thought. *It’s the rest of it...*

She must have shuddered, because Gregory stirred against her. “What is it, love?” His voice was clear, with no trace of drowsiness. She wondered what he had been thinking about, lying so still. It reminded her of Thomas’ unearthly stillness when he rested, and she shuddered again, not knowing why, and sat up. He sat up as well, pushing tangled hair away from his face. “What?”

She shook her head. “Nothing...I mean, it’s nothing to do with you, Gregory. I just...I have to get back. I can’t stay.”

She moved to stand up, but he reached out and caught hold of her thigh, so that she couldn’t move further without tearing out of his grasp. “You haven’t worn me out yet, Di.” He was smiling, but his eyes were serious. “I’ve been wondering. Why do you need my compound so badly, and what are you doing with it tucked away into that little mouse hole up in Maine? You should tell me, as I’ll be in the center of it all, in a way. This is a Great Work, then?”

“Yes. But I can’t tell you more, Gregory, I’m sorry. I really can’t.”

“Is it a good thing you do?”

“I hope so.” She gently pulled away from him and got up, feeling slightly dizzy. “I need some water, Gregory, I’m really thirsty. I’ll be back.”

She went into the kitchen and drank water straight from the tap. The wine bottle and glasses were still on the table. She sat down on the edge of a chair, her sweaty skin sticking to the scarred wood, and poured a glass of wine. Gregory emerged from the bedroom and came to the table to sit down opposite her. “Want some?” she asked, and he nodded.

It was very good wine, and she sipped slowly, savoring it. Shadows were slowly blooming from the room’s corners, and Gregory lit a candle that stood on the table in a holder made from a catsup bottle. It must be sunset. *Thomas will be waking up...* Abruptly, she drained her glass and poured another.

“What is it?” Gregory had only half-finished his own first glass. “I’ve seen you do this before, Di. Tell me.” He reached out and covered her hand with his own. “What’s happening to you up there? There’s something fey going on with you, I can see that for myself. Something’s touched you that ought not to be walking in the world. Tell me what it is. A secret will eat you out from the inside, till there’s nothing left of you but the skin...look, you’re trembling now. What is it?”

She covered her face with her hands for a moment. “Oh, Gregory. I can’t tell you. I just can’t. The working is set now, it has to be held. You understand that. Besides, it involves another person’s private business. I’m not free to discuss it.”

He sat back in his chair, taking a pensive sip of his wine and studying her. In the candlelight, she could see the wineglass trembling in his hand, and wondered how long it had been since he’d eaten. Under his sober gaze, she fidgeted a little, recalling what he’d said about *seeing*. “I’m wondering,” he said slowly, “whether you should go on with this, love.”

“I don’t have a choice now. I’ve made a vow—we both did.”

“You could ground it, then, the two of you.”

She shook her head. “No. No, it’s not possible. It’s too late.” *And nothing could persuade Thomas to consider that now...*

“And what if it turns on you, love? What if the working turns inside out? Such power as you must plan to raise, imagine what that could do.”

She stared at him for a moment, and then laughed. “Oh, Gregory—you mean like those old scare stories we used to tell the apprentices? Intention like this can’t turn, there’s too much Will behind it. It might fail. I accept that. That would be disastrous enough. But I’m an Adeptus, Gregory, I’m not setting off magical firecrackers that might blow out the wrong end. That’s kid stuff. Tell me the truth, have you ever heard of a Great Work turning?”

He took another drink of his wine and nodded soberly, without speaking.

“When?”

“It happened to him...Levoissier...or so he said, once.”

Taken aback, Diana stared at Gregory for a moment. He didn’t look as

though he was joking. “Are you sure he was serious?”

“It was a very serious conversation we were having, is all I can say about that.”

“Well—what else did he tell you about it? What was he attempting to do, and why did it turn?”

“That, he wouldn’t explain. But he said it was the best magical lesson he ever learned. I got the feeling that it was the hardest, as well.”

“They’re often the same thing, aren’t they?”

“That is a fine and true statement, love.”

Diana frowned down at the table top. “Did he say anything about the effects of the work turning—what actually happened?”

“He said it was like everything went into reverse, and then snapped back the right way again—those are his words. It sounded like it wasn’t something he would hurry to do a second time.”

They sat in pensive silence. Finally Diana asked soberly, “Is that what you *see* happening, Gregory? Did you tune into something while you were making the compound, are you trying to warn me?”

“No, I didn’t see that, Di,” Gregory said without hesitation. “I wouldn’t want you to think that. I’d have told you before, if I had. But there’s this feeling I have—that there are more hands stirring the broth of this working than you know about. And I don’t know what might happen, if you’re not taking that into account. Does this mean anything to you, Di, *are* you taking that into account?”

“I think so,” she said after a moment. “I think I know what you’re feeling, yes.”

He smiled, although his eyes still looked doubtful. “Then I’ll trust your judgment, Di—which I do, anyway, or I wouldn’t have made the compound to start with.”

Diana got up and walked over to the shaded window, peering out along the edge of the blind into the empty backyard, where a line of tall old lilac bushes were shadowed by dusk. Gregory’s eyes followed her hungrily and she turned back to see him watching her with a dreamy expression. But she felt oddly chilled, despite the oppressive warmth of the room. “I should leave, Gregory. It’s a long drive back.”

“Stay the night, love, you’re welcome. Don’t drive when you’re worn out. You can leave in the morning, surely your partner up there will understand. Or is he such a taskmaster as all that?”

She tried to laugh, without much success. “No, no, I’m sure he’s in suspense, but he’s not trying to boss me around, really. I’d like to stay, but—” suddenly she shivered and hugged herself tightly.

“You can do what you want. But it pains me to see you like this. You can’t leave in this state.” He got up and came over to her, putting his arms around her. “I know what you need, you’ve not had your own satisfaction from me, I’ve been so quick...” and he was kissing her face lightly, stroking her hair back from her temples and forehead.

“Gregory, that’s not your fault, really. It’s just been too long, I’ve lost the knack for it.”

“Nonsense, you can’t. I still have a trick or two left in me.”

“Really, Gregory, you don’t have to...” but his mouth stopped her before she could finish and she gave up, finding something better to do with her tongue than talk.

“Now watch this,” he said, “put your legs around me...” and he took hold of her waist with both hands and lifted her up, pressing her against the wall with his body. Startled, she reflexively clutched at him with legs and arms, and he caught hold of her buttocks with his hands, saying, “don’t pinch me now with those strong legs of yours. I’m not a horse, I won’t let you fall.” Feeling strange to be looking slightly down on him, she bent down and met him in a long kiss, and as she did he pushed up more tightly against the wall and let her slowly slide down onto him, with a few stops and starts as she had to let her own grip release slightly on the way. He crushed her against the wall, so hard that the pressure on her bones was almost painful, but the resulting effect was unexpected. As he thrust upward into her, the sensation nearly overwhelmed her with its intensity, and she pushed her head back against the peeling wallpaper, her toes curling, caught up in the rough, repetitive stimulus that blotted everything else from her mind. This went on far longer than before, Gregory being on his last wind now, and she began to feel dizzy from hyperventilating. Suddenly she climaxed so violently that her body shuddered in waves from head to foot, and she cried out over and over again, not even certain if she was feeling pleasure or pain. He sank down to a kneeling position, spent finally, and they clung to each other as Diana started to laugh helplessly, not even knowing why.

“I do feel better now,” she managed to say at last, wiping tears from her eyes. “But no more, Gregory, or I’ll be too sore to drive the car tomorrow. Look at you, you’re shaking all over.”

He rested his forehead against her shoulder, still breathing hard. “I’ll be all right, love.”

Their skin was slicked with sweat, and Diana pushed her soaking wet hair away from her forehead. “Do you have a bathtub big enough for two in this place?”

“Surely, for two and their four children, at least. You feel like a swim, Di?”

“I think I do. Let’s take the wine, and the candle, and go fill the tub, and we can get in, and I’ll tell you some of the news you’ve been missing all these years, and you can tell me...” she paused, looking sadly around the barren kitchen, “you can tell me what you’ve been living on here all this time, Gregory.”

“That won’t be a long tale. My sister has been helping me some, sending food, mostly. She’s a bit late with it this month, that’s all. And there are a few people who give me odd jobs, when they have them, and I’m able to do them. But it’s not much.”

“Are you content with that, your sister helping you?”

“No,” he said softly. “But let’s go then, and we’ll spend the night getting all

wrinkled if it pleases you, Di. You've picked fine weather for it."

They talked late into the night, as the crickets sang from the overgrown front yard, about gossip and magic and alchemy, her divorce from Stephen, old friends, how she had found his address, the problems he had with the City of Manchester. Finally they fell asleep on the mattress, and Diana awoke to the first bird sounds of early morning and lay listening to Gregory's quiet breathing. *I married the wrong man*, she thought with bitter amusement. *Marry one who sleeps like a baby, that will be my new rule.* Stephen snored.

When Gregory awoke, they dressed and went to the basement, and he helped Diana carefully pack the chest containing the bottle of compound into the back seat of the car, where it would be cooler than the trunk. She was ravenously hungry, and she still hadn't seen Gregory eat anything. When his stomach growled, she said, "would you like to go into town with me and get some breakfast?" He hesitated, but his face had a wistful expression. Diana braced herself.

"Gregory," she said firmly, "I told you that last night was not compensation for the compound, and I meant it. You're not in any position to refuse a reasonable offer. Now come on, we're going into town."

"So you think my compound is worth the blue plate special?"

"No! The blue plate special is for last night—okay, it's for the third time last night. That was above and beyond the call of duty." He'd started to laugh, which was a good sign. "After breakfast, we're going to City Hall."

"You're going to marry me, love?"

"You haven't asked me yet. No, we're going to pay off the lien on this house."

His face fell. "Oh no—I couldn't let you do that. That's too much."

"It's only money, Gregory. You deserve it at least as much the poor sad sacks who live at Bread and Roses. I don't want you to be evicted. I might need you for something, and how I would find you again? And your poor old great-auntie would haunt you, if you let the city take her house. She left it to you for a reason."

She watched Gregory patiently as he wrestled with his principles. The fact that his stomach was audibly cramping so badly was in her favor. "All right," he said finally. "But only for you, love, and for my great-auntie Rose, may she rest in peace."

She waved to him impatiently. "Come on, get into the car. I'll buy you a box of groceries, too." As she started the engine, she said, "This is the tip of the iceberg of what I owe you, Gregory. For the compound, and for last night, and for the last five years. It doesn't matter how you feel about it. I'll never repay you for all that."

He gave her a strange smile. "Oh, don't be so sure, love. I might come up with something, at that."

*D*éjà vu, Diana thought as her car slowed on Route 1 just south of Camden. It was about five in the afternoon, and the road glittered under the fierce July sun. The traffic had been far heavier on the way up from Manchester than it had been on her drives from Boston, before the end of school and the start of vacation season proper. Small town Main Streets now bustled with pedestrians, cars crawling along them in tight lines like linked carnival rides. Small pleasure craft speckled Penobscot Bay wherever she glimpsed the water, their triangular white sails gleaming in the sun. Scarcely any motel or cottage she passed, from Portsmouth to Camden, displayed a vacancy sign. Brent must be doing a land office business.

Indeed, he was deftly servicing two cars at once as she turned into the station's graveled yard. Diana pulled over to the side of the building and parked, then got out and stretched, grateful to be standing up. She waited until the second customer had paid and pulled back onto the road before she walked over to the pumps. Brent, unaware of her approach, carefully smoothed out his thick fold of bills before tucking it back into his overalls pocket. Dust still hung in the heavy air.

"Looks like you need to lay some oil down on this yard."

"Ayeh, it's been dry," Brent said absently. "What can I do ya for, miss?" He turned around as he said this, and his expression dropped. "Omigosh! It's you!"

She laughed, partly at the look on his face and partly from real surprise. "So I've been told. Am I some kind of celebrity?"

His sunburned cheeks turned even pinker. "Well...you know, I remember you comin' through and all, that day, and we talked about Mr. Morgan, and then hearin'...well..."

"Yes, I can just imagine what my reputation around here must be. Believe it or not, it's strictly business, Brent. I'll tell you all about it. Look, is this a busy time of day for you?"

He looked up and down the road appraisingly for a moment. "Depends. It's 'bout suppertime now, and things slow down a bit then, least on weekdays. I got

a fan belt to replace on that Ford in there,” he gestured economically toward the station’s bay, “but it’s hard with people pullin’ in all the time.”

“When do you close?”

“Well, we’re open ‘til eight during the summer. Open at six, close at eight.”

She stared at him. “Holy *cat*. That’s fourteen hours, Brent! You’re here alone all that time?”

“I got a cousin comes in sometimes, but he’s just fifteen, so I got to watch him pretty close. Can’t afford to pay anyone. This is my dad’s station, and it’s all we got. Got to stay open during the season, ‘cause that’s when we make the most. Not much business after the summer people go.”

“You’re not open on Sunday, are you?”

“Half the day, but just in the summer. I come down after church.”

He’s not going to have time to take on an extra project... she thought, dismayed. She shaded her eyes against the glare from the western sky. “Can we get out of the sun for a minute?”

“Oh, sure! Come on, I got a couple chairs in the office.”

They walked across the crunching gravel and entered the tiny office. A small fan with a badly bent wire casing did little to move the stifling air, which smelled overpoweringly of motor oil. A bulletin board jammed with thumb tacked work orders, fuel invoices and, she noticed, unpaid customer bills hung over a two-drawer wooden desk. Stacked boxes of motor oil, engine parts and antifreeze left barely enough room for a wobbly straight back chair and Brent’s rolling office chair with its broken back.

“So,” Brent said, leaning forward awkwardly because of the broken chair back, hands clasped between his splayed knees. “You got something to talk about?”

She wiped sweat off her forehead with the back of her hand—*gods, it’s hot*. “Yes, it’s kind of a...business proposition.” He nodded, frowning slightly. “Mr. Morgan and I are working together on a project. We need someone to do some welding for us up at his place. Could you take on something like that?”

He rubbed the side of his nose thoughtfully. “Welding...This would be what, a boiler or something like that?”

“Not exactly. It’s something like a, well, an art project. There will be six pieces, of different kinds of metal, and—it’s hard to explain, you’ll just have to see it. It’s very simple, really. It’s just very meticulous work. But if you can weld a car body, you can do this.”

“I could do it in a couple of days, maybe? Simple like that?”

“I’m not sure how long it will all take. It has to be done in sections, you see, and allowed to cool.”

Brent studied his clasped hands, his forehead creasing. “I don’t know,” he finally said. “I can’t really leave the station, you know...”

“This would be after hours.”

He shook his head. “After hours, I’m usually here, doin’ jobs like that Ford.”

She closed her eyes a minute, thinking rapidly. "It can wait until after Labor Day," she said, praying that she wasn't making a serious mistake.

He looked down at the concrete floor, pursing his lips.

"We're prepared to pay you a lot of money."

He looked up. "Nothin' illegal, is it?"

"Absolutely not," she said, thinking wryly, *At least not in the 20th century.*

He was silent for another minute, calculating. "Well, if it can wait till Labor Day...I wouldn't say no to some extra money, not then. Station closes at six after that. You say I got to come all the way up there for this?"

"I'm afraid so. It all fits into something we're building, so the work has to be done in place."

"Okay," he said, although his tone indicated understanding, not agreement.

"Do you think you can take it on? We'll have to find someone else, if not, and I'll need to do it soon."

He shrugged. "No reason why not. I'll just need to schedule it in and all. Could you tell me more about this job? What'll I be doing, exactly?"

She took a deep breath. "Well, like I said, it's a little hard to explain, Brent. We're having the parts made up, and they haven't been delivered yet. When they are, we'd like you to come out and see them, and see where you'll be working. It won't make a lot of sense until everything's in front of you. Does that sound okay?"

"Sure. But 'we'—you mean Mr. Morgan?"

"That's right."

"You mean I'm going to get to meet him?"

She swallowed uncomfortably. "In person. You're going to get to know him pretty well, in fact."

"Gosh. He's practically a legend around here."

"You're probably going to be disappointed."

"I don't think so." Brent's face pulled into that irrepressible grin. "Not from what my aunt says...jeez!"

"Something to look forward to. Look, when the parts arrive, I'll give you a call and we can set up a time, okay? It should be just another couple of weeks. I know you're real busy now, but I hope you can manage to fit us in."

"Oh yeah...I wouldn't miss this. Look, shake on it, okay?" He extended his grimy hand, and Diana shook hands briefly. "That'll hold us till we get a job contract in writin'."

"Thanks, Brent. We'll be in touch."

Two weeks after her conversation with Brent, Diana sat in the front room of the Schuller house, carefully cutting a bolt of white silk into precise squares. She had cleansed and consecrated the bolt that afternoon, a working which had taken three hours to complete. Once the squares were cut, they could be charged, and then they would be ready to wrap each brick as it was consecrated. The simple work of measuring the cloth, squaring the line and cutting seemed

like rest and relaxation compared to the intense concentration required by the magical procedures. Diana felt as though she had been in an unremitting state of exhaustion for weeks.

After returning from Manchester, she had prepared for the elaborate task of sealing Gregory's compound into the glass vessel. It had taken two days to create the vessel itself, and she had burned her hands twice. When the vessel was ready, she had gone into seclusion, fasting for three days while she meditated and performed self-purifying rituals. The physical act of filling, siphoning and sealing the vessel took only minutes—the enclosing ritual required another three days. By the time she emerged from the house where she had retired for the working—yet another of the four houses on Thomas' land—she was weak, shaking and ravenous. Yet she had experienced no visions or dreams during the procedure, and her divinations had been ambiguous. Perhaps she was just allowing herself to become too tired.

She folded the square of silk and placed it with the others in a wooden box lined with the same softly glistening material. She reached for the bolt to unwrap another length of cloth, but suddenly extending her arms seemed like too much effort. She let the end of the bolt drop and sank into her chair, putting her head down on her crossed forearms. Her eyes were strained and burning from the dim light of the kerosene lamps, and she closed them, listening to the muffled trilling of insects from the woods outside.

“Are you all right?”

She started and raised her head. Thomas stood in the doorway, two of the fine-textured yellowish bricks cradled in one arm. She blinked at him, wondering how long he'd been there. She hadn't heard a sound, and the warped floors creaked even under Thomas' footsteps. To get to the inner door silently, he would have to have dematerialized. *But why would he do that?*

“Sunset already?”

“It's past eight o'clock.”

“I had no idea.” She'd been cutting cloth for over two hours.

Thomas turned away and took the bricks into the small room next to the kitchen which they had consecrated as a ritual room for preparing the athanor materials. The floorboards creaked loudly and variously under his feet, and Diana frowned. When he emerged from the room, she said, “Strange that I didn't hear you come in.”

Thomas paused in the doorway and looked at her silently for a moment. “I'm sorry if I startled you.”

“Did you not want me to know you were there?”

He looked away from her and went into the kitchen. She sat stiffly at the table, struggling with the frustration that was becoming so familiar. *Damn him! I look up and he's watching me, he avoids me, he won't come near me or touch me, now he's sneaking up on me?* With any other man, there would have been a confrontation days ago. But she'd never had to work with a man quite so slippery as Thomas.

He rarely dematerialized in truth, but it would have been redundant given how adept he was at evading questions, sliding out of conversations, and just plain staying out of sight if he wanted to. The more she welcomed his company, the scarcer he seemed to make himself. He disappeared entirely for several hours every two or three nights anyway, for his forays, as he called them, to find animal blood. But given how much of the rest of the time they spent working together, the distance he succeeded in maintaining was impressive.

She jumped when he suddenly appeared in the doorway again, swinging around the jamb with one hand like an excited boy.

“There’s a truck coming.”

She hastily got up and followed him out the back entrance to hurry around to the front of the house. A small panel truck was pulling into the front yard, cautiously drawing up to the flats of bricks, which were heavily swathed in tarpaulins. After hours of kerosene lamplight, Diana had to shade her eyes against the headlights, wincing. The driver put on the parking brake, opened his door and jumped down. “Wow. I’m glad to see you,” he said, wiping his forehead with his shirtsleeve. “I saw all those boarded windows and I thought I’d taken a wrong turn.”

“Hello, Conor, I was going to call Maurice tomorrow.”

Conor returned Diana’s handclasp—he was another ex-member of the OSL. “I think I broke you a new driveway, there. I guess this is what the army would call camouflage.”

“Right on the money. Of course, the locals know perfectly well there’s something going on up here, but they’re big on minding your own beeswax in Maine, thank goodness.”

Thomas had moved around to one side to get out of the line of the truck’s headlights. As he stepped up next to Diana, Conor started. Quickly, Diana said, “Conor, I’d like you to meet Thomas Morgan.”

“Right, the guy whose name is on the bills.” The two men shook hands, and Conor’s eyes narrowed slightly, but then he smiled. “Well, let’s get the stuff out. Ye gods, that traffic was brutal coming up here. Wish you’d warned me. I’d have taken the shortcut, through Canada.” They all went around to the back of the truck, where Conor briskly unpadlocked the doors and swung them open. Six large wooden crates stood inside, and Conor pulled out the truck’s ramp and climbed up into the interior. As he came forward rolling a dolly, he said, “Maurice said to tell you he’s sorry for the delay, but we had a little trouble casting the bronze. I think you’re damn lucky to get them this fast, but that’s just me.” With a grunt he hoisted the first crate and carefully walked it down the ramp, dolly almost horizontal. “Which way do we go?”

It took all three of them to get the crates around to the bulkhead and down the steps. Thomas signed Conor’s shipping order, and he climbed back into the truck, grumbling about having to drive on to Bangor.

“You can stay here for the night, Conor, you must be bushed after driving

all the way from Boston,” Diana said earnestly. But Conor glanced uneasily at Thomas and forced a smile.

“Nah, nah, thanks loads, Diana, but I’ve got to pick up some supplies in Bangor and then hit the road early in the morning. Don’t worry, the motel gets deducted from our taxes. Good luck with those things.” He brutally slammed the truck’s misaligned door. When he had performed an intricate and lengthy maneuver to turn around without hitting the bricks, and the sounds of crunching undergrowth had receded into the distance, Thomas finally spoke.

“Well. Tomorrow you can set up the appointment with our welder.”

The following Saturday night, Diana pulled into Brent’s station at eight o’clock sharp, and drew up by the office door, leaving the engine idling. The station’s outside lights were turned off, and she could see Brent sitting at his desk. He half-turned and aimed a wave and a quick grin in her general direction, then went back to his paperwork. She watched pensively as he finished closing up for the night. He emerged from the dark office and locked the door behind him, then bounded to the passenger’s side of the car in two steps, pulled open the door and tossed himself onto the seat.

“So, we ready to go?” His eyes were bright with anticipation.

“Don’t you *ever* get tired, Brent?”

“Not till Labor Day. Can’t afford it.” But as if the word “tired” had set off a reflex, he yawned hugely.

She pulled onto Bridge Road a short way before the turnoff to Thomas’ house. “We’ll be meeting at the Schuller house. I want to warn you ahead of time, don’t get all spooked when you see it. The place was boarded up when old man Schuller died, and we’ve left it like that.”

“How come?”

“Security, and privacy. We don’t want anyone barging in, or any kids trying to figure out what’s going on. Just as easy to leave the place looking deserted.” The leaning fencepost with the ragged red bandana loomed up suddenly, and she stopped, backed up, and made the left turn into the undergrowth. Brent became very quiet as they broke through to the front dooryard and the headlights garishly framed the blank windowed, peeling façade. She parked the car and got out, and after a moment he followed.

“So, what are these?” he asked, widely skirting the tarpaulin-shrouded stacks of bricks as though he thought they might pounce on him.

“Plain old bricks. We’ll explain what they’re for. Come on, Brent, we only use the back entrance.”

Golden kerosene lamplight spilled through the torn screen door, making an orange square on the cracked concrete step. Diana pulled open the door and went inside, ushering Brent quickly to the front room as he tried to peer into the darkened doorways they passed. Thomas was sitting at the metal folding table they had set up, reading one of his ledger books. He looked up, smiled and rose from his seat to meet them.

“Good evening, Mr. Crothers.” He extended his hand to Brent, who stood staring like a marmot fascinated by a cobra. “It’s a pleasure to meet you at last.”

Brent blinked, glanced down, flushed and hastily gripped Thomas’ hand and shook it. He opened his mouth and made a voiceless huffing sound, swallowed and tried again. “Hi...pleased to meet ya. I’ve heard...I mean, I...golly.”

Diana could see that Thomas was enjoying himself. “I’ve met your aunt, I believe...Miss Margaret Crothers, isn’t it?”

“Uh, yeah! Yeah, she’s uh, mentioned you a couple of times.”

“Charming lady. I can see that red hair runs in the family.”

“Uh, yeah, we’re Irish. My dad comes from...uh, well, never mind...”

Diana said, “Maybe we could show Brent the items he’ll be working with.”

“Oh, yeah, I’d like to see that.”

Thomas shrugged. “We can start with that. They’re down in the cellar. Would you take a lantern?”

Brent gingerly took a lantern from the table. As he turned to follow Thomas, Diana saw him crane his neck to stare at Thomas’ ponytail, and then give his head a small shake as though he didn’t quite credit his senses.

They filed down the steep cellar steps, Thomas leading the way. The side of the basement nearest the fireplace was now largely occupied by a low platform shrouded in white silk. Brent peered at the gleaming white fabric in puzzlement. “What’s that?”

“A work in progress,” Thomas answered smoothly. “But this is what you came to see, Brent.” He reached up and hung his lantern from a long iron hook that descended from one of the floor beams, then walked to a set of uneven shapes, also covered with white silk, against the wall near the steps. He drew off the hissing cloth, carefully folding it to keep it from trailing on the floor, and Brent took in a long deep breath.

“Criminy...” he finally whispered, letting out his whole breath on the last syllable. “What are they?”

Diana walked up to stand beside Brent, fully understanding his reaction. She had been almost as awed when she and Thomas had opened the crates and pulled away the armfuls of crackling excelsior packing. Lined up against the wall on beds of silk-covered excelsior were six half-spheres in graduated sizes, ranging from nearly three feet in diameter to just over two. They were almost perfect, except for a slightly flattened bottom on each so that they would stand without rolling, and to guide their being fitted together. The largest pair, of cast iron, was rich black, their matte surface as smooth as fine charcoal. The bronze shell glowed with a rich sultry color, not yet touched by oxidation, holding the orange lamplight on its surface and giving it back to the room deepened and mystified. But it was the smallest of the spheres that commanded the eye—fiery copper, so bright it almost hurt to gaze at it. This was the heart of the athanon, the secret core where the power would be reflected back again and again into the glass vessel it cradled.

They all stood in silence, gazing at the six shells of metal. Finally Diana said softly, "Do you think you can weld these together, Brent?"

"Weld *these*? I don't know...I mean...they're just so..." his voice was almost reverent. "So...*perfect*."

"But that will make it easier, won't it? They'll fit precisely. They've been specially cast."

He shook himself as though attempting to throw off a trance. "Oh, yeah...I mean, that always helps." His face took on an intently serious expression. "Can I...?" he said, gesturing to the closest iron shell, and Diana nodded. He stepped forward and knelt down by the shell, then reached out and ran a tentative finger along the edge, where the halves would be joined. "Like touching water, or...I didn't know you could make iron that smooth." He stood up. "These go inside each other?"

"That's right. There's a glass container that goes inside the copper first. Then you work from there. They'll need to be completely sealed, that's very important."

"And when they're all done, then what?"

"Well..." Diana turned to the platform. "The whole thing goes into this. It'll be a sort of...furnace." Brent frowned, puzzling over this, and Diana bent down quickly and lifted the silk so Brent could see the edge of the athanor's foundation.

"Oh, that's what the bricks are for. Man, these metal things are going to weigh a ton when they're all put together. How are you going to get 'em in there?"

"Oh, we've got block and tackle." And they had Thomas, who could lift the iron shells with one hand effortlessly.

"So what is all this for? I mean, it's incredible, but I just can't figure it out."

"Well..." she hesitated. "Let's go back upstairs and sit down, okay? There are a few more things about this job that I need to explain."

Thomas replaced the silk cover on the metal spheres and the three of them took the lanterns and returned to the front room. Brent sat on one side of the small table, looking nervously at Diana and Thomas. Diana had put considerable thought into how she would describe their procedures to Brent, and prayed that the approach wouldn't backfire. Now she studied his attentive face for a moment and took a deep breath. "Brent...I guess it's fairly obvious to you that these metal spheres are something very—special."

"I'll say," he said weakly. "That first day you stopped by the station, you said something about an art project?"

"That's true, in a way. That's how carefully we need each of them to be sealed—like you were making a sculpture. But that's only part of it. They're really a sort of...religious item."

"Religious?" Brent's brow furrowed. "You mean, holy, like something in a church?"

"Yes, exactly. Sacred, like something in a church."

"You mean, they've been blessed, by a priest or something?"

"Yes." Technically, it was true, given the qualifier, "or something."

“Man.” Brent looked both awed and doubtful. “I don’t know...I’m not sure I’ve got what it takes to work on something like that. I’m only...I don’t even...” he trailed off, flustered.

“That doesn’t make any difference, Brent. You’re a good person, and that’s all that counts. There’s nothing special you need to do except, well, there are a couple of things that we’re going to ask of you.”

Brent swallowed. “Such as? Look, you know, I didn’t even finish high school—”

“That’s okay, Brent. We’re hiring you for your skills, like the artisans who built the great cathedrals. They weren’t saints, they were just doing the best work they knew how.”

After a pause, Brent shrugged. “Okay, I guess that makes sense...so, what are the things you need me to do?”

“Two things, really. First, we’re going to ask you to wear particular clothing while you do this.”

“Uh, wait a sec...I got to wear heavy gear to do welding, you know.”

“I know, but do you think you could wear all white? For instance, if we provided you with heavy white trousers, and a white sweatshirt, and white gloves, and so on? We’ll take care of all the expenses, and the clothes will be ready for you. You’ll just change into them when you get here.”

Brent shook his head in bewilderment, but he said, “Sure...that sounds like it would work. Except I have to wear my helmet.”

“The helmet’s fine.”

“Well, okay...”

“Your apparatus is portable, right?”

“Yeah, there are a couple of tanks. They go in the back of the truck.”

“Good. So there’s no problem there.”

“I guess not. So, what’s the second thing?”

“The second thing...” Diana hesitated, studying Brent’s face carefully. “The second thing is that, for the time that you’re welding, Thomas and I will be doing a sort of...ceremony. Probably we’ll be upstairs here. Mostly you’ll just be aware of us chanting.”

“Chanting—you mean like monks or something do?”

“Just exactly like that. It will sound like that kind of chanting, almost like music. It won’t be in English, at least most of it won’t. You probably won’t hear much of it through your helmet. And you really don’t have to think about it. You’ll focus on doing the best, the most perfect job welding that you possibly can. You won’t need to pay any attention to us.”

Brent leaned back in his chair, rubbing one hand over his close-cropped hair. “Okay...are you going to be wearing special clothes, too? Like a priest or, or whatever?”

“As a matter of fact—we are.”

Brent looked from Diana to Thomas, obviously struggling to fit the scenarios

in his mind into some kind of comprehensible context. "This is crazy. I never figured you for being religious or anything—I mean, no one's ever seen you in church..."

"Not conventional church," Thomas said.

"Trust me, he can be pious to a fault," Diana said in a more dry tone than she intended, and Thomas glanced at her with a raised eyebrow. Watching this, Brent blurted out a laugh, as if he couldn't suppress it.

"I'll take your word for it, but man, everyone always says you're—" he broke off, flushing to the hairline.

"A Communist?" Thomas said, amused, and Brent mumbled something. "Well, I'm not. And communism is a political ideology, not a religion, in any event."

"We're not asking you to help us do anything illegal or unethical, Brent, or for that matter, un-American. Look—what do you say? Do we have a deal?"

Brent, still flustered by his foot's close call with his mouth, took a few moments to answer. "A deal? Oh. Umm, I have no idea what to charge you for something like this. I'll have to think about it."

Thomas said, "May we make you an offer?"

"Sure. Shoot."

"We were thinking that thirty three dollars an hour would compensate you for all the inconvenience." He and Diana had agreed on this amount the night before, as much for the magical significance of the number as the generosity of the fee.

Brent gaped, his freckles suddenly standing out against his pale face. His mouth moved but no sound came out. "Thirty...thirty three *dollars?*" he finally choked. "An *hour?* What, are you nuts?" He seemed to realize that this was an ungracious response, but spluttered on, "No one pays that kind of money for welding! No one's ever...I never saw that kind of money in my life."

"You don't want it, then?" Thomas said, unperturbed.

"I'd feel like I was...I'd be cheating you. I can't take that."

"It's worth it to us. We are asking rather a lot of you, aren't we? Including..." his voice softened. "Including your confidentiality. You can't tell anyone about any of this, Brent. That's very important."

"Well, I wouldn't, anyway, but how'll I explain where the money came from?"

Diana said quickly, "Oh, you can say you've got a job, Brent, it's just the details we want kept private...I mean, you can see why."

Brent stared from one to the other of them, and finally his shoulders slumped. "Well...I mean, if you want to throw your money away like that..."

Thomas said, "It's worth it to us, Brent. And you deserve it. Don't undersell yourself. You must have aspirations beyond running a filling station."

"Well, sure, maybe someday...you must be pretty rich, huh?" he said as if confirming a long-held suspicion.

"Yes."

Brent looked reflective. Finally he began to grin, almost sheepishly. “Okay, you got yourselves a deal. Thirty three dollars an hour, huh? I’ll have to tell my dad I won the Irish Sweepstakes or something.” He put his hand out and Thomas, smiling oddly, shook hands. “I’ll need to write up a contract.”

“I understand. But don’t include any of the specifics we’ve discussed here. Just the payment per hour and the fact that it’s welding work.”

“Right, I follow you.” Brent glanced down at his hand with a grimace, and his forehead creased in a frown.

To distract him, Diana said, “We can talk more about how it will all work later, Brent. Think of it as a kind of theatre, in a way. All rituals and ceremonies are like that, really—look at weddings, they have rehearsals.”

“Oh, yeah, I get that—I guess.”

“Did you ever help serve at Mass, were you an altar boy?”

“No, nothing like that. But I was in the drama club in high school, did a couple of plays. *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, we even did. Man, was my mom ever excited about that. I thought the guys would never quit ribbing me about it, though. I’m still getting it.”

Thomas got up and walked around the table to adjust the wick of one of the lamps, which was smoking quite badly. There was a strong stink of kerosene exhaust in the air. “What role did you play?”

“Oh, I was Lysander. Kind of silly...”

“I’m sure you were excellent. I wish I could have seen you.”

Brent shrugged self-consciously. “I only did it for laughs.”

“It is a comedy, after all,” Thomas said. “Doing it for laughs is highly appropriate.” He walked back around the table toward his seat. When he passed behind Brent’s chair, he stopped, reached his left hand around under Brent’s chin, pulled his head sharply back and to the side, bent down and locked his mouth onto Brent’s neck, over the vein. Brent half rose from his chair, reaching up with his right hand, and Thomas caught the hand in midair, with a smart slapping sound. As a dark line of blood snaked over Brent’s throat to soak into his shirt collar, Brent’s body sagged, whites showing beneath his eyelids, and he sank back down into the chair. Thomas released Brent’s right hand and it drifted slowly down to hang limply by his side. He tugged Brent’s head a bit further to the left and shifted his position slightly, and the trickle of blood that was escaping him stopped. Brent let out a long sigh, and whispered something under his breath.

Ten seconds all of this took, not an instant longer, and Diana sat rigid with shock in her chair, her fist jammed into her mouth to keep herself from crying out. *I didn’t even see it coming*, she thought, as if that somehow made it worse. *I didn’t even see it...* She wanted to look away, but she couldn’t. Her hand hurt and finally she took her fist away from her mouth and saw deep tooth marks on the knuckles. Wincing, she straightened out her fingers and pushed her hands into her lap. Still Thomas held Brent motionless, drinking steadily, and Diana

could feel herself beginning to shake. *This is ridiculous*, she thought, *pull yourself together! You'll have to take him home after this...* and she suddenly felt panicked. What would she say to him?

Thomas shifted again, and Brent shuddered violently and moaned. He took a deep breath, seeming to be recovering his faculties, and Diana watched in fascinated horror as Thomas took his mouth away from Brent's throat for a minute, licking his lips. Then he bent back down and painstakingly licked the blood off of Brent's skin, as methodically as a cat. He wiped the sticky little rivulet off of Brent's collarbone with his finger and sucked his finger clean. Slowly pulling himself upright in the chair, Brent dazedly raised his hand as if to push Thomas away but couldn't get his arm up quite far enough. When almost no blood was left, Thomas straightened up, putting his hands on Brent's shoulders. Where he had latched on there was a small patch of swollen, reddened skin that looked like it would darken into a contusion. In the center was a puckered bump like a tiny pinched mouth. Brent touched the blood soaked patch on his shirt and stared blankly at the red smear on his fingertips.

"Now, then, Brent, you should go home. Get some rest, and we'll see you in about three weeks. Agreed?"

After a long pause, Brent said, "Right. Three weeks. And, uh..." he looked down at his shaking fingers again.

"Don't worry about that, Brent. You'll be fine. Be sure to drink plenty of water tomorrow."

"Okay." Brent looked around the room as though he wasn't sure why he was there.

"You better take Brent back to his filling station, Diana. It's getting quite late, and he needs to get home." Thomas' voice was as calm and matter-of-fact as if they had simply concluded their conversation about the play.

Wordlessly, she rose from her chair, and Brent stood up and followed her, stumbling on the warped floor. They walked in mutually stunned silence to her car. On the drive back to the station, Diana glanced at Brent once or twice, and each time he was staring straight ahead, his face obviously pale even by the dim reflected illumination of the headlights.

When they pulled into the station, she asked, "Are you sure you don't want me to take you right home, Brent?"

"What?" he said slowly. "Uh, no. My truck's here. I'm okay."

"Are you sure you can drive?" she said helplessly, and he turned and looked at her. For a long minute they stared at each other in silence. Then Brent looked down at the dashboard, reaching up to touch the darkening spot on his throat.

"Is he...did he really..." He stopped, as though he wasn't sure how to even describe what had happened.

"Yes."

"But...but there's no such thing. I mean, I know there isn't. There can't be." He raised his head, his expression suddenly both distant and intense. "I can't

tell anyone about any of this," he said slowly, with an odd inflection that didn't sound like his voice.

"No, you shouldn't. This is just between the three of us."

He nodded. "I can't tell anyone about any of this," he said again, with precisely the same tone and expression as before. Diana felt a chill clutch at the pit of her stomach. But then Brent gave his head a small shake and sighed. "No one would believe me, anyway," he added, sounding more like himself.

"Probably not."

"I mean, it's crazy. All that stuff about him, that people talk about. The food, and not being around in the daytime, and everything. It all makes sense. But who'd ever think of it? Not in a million years." His face twitched. After a moment he said, "I better get home. I've got a lot of work to get done tomorrow..."

"It's Sunday, Brent."

"Yeah, I get a lot done on Sundays." He opened the door of the car and got out. "Thanks for the ride back. I'll see ya later."

"Good night, Brent." She watched him walk unsteadily to his truck, and hoped he would get home without running off the road. After he was gone she sat in her car by the dark station for a long time, thinking about the glittering day two months earlier when she had pulled into this station for a bargain, and wished with all her heart that she had stopped someplace else.



Summer was already passing as August waned, the nights cooling to crispness under dark skies, only the crickets left to chirp their rhythmical chorus. Brick by brick the firebox and walls of the athanor rose from the cellar floor of the house. Thomas and Diana would devote one night to consecrating bricks, the next to ritually fitting them into place. The cellar stairs had begun to creak from their countless trips up and down, carrying one silk-cocooned brick at a time. By dawn, Diana's voice was hoarse from repeating the sing-song chants, and even Thomas appeared weary. Yet the firebox itself was completed, and the sloped outer and inner walls began to rise. The silicone sand arrived, four weeks past its promised delivery date.

"We don't have to consecrate this grain by grain, do we?" Thomas said as he brought the first heavy bag down the bulkhead steps, and she only rolled her eyes at him.

As the circular foundation slowly blossomed from the earthen floor like some sort of mineralized fungus, Diana could feel the mirrored network of etheric energy grow along with it. When she walked into the cellar with her magical awareness open, she felt as though she were wading through cool flowing water, filling the entire room with a slowly turning vortex. As they set each brick into position, it brought with it the tiniest increase in the invisible web, which already prickled her fingers like electricity when she touched the athanor's walls. From time to time she caught Thomas frowning down at the empty floor, as though, like a cat, he could see the magical energy directly. He picked his way across the cellar like a hiker crossing a rocky streambed. The magic had already begun to collect in the metal hemispheres, which sometimes hummed, almost imperceptibly, from a vibration that had no physical source.

Thomas became even more silent during these weeks, rarely speaking to her except when they completed and rehearsed the words for the final ritual. He corrected her pronunciation while she coached him on the placement of the cadence notes, and that was all. But these days, Diana felt almost relieved by his distance.

Ever since she had returned from taking Brent back to the station that night, Diana's feelings about Thomas had been both distracting and confused. She wanted him to be closer to her, yet when he happened to step too close, she had to restrain herself from recoiling. In each ritual they performed together, with its choreography of passing objects, moving and separating, Diana felt such an intensity of attraction, and such a depth of repulsion, that she had difficulty focusing on the magical workings. Outside of ritual space, she would catch herself thinking, for minutes at a time, about some tiny detail of Thomas' movements or body—the curve of his long fingers, the shadow his thick lashes cast on his cheek under the lamps. She had to force the images from her mind. For his part, Thomas was so psychically defended from her that his mental walls exceeded the brick ones they were building. Yet once or twice, she had turned or glanced up suddenly and had seen him quickly look away, as though he had been watching her. But of what, if anything, he was feeling, he said nothing at all.

And so the athanor took shape, until they were nearly at a stopping point, and would need to wait for the metal core. They awoke, spent the night doing their rituals, and slept. Thomas still needed to make an occasional foray, but he did so at longer and longer intervals—four days, then five. He never spoke about where he went, or how long he could wait until the next time. Despite her tangled emotions, Diana couldn't help feeling deeply impressed by his magical discipline.

The Thursday before Labor Day weekend, Diana arose in the mid-afternoon and drove over to Camden to see if Brent would be ready to begin welding the following week. No customers waited for service at the filling station, and Brent had once again propped the much-painted-over plywood sign against the southward pump. Diana pulled into the side of the graveled yard and parked. It seemed very quiet. She walked toward the open bay of the station, and Brent came to the entrance from the deep shadows inside and stood blinking at her. She hesitated, wondering if something was wrong.

"Hi," she said uncertainly, and he shaded his eyes with a hand and then smiled.

"Oh, hi, it's you. I can't see too well in the sun, when I've been in here for a while. Come on back."

She followed him into the dim bay, where only light from the doorway and a single grimy overhead bulb illuminated the interior. A boxy Ford sedan stood with its hood patiently open, like a resigned dental patient. Brent went to the front of the car and picked up a wrench that had been set on a rag spread on the car's fender. "I'm almost done here," he said. Diana watched him torque a bolt into place inside the car's engine.

Brent finished his work and turned to replace the wrench on a hook in a pegboard on the wall behind him. When he had tossed the rag into a canvas sack, lowered the car's hood, and washed his hands at a small chipped iron sink in the corner, all without speaking, Diana finally cleared her throat and said

uneasily, "Are you all right?"

He studied the towel as it moved from one hand to the other. Finally he said, "Guess you'd know if I'm all right or not. That's what my mom keeps asking." He smoothed out the towel and hung it on a hook next to the sink. "I don't know what to say. I told her I thought I had the summer flu, or something." He suddenly looked up at her, and said softly, "Am I all right?"

At the expression in his blue eyes she had to catch her breath. Suddenly she remembered the way she'd felt when she'd woken alone in Thomas' house, too weak to move, and with nothing but her reason to combat the fear and confusion she felt. All Brent knew was that something from children's nightmares had just become part of his personal reality, and he was helpless to seek advice or defend himself. She didn't know how to respond, and floundering, asked him, "Well, how do you feel?"

"Now? Okay, I guess." He thought for a moment. "I get real thirsty sometimes. Keep having to come back here and drink water. And the light bugs me. But I..." he broke off, gulping in breaths of air as if he were sobbing. "It's like, it can't have happened, y'know? It can't have happened, but I keep dreaming about it, and then I wake up and I don't know...I don't know what..."

She glanced out at the empty yard and stepped closer to Brent. "We'd better talk about it, okay?"

He looked around furtively. "Not here...someone might come in..."

"But you can't go on just..." she paused, suspecting that there was some particular thing that was bothering him. "What is it, Brent? I mean, is there something that you really need to know?"

He glanced down, blinking rapidly, and spoke without looking at her. "Well, uh...do you think...ahh, this is stupid." He threw his head back, eyes closed, and sighed. "I got nothin' to go on, y'know? Movies, and, crap like that."

"Yes, but?"

"Well...you don't think...you don't think I could...you know..."

There was a pause, and Diana said cautiously, "...turn into a vampire?"

"Yeah," he said with a long sigh of relief.

It was certainly a valid question, and she pondered it darkly, one finger pressed absently to her mouth.

"You're not answering."

"I don't know," she finally said with a shrug. "But I don't think so...just from him drinking? No, I don't think so. I think it's a lot harder to do than that. He says it's never happened."

"Yeah? In how long?"

She gave him a sidelong look. "About...two hundred years."

He sat hard on the edge of the sink, as if his knees had given way. "Jesus jumping Christ," he whispered. "How can this be *happening*?" He rubbed his hands upwards over his face, wiping away the sweat that had gathered there. "I've been so scared...I couldn't even tell you. The way the sun hurts my eyes,

and always being thirsty, and then the dreams...I thought, either I've gone right off the deep end, or else..."

"No, no. Believe me, Brent. You're not crazy. This is as real as it gets. But you're not changing into anything. Those same things happened to me, really. I don't know why, but...you don't want to know what you'd have to go through to be like Thomas. Brent, I'm sorry," Diana reached out and touched his arm helplessly. "I should have talked to you about it, I didn't even think...nor did Thomas, it was just—"

"Yeah, well, look. I feel better just talking to you about it, because y'know, the worst thing was, I kept thinking I must be crazy. At least I know it's real. I don't have to like it, but at least it's real. Because you know, if anything happens to me, my family...well, it'll be real hard on them."

Diana closed her eyes for a moment. "I understand." They both looked up as a car pulled in to the pumps. The driver honked his horn impatiently.

"Look," Brent said quickly, "don't you leave, okay?"

"Don't worry. I came on business. We need that job contract."

"Oh, right. I've got it. I'll be right back." He hurried out into the sun, flinching and shading his eyes with his hand, as the customer honked again.

It was just sunset when she got back to the stone house, and Thomas was already gone. Puzzled, Diana went to his study and put the job contract on his desk. He must have gone out on a foray. They always walked over to the Schuller house together unless he had gone out. She got some bread and peanut butter from the kitchen and walked down the road and through the woods to the house, munching, as the sky deepened to blue-green overhead. To her surprise, the screen door glowed with yellow lamplight. She went in, stepping carefully on the floorboards which now both creaked and wobbled, and stopped at the doorway of the ritual room. Thomas was there, preparing for the night's working. He glanced up at her briefly, then looked back down at the square of silk he was unfolding.

"Is everything all right?" he asked the silk.

"I thought you'd gone out."

"No, I want to finish these. We only need to do a few more and then we'll have to stop, at any rate. Where have you been?"

"I went over to see Brent."

"And how is he? Will he be ready to start work after the weekend?"

"Yes. He had the job contract all typed up, it's on your desk."

"Excellent." Diana leaned against the doorjamb, sucking peanut butter off her fingers. Abruptly, a mental picture came into her mind, Thomas sucking his fingertips clean of Brent's blood, and she hastily wiped her hands on her slacks. Thomas looked up at her, and his forehead creased slightly. "You look very tired."

She shrugged, avoiding his eyes. "You don't look so well yourself. How long has it been, a week?" He was even paler than usual, giving his face an almost ethereal cast.

"You needn't be concerned about that. I'm aware of my limits by now, believe me. The work is our first priority, don't you agree?"

She straightened, looking darkly at the heavy brocade draperies that concealed the peeling plaster walls. "Is it? I'm not sure right now."

Thomas set down the censer he'd been filling and frowned at her. "Diana—what is the matter? You seem upset, has something happened?"

She sighed, her shoulders slumping. "It's just that Brent is...well, he's not himself, Thomas. After all this time. He's so...quiet. As if he were still in shock."

Thomas stood still, studying her. "It's almost the end of the summer, and he's working very hard. I'm sure he's nearly worn out."

"Yes, but...it's more than that." Exasperated, she burst out, "Thomas, you know exactly what I'm talking about."

"Yes, I know what you're talking about. I'm sure he'll recover in time. I may have pushed him a little too hard, that's all. I've only tried to influence someone that way a few times, and I told you beforehand that my abilities lack subtlety. I'm sorry about that, but..." He paused, and when she didn't answer, he shrugged and leaned down to pick up the aspergillum. "Are you ready to begin? We may be able to finish tonight."

"Thomas...don't you understand? He had no idea what you'd just done to him! How was he supposed to cope? We didn't explain anything, we acted like it hadn't even happened! I just dropped him off at the station to go home, and for two weeks we left him to wonder whether he was losing his mind, or whether he would..." she stopped, unwilling to humiliate Brent by telling Thomas what he had feared. Thomas stared at her.

"Usually I don't need to explain," he said uncomfortably. "I had no idea that Brent was having such difficulties."

Diana took a breath, but so many emotions were welling up, with anger at the crest of them, that she couldn't continue the discussion. "I'm sorry, Thomas. I just can't work tonight."

She went out into the front room and leaned against the wall by the doorway, staring unseeing at the boarded windows. She felt overwhelmed by her frustration and utter helplessness in the face of Thomas' reserve. *He's not human, how can I work with someone like this?* Levoissier had not seemed this inscrutable to her. Despairing, she slid down to a sitting position and hugged her knees.

She heard Thomas walking down the hallway after another minute or so. He came in and went down on one knee a few feet away from her, studying her with an ambiguous expression. She raised her head and gave him a hard, cynical look. "At least I know how to get your undivided attention," she said with a sarcastic bite in her voice. "Go on strike. Take away the only thing you care about—the only use you have for me, and at least you'll look me in the eye for a moment." If she hadn't been so angry, she might have thought the expression on his face was hurt.

"Diana, I don't...I don't have any idea why you're saying this. Do you

honestly believe I'm that calculating and unfeeling? Do you really trust me so little as that?"

"I want to trust you, Thomas, but...you remember that night when you promised you'd tell me anything I asked? There's so much I don't know, so much that you're still hiding—"

"Such as what?"

"Such as where you go at night, what you do, how you move around so quickly, just to start with..." She could see that guarded expression come back into his eyes, and she burst out, "Stop it! Stop throwing up those defenses like that! By all the gods, Thomas...for weeks and weeks, you've had such barriers up against me—it's like you weren't even here most of the time."

He looked shocked. "You know what I guard against."

"No! It's not that simple."

"Isn't it? I can't allow myself to be distracted. We have work to do."

"And I can't go on with that work under these conditions, Thomas." She leaned toward him, and he drew back. "I've been trying to tell you for two months what some of the side effects of all this might be, and you refuse to listen. You obviously know what you're doing magically. How can you be so blind?"

He looked down at the floor, and she saw his eyes traveling along the cracks and knots in the wood, tracing the path between the two of them.

"I am not blind. And when the work of preparing the athanor is finished, then I'll tell you all of these things that you want to know. There simply hasn't been time. I'm too aware of our deadline. I don't want to wait another year." He looked up at her with nothing guarded in his expression at all. "I'm too afraid to wait. That's why I've used you—yes, I will say it—and Brent, and why I've pushed you so hard. I don't dare wait any longer, Diana. It may be that you'll be rid of me at the end of it."

"I don't want to be rid of you."

He inclined his head. "God will make that decision." After a moment, his mouth quirked into a humorless smile. "I'm sorry, was that remark too pious?" But Diana was unabashed by his jab.

"It does sometimes sound as though you're evading responsibility. God, destiny, Providence—what about your own choices? You can't blame God for everything, you know. Eventually He'll file an objection, and He has a tendency to be sustained."

Thomas looked at her silently for a few moments. "What is it that you want from me?"

"I want you to open up to me. I want you to stop being so afraid of touching me, hurting me, letting me see what you're feeling. What is it that you're hiding? What great and horrible secrets could you possibly have, that you're so terrified I'll somehow perceive?" He hesitated, and she felt a surge of anger welling up again. "I'm not doing any further magical work with you until this is settled, Thomas."

For a moment, he looked slightly desperate, and then his face tensed with anger. "You made a vow."

"After you had promised to tell me everything. 'You need only ask,' those were your words, not, 'what I deem that you need to know.' You aren't upholding your side of the bargain. What am I getting from this, after all? This is all for you, we're doing this for you!"

He sat back, one closed hand pressed against his mouth, studying the floor before him intently. Finally he said, "You...want to know more about my forays, is that it?"

"Despite the way you've ducked around on that topic, I do think I've got the gist of it. There are a few puzzles, but they're not really critical. But there is one question you avoided that first night that I've never gotten around to asking again." She paused, as he waited warily. "How did you know my name, and why were you looking for me, and who told you such...flattering things about my capabilities? You claimed you still have contacts in the Order, but I'd never heard of you. Who told you about me, without letting me know about it?" Technically, that was against the rules of the OSL, although no one had ever been banished merely for gossiping to another initiate. Diana waited until the silence itself seemed to validate her point. "That's why you're keeping so distant. You're afraid that if you relax even for one moment, I'll see the answer to this. And then, I think, you believe that I'll pack up and leave. Which alone tells me something, doesn't it?"

He looked up sharply. "It's not only that."

"But it's partly that, isn't it?" She slammed her hands against the floor in exasperation. "Thomas, am I crazy here? Have you really not been aware of the *tesion* between us these past few weeks?"

He looked away from her. "Yes, I've been aware of it."

"And you think this is a tenable situation?"

He looked squarely at her, at last, and Diana caught her breath, because in his eyes she saw the same combination of longing and reluctance that she now felt whenever she thought of him, but amplified. "You are...an *intense* distraction to me," he said slowly. "And yes, I know perfectly well how I've been making you feel. I think you suspect me of being considerably more obtuse than I am. I don't want to...to let my own temptation derail what we're doing." She kept on meeting his gaze with a level look, and after a moment he dropped his eyes. "Which is happening, in any event, obviously."

"Obviously." Diana looked down at the floor herself, saw nothing that would be holding his attention, and finally let out a long, resigned sigh. "There's only one way to really solve this, you know."

He looked up, genuinely puzzled. "And that is?"

She put her hands on the floor and deftly shifted, on hands and heels, to sit next to him. He pulled back, blinking, and she put a hand on his knee to stop him, making him gasp. He could have freed himself without even thinking,

but instead he froze, like a startled animal.

“Stop resisting. It doesn’t help the work, it’s hindering it, and there’s no reason for it.” He opened his mouth to protest, and she cut him off. “You know you want to. You’re starving. Go on, Thomas. Do you think I’m afraid of you? I’m not—not of that, anyway. You didn’t lose control with Brent, did you? Go ahead—prove that you can trust yourself. Prove that I can trust you.”

She let go of his leg and extended her hand toward him. He was watching her warily, but she could feel a subtle tension fill the space between them, and he wasn’t hesitating nearly as much as she’d expected he might. Slowly he reached out and put his hand in hers. He was very cold, and his fingers curled around to the back of her hand. He closed his eyes for a moment, and she thought she could feel her pulse beating against his fingertips. She tightened her grip and he opened his eyes. He licked his upper lip slowly, and swallowed hard.

“You’re...quite sure about this?”

“*Quite* sure. I want to feel exactly what it is that you do. I was in no state to analyze it the last time. I’m sure it’s another of those intangibles you’ll say you couldn’t explain.”

“Look up, then.” He bent toward her without waiting for her to comply, and she looked up at the wavering shadows on the cracked plaster ceiling overhead. He took hold of her shoulders and pulled her toward him, his cool lips meeting the bare skin of her neck. She braced herself for a bite but it never came. Instead, there was a painful tug at her skin, and a sickening sense that she had simply been pulled open, like a hole torn into a piece of cloth. But the pain was instantly washed away by a flush of warmth, liquid and slippery, Thomas’ mouth catching and holding it.

She opened her eyes, realizing she was pulling back against his hands, and let out her breath in a long sigh, her whole body relaxing as his arms slid around her. Erotic arousal tingled up and down her body in soft waves, and she abandoned herself to the pleasure of it. She could feel Thomas’ intense relief from the strain of his self-denial, and the release he felt simply giving way to his terrible hunger. He must be drinking very fast, she thought vaguely, and it occurred to her that she should care about that, but she couldn’t have resisted him now if she’d wanted to.

Far too soon, he shifted slightly, pulling a bit away from her. Then, where his mouth was, there was a cold thrill like a nerve pinched the wrong way, and she suddenly felt as though she had been dropped six inches onto the floor. She vaguely remembered feeling this on that first night, and she realized now that she had seen Brent react to it. It came as quite a shock, cutting off the flow of blood, the warm eroticism and her psychic connection to Thomas as sharply as a slamming door. She drew in a deep breath, aware now that her stomach was queasy and she was dizzy. Thomas drew his head back and looked into her face impassively for a moment, licking blood from his lips. Then he bent back down and carefully licked the blood off her skin, and she waited patiently for

him to finish.

When he started to pull back from her, she caught his hands and held him where he was. He seemed surprised, and put his arms back around her. They remained sitting on the uneven floor like that for a long time, Diana leaning her forehead against Thomas' shoulder. It seemed she had been waiting for this for weeks. She could feel the magical energies around them spiraling to ground for a little while, taking with them all the tensions and defenses and emotions that had built up over the summer, and she clearly sensed that Thomas could perceive this as well. His relief at the change, for more than one reason, was palpable.

"Are you all right?" she heard him say, a bit cautiously, after several minutes had passed.

"You mean, do I feel able to get back to those beastly bricks?" Her tone was more amused than her words.

"If you think you can manage it."

"Give me a minute." She reluctantly pulled away from him and pushed back against the wall, trying to center herself and assess how shaky she was. "Maybe a half hour?"

He nodded, his eyes avid. She hadn't seen him this energized for some while, and he sat back on the floor and stretched his arms luxuriously. "Is some of your technical curiosity satisfied now?" His tone was wry but not unkind. "You're right—I couldn't explain it in words if I wanted to."

"Maybe a little. I think I could do without that bit at the end, though."

"No, you couldn't. Without that you'd bleed to death."

"Well, true."

"About young Crothers," Thomas said after a moment. "Perhaps I should speak to him."

Diana smiled, shaking her head. "I don't think that would help."

"You seemed to feel so guilty about his predicament, as though it was all your fault. If you had insisted on choosing another welder, I would have listened to you. But I thought your suggestion was ideal, for many reasons. I don't see what else we could have done. I would have had to exert the same influence on anyone we hired."

"You're right. I just never felt quite so...manipulative before. I always just paid any cwan that I needed to help me with a working."

"We are paying Brent. A small fortune."

"I know."

Watching him relax on the floor, as supple as a twenty-year-old, Diana was struck by how much his aspect had changed, not just physically but on other levels as well. She sensed that there would never be a more auspicious moment, and shot the question without warning or preface. "So, who told you? Who was your unimpeachable source, Thomas?"

Thomas paused only a moment, although he looked down when he spoke. "Levoissier."

Diana leaned her head back against the wall, closing her eyes. “I knew it.” *Five years and five years...what can it mean?* “I’ve known it since Manchester. He’s contrived this whole thing from the beginning, hasn’t he?”

“That, I wouldn’t know about.” Thomas bridled a little. “But really, Diana—I’ve been amazed that you took so long to figure it out. Levoissier was your mentor. Wasn’t it he who suggested that you study Welsh as a magical language? And when you tracked down the only alleged immortal whose records you could trace to the present day, and found that the trail led to a Welshman—didn’t that ever strike you as a rather *astounding* coincidence?”

“A coincidence, yes, but...” she broke off, overwhelmed by her own stupidity.

“You see, I’m not the only one who can focus so closely on one goal that all distracting details are disregarded.”

She couldn’t repress a despairing groan. “I’ll bet he even planted some of the information I found in the archives about you. I never told him what I was looking for, but he’s been leaving a trail of bread crumbs for me, for five years! I can’t believe it.”

“If he did that, he certainly assisted you more than he ever did me. If it makes you feel any better, he didn’t tell me much about you at all. The only thing he ever said, in a letter to me, was that he thought you and I could be of service to each other, and he told me your name. He never told me how to find you, and he did not indicate that he would send you to find me. Believe me when I say that my surprise when you showed up on my doorstep was unfeigned.”

“Why didn’t you say anything before now?”

“You refused to tell me the name of your mentor, remember? Besides...” he looked away uneasily. “One...doesn’t talk casually about Levoissier.”

She stared at Thomas’ expression in disbelief. “You’re afraid of him?”

He swallowed. “I wouldn’t cross him, nor advise anyone else to do so.”

“But...you’re indestructible! What do you think—” but at his look, she broke off. “How long have you known him?”

“I wouldn’t say I ever really knew him. I first met him in 1741.”

This took a few moments to absorb. When Diana spoke again, her voice quavered a bit. “Did you ever work with him?”

“No. My contact with him has been quite limited, actually. When I returned to England in 1764, I was looking for him, but the Order told me that he had left the country some years earlier, as far as they or anyone else knew. I didn’t encounter him again for over a century. I got the feeling, however, that he had been following my movements—how, and why, I don’t know.”

Diana swallowed hard. “Is he...do you know...is he a vampire, too?”

Thomas shook his head slowly. “I don’t think so. I had no evidence for that, and he seemed very...*amused*...by me.” Diana winced in sympathy at his bitter tone. “But you would be far more able to judge that than I would. He wasn’t my mentor. I never slept with him.” She looked up at him sharply, but he only smiled. “The extent of Levoissier’s mentorship was very well known within the Order,

I'm afraid. You surely knew that would be involved, when he asked, didn't you?"

Diana sagged back against the wall. "Of course," she said after a moment. She glanced at Thomas. "You wouldn't have, anyway, would you?"

"When I was younger, no. But since..." he shrugged. "Another of those inexplicable changes I referred to. Suddenly the gender of my partners ceased to matter—at all."

"I guess it never mattered to me in the first place." She was tracing patterns on the floor with her finger, thinking now about Gregory, and what he'd said in Manchester. "I shouldn't tell you this, but...Levoissier mentored Gregory Fitzhughes. Before he took me on."

When she finally looked up, she saw Thomas sitting cross-legged with his chin propped on his hand, looking so deep in thought, she cut off what she was about to say rather than interrupt. After a moment he said in a somber tone, "Do you think *this* is a coincidence?"

"I have no idea. But Gregory and I are both using techniques we learned from Levoissier. The magical community is a rather small and rarefied one, after all, Thomas—and the Order is just a tiny part of it. There are going to be connections, it's inevitable. But I will say one thing. If I find out that Brent Crothers has ever met Levoissier—I'll be tempted to ground out our vow and give this whole endeavor up. That would just be too much."

Thomas said nothing to contest this statement, and she braced her hands on the wall behind her and carefully stood up. She only felt dizzy for a few moments, and she gave her head a shake to clear it. "Come on. I'm ready to start."