



Read other SF and paranormal suspense novels by N. D. Hansen-Hill:  
The Light Play Trilogy (*Light Play*, *Light Plays*, *Lightning Play*) and The Grave Images Series (*Grave Images*, *Graven Image*, *Grave Imagery*).

# ***Vision***

**by N. D. Hansen-Hill**

Read other SF and paranormal suspense novels by N. D. Hansen-Hill:  
The Light Play Trilogy (*Light Play*, *Light Plays*, *Lightning Play*) and The Grave Images Series (*Grave Images*, *Graven Image*, *Grave Imagery*).

©Copyright November 2001 by N. D. Hansen-Hill\*

ISBN: 0-9582023-1-1

Published by Parade Books, an imprint of Argyle House Press

PDF electronic edition published December 2001

\*This book may not be offered or issued for sale without the permission of the author

## Dedication

*To Gordon L. Hill, Sr.*

## Vision

The blind illusion of logic bent,  
Clarity strewn when reason went,  
Torqued and bloodied thoughts adrift  
A truth-entangled genetic rift.

\*

So, clear the head and fill the mind  
As past and present are left behind,  
Blow the then and blast the now,  
History shorn in a shattered vow.

\*

Enter the beasts and demon spawn  
To manipulate the naive pawn,  
Genetic mayhem and twisted schemes  
Cursed in parabnormal dreams

\*

Where prophecy rules the first is last  
Death reverts to life aghast,  
Insanity reigns - there lies the fault,  
Only murd'rous mayhem can force a halt.

**by N. D. Hansen-Hill**

## Prologue

The day was split - overlain with the shuddery thunder of a heavy tread on sedimentary soils.

Soils that were soft and non-impacted.

Soils that were still new.

He stood there, blind and deaf to any world but this. His vision was trapped here, while his body lingered in a world a hundred million years - maybe *several* hundred million years - away.

Past experience had warned him not to move. In a place like this it could be deadly. Because, over the aeons, so many of the land's physical features had changed.

*What you see is not always what you get...*

He could only watch, paralysed by his vulnerability, as the monstrous shape came toward him. His eyes fixed on the long, talon-like claws, the ripping teeth, the daggerlike spine - almost like a scorpion's stinger - at the end of the tail. The stinger was what caught and held his eye. He forced himself to focus on it, as the creature did a series of bounding leaps in his direction.

*It can't see me*, he thought, trying to bolster his confidence. But, it didn't do much to help. Because there was a gleam in the predator's eye now, and Dustin could swear it was aiming right for him.

The mud slapped with each heavy step, and now, there was mud flicked in his eyes. Flicked in his eyes and flecked on his face. Sweat on his skin and terror in his heart.

The mouth opened so fast, he knew he'd never stand a chance. No hope to outrun it on terrain he couldn't even see.

*Not true. It's because you see too much...*

*It's not here!*

***You're not here!***

But it didn't help. He was in a world stinking of methane and sulphur, and rotting meat on three-inch teeth. Where enormous lizards snapped jaws at man-sized morsels.

And it didn't do him a damn bit of good to tell himself he wasn't here.

Because he'd never tested it before. He'd learned not to move, because his own world could kill him. But he'd never deliberately sought to place himself "somewhere else".

His existence had never been at risk before...

*I can't sit here and be eaten...*

The monster was confused by his stationary pose. It was accustomed to having its prey flee, squealing. At the very least, it was expecting some evasive manoeuvre: head bobbing, counterattack, dodges - something any prey with a gram of intelligence would do.

And, suddenly, it was no good. "*I need out!*" he hissed urgently. "*Josh!*"

It was the panicky squawk the creature had been waiting for. The eyes widened, and in that second, Dustin knew it was going to strike. The jaws snapped once, and he wasn't imagining the saliva. As the head lunged forward in a snake-like strike, he dove to one side.

But the tail moved even faster.

This time, when the man's mouth opened, it wasn't with shrieks of terror - it was with an even shriller howl of pain.

## Chapter One

“Dusty!” Someone was shaking him roughly.

*Josh.*

“Can you hear me?”

“Yes, I can hear you,” Dustin replied mechanically. He waved a hand in front of his face. “*His* breath was better -” He squinted his eyes open, peering at his surroundings. Dried, reddish soil. Bright blue - not the sullen overcast of dinoland.

There was a note of tension in Josh’s voice. “Did you see one?”

Dustin wiped his face. “Could be-e...” He dragged it out, but Josh’s sigh made him snigger. *Put him out of his misery.* “Nasty things, those *Drepanosauruses* -” He left it hanging, and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. Sweat, and something else. A gritty something, that stunk of sour soils.

Josh’s hand gripped his shoulder so hard it hurt. “You *saw* one?!” He twisted him so Dustin was forced to look at him. “Did it -” At this point Josh swallowed hard, his voice barely above a whisper. “- did it have a *spine*?”

“Yeah -” Dustin said, a little distractedly. He was thinking of the weight behind the impact. The force of the blow that had left him stunned.

*Or stung...* There was a tingle of pain in his leg - like the nerve-jabbing sting of a cold sore.

*No way. That’s impossible,* he thought, trying to calm the lurch of panic that sent his heart racing again. *I’m an observer. Only an observer.*

The pounding of his heart was suddenly matched by a throbbing pulsebeat in his left leg. The throb gave way to a searing, stabbing jab that shot down between his toes and back up to just beneath his jaw. “Josh -” he gasped, his eyes widening. He gripped the front of Josh’s shirt with his fist. Dustin’s face was white, his teeth clenched.

“*Shit, Dusty!*” Josh said worriedly. Was he having a heart attack or something?! “*What’s wrong?*”

Dustin grimaced, but pushed himself up, so he could look at his left leg. *See,* he told himself, an icy wash of relief running through him. *All normal.* The relief lasted until the next agonising jolt of pain hit him. This time, he felt it in his gut, too.

*Can’t be,* he thought, through chattering teeth. *Only in your imagination...*

He gripped his thigh. He sensed Josh’s panic, but he could hear his voice only dimly through a fog. “M-Make it *stop!*” Dustin grunted, unaware that he was saying it aloud.

“Make *what* stop?!” Josh almost yelled at him. “Tell me what’s *wrong!*”

The back of his pants leg was wet. *Must be marsh mud,* Dustin thought, confused. He lifted his fingers to look. The tips were bright with blood.

“What the hell!” Josh shrieked, hitting the panic button. He forced his voice down a notch. “W-What have you done now?” He pushed Dusty over on his side - afraid of what he was going to find.

There was blood soaking through Dustin’s jeans. Blood leaching into the arid ground. A lot of blood. But, it could have been worse - undoubtedly, would have been worse - if there hadn’t been a stopper in the hole.

It was so coated with blood, that at first he couldn’t figure out what it was.

“I-Is it bad?” Dustin asked.

“No,” Josh lied. It was a tooth - or, maybe, a spine.

Josh's mind rejected it. *It can't be...* Reason told him he should leave it in, to help control the bleeding. But something else - some other instinct - told him bleeding wasn't the worst of Dusty's problems. *Better to make it bleed...* With a shaking hand, he grabbed the back of the "tooth" and started to yank it back, out of the hole.

It didn't want to come. It had gone all the way to the bone.

Josh gorge rose. *Maybe into the bone -*

"Good," Dustin was saying, and it took Josh a moment to realise he was responding to the "No". It bothered him that Dusty couldn't feel what he was doing.

Dusty was still talking, but he didn't sound right. "Josh," he muttered, "feeling a little weird..."

His voice trailed off. His bloodied hand went limp. Josh swore he could feel it, when Dusty's head flopped down, onto the soil.

\*

"What do you mean, you 'helped him set it up'?" Ren asked him angrily. "In other words, you set *him* up! You know what he's like!"

"I know," Josh admitted. "But when he heard what I was looking for - so I'd know whether to push for funding..." His words tapered off, a little dismally. It sounded like he was making excuses. "You're right, Ren. He knew it, I knew it." He shook his head, his own eyes glassy. "I didn't know it could touch him like that! Hell, he didn't know it himself!"

"It shouldn't have," she replied, staring out the window. "It never has before." She turned, to meet Josh's eyes. "You know how I knew, don't you?"

"The telepathy thing?"

"Don't sound so dismissive, Mr. Clairvoyant. Of course, it was the 'telepathy thing'." She rubbed her left leg. "I even felt it when it jabbed him," she whispered.

"Don't tell him," Josh warned.

She shook her head. For one who was supposedly "sensitive", Josh could be so dense. "Of course I won't," she said impatiently.

Josh grinned. "I get it. Because of the affection thing."

She averted her eyes. "Ridiculous," she grumbled.

"Hey - at least you're finally admitting you can read minds," Josh told her annoyingly.

"Hardly. Merely sympathy pains, brought on by -"

Josh smiled, and put an arm around her. "- your sympathy for your subject."

She nodded and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

"You know, some day Dusty will get his mind out of the past, and back into the present where it belongs."

She couldn't believe she was hearing this from him. Her expression said as much.

"Oh, I'm not saying he shouldn't visit the past from time to time -"

She snorted.

"- but he doesn't like it any more than you like 'picking up vibes'. Do you realise I'm the only one of us with appreciation for my 'gift'?"

"Since nobody else appreciates you," she said with a slight smile, "I guess you have to start somewhere." She added, "Did you forget Dainler? He 'appreciates' his gift, too - that's why he has a limo." Ren sounded disgusted.

At the coffee machine, she turned Josh's way expectantly.

"F7," he supplied.

There was a flicker of annoyance in her eyes.



He grinned. "I had one earlier," he explained, with mock innocence. "Dainler and I aren't in the same class. He stops 'em from being buried, and I dig 'em up."

She handed him his coffee, then punched in her own. "You know," she whispered, with a shiver, and a glance toward the ICU. "If he doesn't feel better soon, I might give Erik a call."

"Dusty won't like it."

She looked over at him, her own eyes moist. "Better than having to communicate through Merrie. Besides, " she added, "if I don't, you can bet Valterzar will."

\*

"Hey, Dusty." Ren put a cool hand on his hot forehead, jerked it back, then, with trembling fingers, put it back again. *So hot. So weak.* When she touched him, she could feel the burning in his veins.

*Oh, crap.* It was the signal. She'd halfway hoped it wouldn't be there, because it scared her witless. It had only happened once before. With her sister. Maggie had fallen from a tree and was bleeding when Ren had found her. She'd touched her and held her and cried her eyes out, while Maggie had screamed the whole time to go get Mom. In the end, it had been Maggie who'd had to run for Mom, and Ren who'd had the broken arm.

Ren had never spoken of it to anybody, but something had changed that day, between her and her sister. Maggie was two years older, and wary of a sister who could finish her sentences. As she grew up, and began to develop that secret life that all teens have, she'd grown as far away as she could from Ren. And, ever since that day in the orchard, there'd been a wariness between them.

Dustin's eyes opened, and he looked at her. "Knew it was you," he murmured. "Must be psychic."

Ren brushed a kiss across his lips, then took his other hand in hers.

He sighed, and she knew he was glad to have her there.

If he hadn't been so dazed, he might have realised what she was doing. Realised how much she might be risking. Might even have realised why she was willing to risk it.

It was a risk, too. Josh would be furious, and feel more guilty than he did already; Dainler would feel violated, as though she'd intruded on his turf; Valterzar would smile and be pleased that he could add one more note to her file. And Dusty? Would he carry the same wary flicker in his eyes that Maggie had? Because she'd intruded far beyond his stray thoughts, and into his blood and bone?

"Kitten?" he murmured, a trace of alarm in his voice this time.

"It's okay, Dusty," she whispered, trying to hide the huskiness in her voice. The quaver that might give away her fear. Because this was Dainler's gift, not hers. She'd always been afraid to use it. At heart, Erik Dainler was about as sensitive as stone. He could shunt away all the disease and injury because he never let it touch him. He never got involved with his clients; never took on their pain or their aches or their angst. She'd asked him about it once, wanting to know how he could heal without identifying with his clients' pain. Erik hadn't always been this cold or distant, so he'd somehow developed this shell; this insouciance. She'd wanted to know how - needed to know how - because it was a way of protecting herself, in case anyone got too close.

*Like now.*

A flicker of awareness told her Valterzar was getting impatient with the delays. They were only allowing them in one at a time, and he wanted to "assess" the situation himself. It was more than that, though. Josh was going nuts out in the waiting room, which made Valterzar irritable. Josh was blaming himself for this, but he couldn't produce the spine the doctors had asked for.

Because they would never understand how a spine, that should have been buried for a hundred million years - that should have become stone long since - could carry fresh toxin. How it could contain living cells. And antagonistic proteins.

*Shit!*

Kithren didn't wait any longer. Dustin was unconscious again, and his skin looked waxy. His breath came in uneven shudders.

"Love you," she whispered, close against his ear - relieved that he'd never know how she felt.

*A thing can be over-analysed.* She ought to know. Science was her business.

Ren closed her eyes, tightened her grip on his hand, and let his feelings come.

\*

The scream of the monitor brought Josh to his feet. "Oh, *shit!*" he gasped, wiping his eyes roughly with his hand. He and Valterzar raced down the hall. They ran into the IC unit just in time to hear the nurse shout angrily, "*What the hell are you doing?!*"

It did, indeed, look like mayhem. Ren was leaning against the bed, one hand tangled in the cords, wires, and tubing running from Dustin's body. She'd triggered the alarm, and in that moment, Josh knew she wasn't even aware of doing it. Awkwardly - too sensitive in her current state to tune out the nurse's frustration - her hand fluttered to free itself of the paraphernalia.

"*Ren!*" Josh yelled. He sensed she was wide open, like a raw wound. *Defenceless*. It didn't take much to figure out what she'd done for Dusty. Josh remembered kidding her about being "too sensitive for her own good". His words came back to haunt him now, as she turned to look at him. The pain in her eyes made him suck in a quick breath.

Ren, though, suddenly wasn't breathing at all. She gasped, and there was only a quick, occluded whine. Her hand went to her throat, and she stumbled away from the bed. Even now, she didn't want Dustin to see...didn't want him to know...

*Fuck it, Ren! Why?*

Josh reached for her, but Valterzar was quicker. He caught her as her knees folded and stretched her out on the ground. He checked her airway then bellowed, "*Get me a trach kit!*" to the nurse. "*STAT!*" Then he tossed Josh his phone. His teeth were almost gritted as he ordered, "Punch four. Tell Dainler that if he doesn't get here soon, the first person he'll have to heal will be himself."

\*

"I thought you said it was Mallory," Erik Dainler complained. He grabbed Ren's hand, dropped it, then paced the room. "I can't," he muttered. He ran nervous fingers through his hair.

Lawrence Valterzar had regained some of his cool. He was personally monitoring Ren's functions, and he turned now to look coldly at Dainler. "Why not?" His voice was chilling.

"Because it's Ren," Erik said, and Valterzar guessed that for once he was being honest. Dainler was afraid to heal her because he didn't think he could keep his distance.

"Because she's a sensitive?" Did he think she might give it all to him?

Dainler cleared his throat. He shook his head.

Valterzar saw his expression and nodded. "I understand." The man had feelings for her. He didn't think he could distance himself because some part of him didn't want to. He looked at Dainler. "You know she did this for Mallory?"

"Then maybe you should get Mallory in here, so I can get started," Dainler said brusquely.

For the first time since Erik Dainler had arrived, Lawrence smiled at him. *An unselfish gesture*. "Well-played," he replied, knowing that Erik would understand him.

Erik kissed Ren's hand, then smiled back. "Just think of all the points it'll make me," he said.

\*

Lawrence Valterzar had never wanted to work with this group. He'd trained in medicine, and gone on to specialise in psychiatry and organic brain dysfunction. And then, one day, he'd been called in on a consultation. A James Wickham had been admitted with severe bruising and lacerations. He claimed he'd been "stoned", but in the Biblical, rather than the modern, sense. Lawrence had thought it owed more to the latter, but he'd refrained from saying so.

He'd been in James' room when the tapping on the window began. The almost frenetic beat of tiny pebbles had given way to a glass-spidering assault by rocks and concrete. Then, the first of the invaders had beat down the barriers.

The rocks came on. Lawrence rang for help, yelled out the door, and danced around the room, trying to get clear. He flung the covers over James' face, but he couldn't forget the terror in the man's eyes. It was a rather graphic reminder of why he'd bothered to get into this gig in the first place. James Wickham needed help - and here was Lawrence Valterzar cowering behind a chair.

It made him mad - mostly at himself, but furious nevertheless. He saw himself as a coward and a sham - running when someone needed him most. He stood up, and faced the barrage head on. The first concrete block grazed his cheek, and a heavy rock pounded his shoulder. If anything, his anger escalated. James, meanwhile, was screaming almost hysterically under the covers - undoubtedly wondering why Fate had tossed this particular curse his way.

Lawrence Valterzar couldn't recall when he'd been so angry, and the fire burning in his gut upped another notch. Whereas fifteen minutes ago he would have hesitated to do anything that might affect his prestige or community standing - that might make others "wonder" - at the moment he didn't care. As a seeming boulder headed directly for his face, something lodged in his gut.

He knew with certainty he could end this. He opened his mouth and roared, "*Stop this!*" The boulder stopped mid-flight, shuddered slightly as though fighting his orders, then dropped, motionless, onto the floor.

All around him it was like rocken rain, rather than the pelting assault that had been taking place before. All the pebbles, stones, chips of concrete, and restless gravel dropped in a pinging resonance to the floor. Some bounced, landed and rolled, but none of them responded to anything but gravity.

"Easiest cure I ever effected," Lawrence had muttered.

At the sudden silence, James had pushed the sheet off his face and looked a little warily around the room.

"Was that the first time?" Lawrence asked him.

"You mean was I a 'virgin' rock target?" James asked. There was a glimmer of amusement in his eyes.

It told Lawrence more than James realised. That he could be amused by this meant he was, in some regard, accustomed to it.

His panic, of a few moments before, suggested he'd sensed an "episode" coming on.

If there was ever a case study for organic causes of brain dysfunction, it was this one. Though whether an ability to catalyse kinetic outbursts could be considered a dysfunction, was open to question; in Lawrence's book, it was certainly an aberration. He had a sudden stirring of interest, not the least of which was motivated by his own response to the rock toss. Why had he been so certain he could end it? Where had that conviction come from? It was hard to discount that

particular feeling of burning energy that had lodged somewhere in his gut.

Whatever else, it was certain the rock assault had ended at his words. Was that because James' brain had suddenly picked up the message, and certain activators had been turned off? If James was able to turn this off, wouldn't a sense of self-preservation have triggered the impulse long before this? At a time when he was being personally pelted, and there was no one around to help him?

Lawrence had found the thought that some part of his own brain had acted physically upon the rock storm quite alarming. In all the self-analysis he'd done during his training and afterwards, he'd never uncovered a potential for psychokinesis - or anti-psychokinesis, as the case may be. If he had, he would have found a way to discount it, ignore it, or attempt to rid himself of it.

But now he was trapped. He had to know why.

Still, he hadn't been the one to initiate or enlist the other members of this particular "Cluster". All it had taken was his proximity to James that day, his success in stopping the rockstorm, and some research that was the preliminary to a study he was going to effect on anomalous condition. It had dangled a carrot, and someone had snatched at it.

And, just like a carrot, someone had snatched away his roots, and transplanted him elsewhere. He couldn't exactly say his reputation had "gone to seed", because there's a certain credibility in working for the government - but his security was shot to hell.

As much as he'd wanted to explore the human brain before, now he realised there are a lot of things you're better off not knowing...

\*

"Ren's down for the count. Anyone tell you?"

Of course, they hadn't. Valterzar had left it to him, the weasel. Josh supposed in its own way, it was a kindness, so that Dustin wouldn't have to hear the "why" from anyone else.

Dustin grabbed Josh's arm. "*Where is she? What's wrong with her?*"

Josh noted the panic and hid his smile. *Good*. About time Dusty let her know how he felt.

Ren had never admitted it, either - until today. Today, she might as well have danced on the table for the subtlety of her gesture. She'd done something that went against her principles - for Dustin. She'd put herself at risk, and opened herself in a way that had left her vulnerable. She must have suspected she wouldn't be able to walk away from this one - that she'd have to endure either Valterzar's wrath or his helpful hands - and to someone with her streak of independence, that must have been a difficult surrender. Businesslike relationship replaced by an embarrassing intimacy, if Valterzar insisted on acting like a doctor.

Plus, she'd put Dustin in an impossible position, which must have made her own nearly untenable. He was being given a choice to be excessively grateful, which she would have found abhorrent; to be furious at what he would consider near-suicide; or to be forced into admitting some kind of emotional attachment for her before he was ready.

Josh didn't have to be very sensitive to guess that the last person Kithren Magnus would want to see on wakening was Dustin Mallory.

Josh hauled Dustin out of bed and into a wheelchair. He felt another twinge of guilt as Dustin flinched. Ren might have the venom, but Dustin still had the hole in his leg that went with it.

Josh covered his dismay with a griping, "Hurry up, Dusty!"

Dustin nodded. "Ready!"

The last one she'd want to see, but the one she needed most.

\*

“It’s Lawrence Valterzar’s group.”

Charles Smythe smiled. “‘Rockhead Valterzar’?”

Marc Jekkes nodded. “The only Valterzar I’m unlucky enough to know.”

“Tell me again who’s in the Cluster.”

Jekkes looked at the chart. “Dustin Mallory, Kithren Magnus, Joshua Wingot, James Wickham, Erik Dainler -”

“- the *prima donna*,” Smythe interrupted.

Jekkes grinned. “- and Meredith Feiderman. In order: retrocognition, telepathy, clairvoyance, PK, bioPK, mediumship.”

“What?” Smythe asked sarcastically. “No astral flyers? How could we have been so remiss?” He shook his head, and asked, in the same incredulous tone, “How did I ever get this job?” He nodded toward the chart. “Isn’t Magnus a plant scientist?”

“Yep. PhD plant pathology. Works at the University on pathogenic fungi.”

“Good. We’ll need her. Mallory’s in graphics, and Wingot’s a paleo man?”

“Feiderman’s the only one in the group without a PhD - and she has two Masters’ degrees, in philosophy and Eastern religions. She writes award-winning children’s books.”

“Bright group. What’s Wickham’s specialty? Besides rockstorms, that is.”

Jekkes looked at the text and chuckled. “Geology.”

“Oh, Christ!” Smythe grinned. “We’ve been trying to figure out how Mallory gave the *Drepanosaurus* such physicality. He’s been doing a 3D image for Wingot, by the way. Have you seen it? It’s unbelievable. Amazing the parallels, here. Mallory spends most of his work hours creating 3D work that strives to emulate ‘reality’. Then, in his personal ‘3D world’, he is merely observing, and it somehow becomes his reality. I would have thought PK on the injury if Wingot hadn’t saved the spine.”

“Any theories on the ‘physicality’ so far?”

“Only one with any credibility. We think during the episode, he and Wingot were touching. Shoes, a hand on the shoulder - something like that. Wingot wanted this so badly he could taste it. It’s possible they only came in contact when Mallory flung himself to one side - at the moment of impact. Between Josh Wingot’s clairvoyance, and Dustin Mallory’s retro ability, they were able to extend the boundaries.”

“So, what happens now?”

“None of the players realise how much we know - including Valterzar. His people wouldn’t believe how zealously he guards their privacy - with one exception.”

“The *prima donna*?”

Smythe grinned. “Yeah. In Dainler’s words: ‘too much privacy, and I wouldn’t be riding in a limo.’ We’re thinking of teaming some of them up, and creating situations that might stimulate a repeat performance of Mallory’s and Wingot’s fiasco. Besides, Mallory’s been getting a little dissatisfied. It might be a good time to give him something to think about.”

“Isn’t that a little hazardous?”

“We’re paid to extend the boundaries, then find a use for it, Marcus. We could use some fresh alternatives to conventional military action right now. Something beyond the piddling clairvoyant surveillance or PK number crunching.” He read Jekkes’ next question in his eyes. “It doesn’t matter whether they approve or not. None of them would be alive right now without our intervention. They would have become stats on the infant mortality rolls. Just a few more unexplained crib deaths.”

“But wasn’t it covert activity that initially put them at risk?”

Smythe shrugged. He told Jekkes, a little irritably, “And we could argue aboriginal rights, interment camps, and black suppression, too. Ancient history. The point is, an effort was made to rectify the situation. It was Symbio - and by extension, the ‘government’ - who supplied the ‘therapy’ that kept them from becoming victims. We’ve also supplied money for their education, run counter to any obstacles their ‘conditions’ might have created, and covered for them when ‘accidents’ have put them at risk, like Ren Magnus’ overblown response at the hospital today.”

Jekkes commented, “So, their lives would have been hell without us, whether they know it or not.”

Smythe hesitated, then said bluntly, “And so, Marcus, whether they *like* it or not - they’re ours.”

\*

Dustin lurched out of the chair before Josh had even brought it to a stop. It was the sight of her, his Kitten, lying there so still that shook him. He looked up, quickly checking the room. He caught Erik Dainler’s eye with a look of relief. “Thank God,” he whispered.

“Nice to finally get the respect I deserve,” Erik remarked.

But Dustin wasn’t listening. Valterzar felt almost embarrassed watching this. Mallory was nearly as exposed as Kithren Magnus had been.

Or was he? Again, it made Lawrence Valterzar wonder. Was he seeing more than someone else would? Because he knew them - or because his instincts were more refined than most? He’d been wondering it for a while now. The way he’d been hired, and some of the probable reasons behind it. The way he’d been a damned good psychiatrist - because he could frequently guess what his patients were thinking; anticipate their needs. Had Dustin and Ren really shared their feelings so openly, or was that just the way he was seeing it?

Dustin brushed his lips across her forehead, but there was no response. “Is the respirator -?”

Valterzar nodded. “Keeping her alive,” he said quietly. “We have to do this now, Dustin.” He smiled at him. “Give her a kiss for luck, and let’s go.”

Dustin bent and kissed her on the lips, then nearly toppled over on his bad leg. Erik caught him, and perched him on the edge of the bed. “One patient at a time,” he pleaded, grinning. “Please.”

“Will it interfere?”

“Probably,” Erik said reluctantly, taking another glance at Ren. “But sit back against the pillows and hold her anyway.”

Dustin wrapped his arms around her and brushed his lips against her hair. “Ready,” he said. “Let’s do it.”

Erik nodded. He closed his eyes, rested his hands on Kithren’s middle, and let himself go.

## Chapter Two

*There's no way I'm ever going to do it again. Not a chance.*

*No more retro visits.*

*A normal life.*

"No way in hell," he told Lolita. She fluffed her feathers at him and came in for a scritch, her big hooked beak dangerously close to his ear. She was really annoyed by his uneven gait these days.

"Don't give me attitude," he told her. He balanced on his good leg and rubbed with a couple of fingers behind her yellow crest. "If you didn't weigh so much, we could both manoeuvre better. Good boy," he muttered, but his mind was elsewhere. They'd stitched him up, given him antibiotics, and let him go home on the second day.

Erik had claimed he was too spent after Ren's healing to do any more, but Dustin knew him better than that. He was pissed off, and Dustin figured it had something to do with Ren, and the way she'd nearly killed herself trying to help him.

*As though I had any say in it.* Dustin frowned a little as he considered what she'd risked. He didn't blame Erik for being angry. He was angry, too, but he didn't have anyone to direct it toward, except himself.

She'd risked a lot. It had been a long time coming. He'd never wanted to make the first move. He'd decided a long time ago he didn't have anything to offer her. His life could be hell at times, when he stepped into a backwards world. He couldn't move, couldn't see what was happening in his own time. Instant fool - out of sync. One unwary step and he'd appear more of an oaf than he already did. Tumbling down stairs as he was dodging to avoid a wayward cart.

Which was foolish in itself. Until three days ago, the past had never reached out to bite him. He had to admit the physicality of that last event had scared him shitless.

When he felt better, he might talk it out with Josh. Lawrence would want him to talk it out with him, but Dusty balked at that. Valterzar was a psychiatrist. He'd listen, say little, and shove it into a report.

Dustin didn't want it. He'd never asked for psychiatric help - or any other kind of help. He hadn't even realised till a few years ago how strange that was. There'd always been someone there - someone who came in, and yanked him out of the middle of a busy street when he froze halfway across, lost in Never Never Land. Someone who explained away the incidents, or rang him up to see how he was doing during those times despair had rendered him nearly housebound.

But, normal people didn't have "helpers", or "managers" who came out of nowhere. It was funny how he hadn't known. How the people he hung out with most were those like himself. Ren, Josh, Erik, James and Merrie had been his friends for years - since they were kids. He gravitated toward them, because they, like he, were hiding. Trying to function in a normal world while hiding the phenomena that sprang at them out of the woodwork. Only Erik had decided to come out of the black hole. He'd gone public, and it had been shortly after that that Valterzar had shown up on the scene. That was six years ago now.

Now, Dustin worked a job that was "safe". Stationary. Just him and his computer, some workmates, and an office that didn't go spinning off into the Middle Ages or Jurassic Park if he took a wrong step. And, recently, he'd begun to hope again. Maybe Ren. Just maybe.

*Ren and me.* He grinned. She'd been dropping by every day, with little gifts for him that were somehow just perfect. Drawing pencils, special watercolour paper for his printer. She was the

most beautiful - and certainly the most special - aspect of his life.

The next instant he was worrying that she had another motive entirely. She was one of his closest friends, and naturally, she was concerned about his health. So concerned that she'd taken some of it off him.

He was glad she came. He was as worried about her as she seemed to be about him. Whatever Erik had done, though, had enacted a cure. She looked great.

He sighed. *Boy, did she look great...*

But, he had to admit that he still didn't feel right. He'd phoned the doctor because he had a fever, and they'd reminded him he was on antibiotics, and told him to call them if he was still hot tomorrow.

He knew what Valterzar would say. "*Just give me a call and I'll drop by.*" That, however, was not what Dustin Mallory wanted. He didn't want his keeper fetched, or his life arranged around him. He wanted to go through channels, just like anybody else.

"If you're sick, Lolita, call the doctor," he muttered. Damn if he didn't feel crappy. He couldn't eat, and he hadn't slept since he'd woken up in the hospital ward. He knew he was almost at the point where any doctor would do - even Valterzar - but he was too damn stubborn to give in. "Call your own doctor. Not some trumped-up, glorified, psychologically-perverse quack." He rubbed Lolita under her wing. "Good boy."

"Harsh words. By the way, she's a girl," a voice reminded him.

"Nice of you to knock," Dustin said sarcastically.

"And make you jump off your deathbed? No way." Josh grinned. "You can treat me like royalty next time." He nodded toward the injured limb. "How's the leg?"

"Know you'll find this a little 'hard to swallow'," Dustin retorted, "but it almost feels like I got bit by a dinosaur."

"Shit, you're a lucky bastard." Josh sighed. "Even if it was just a sting." The way he said it made it sound like a negligible bee had somehow found its way up his pant leg.

The weird thing was he meant the "lucky bastard" part. "Excuse me if I pound your face in," Dustin told him. He reached out a fist, lost his balance, and nearly toppled onto his face. Josh caught him and steadied him. "What happened to the stinger, anyway? I might want to put it in my trophy case."

A little sheepishly, Josh pulled a drawstring bag out from inside his shirt.

Dustin snorted. "You're kidding!" He shook his head. "I don't believe you! Shouldn't it be in a lab or something?" He hooted. "What is this? A totem against evil spirits?"

Josh ignored him. He undid the string and reverently drew the spine halfway out of the bag. "See?" he said, in a hushed whisper, his voice awed. It also held a trace of envy as he added, "Do you know how lucky you are? I'll need a detailed account of everything you saw -"

Dustin rapped him with a crutch. "Lucky, am I? (rap) If I'd come back limbless (rap), you could have written a (swing - miss) fuckin' paper (hop - rap) on it!" He shook his head at the gleam of acknowledgment in Josh's eye. "You *are* going to write a paper!" He raised his voice, some of his own amusement gone. "Are you *out of your mind?! They'll crucify me!*"

"I'll keep your name out of it..."

"Until the paparazzi, or whatever they are, get their hands on it! How many people in the hospital records have had a dinosaur tooth -" At the look on Josh's face, Dustin added a derisive "or whatever - pulled out of their hides?"

"They don't know!" Josh explained. "I told them it was a pointy rock." He watched Dustin's agitated pacing. It would have been pacing, anyway, if Dusty could synchronise his



crutch and leg actions. After observing him for a while in silence, he asked, "How're you feeling?"

"Great," Dustin growled at him. "They'll crucify me!"

"You said that." Josh went over and coaxed Lolita off Dusty's shoulder and onto his own arm. "Good girl, Lolita." Dustin wasn't looking too good. In fact, he looked damn sick. Josh realised he'd been so wrapped up in the thrill of discovery, that he hadn't been all that observant. "Want a drink of water?" he asked now, as he urged the cockatoo back onto her perch.

Dustin nodded gratefully. "Thanks."

Josh was gone for nearly a minute. When he came back, he had a glass of water, and a couple of pill bottles. "Let's see: anti-inflammatories, antibiotics, painkillers. What do you need?"

"A good night's sleep and some peace and quiet," Dustin replied. He wobbled slightly.

Josh took one of the crutches and helped him over to the couch. "You're pretty hot," he remarked. He smiled slightly, anticipating Dustin's retort. It didn't come.

Instead, Dusty only shivered and muttered, "I don't feel 'hot'."

"You don't look so hot, either," Josh replied. Dusty's face was flushed, and his eyes slightly glazed.

The phone rang. "Could you get that?" Dustin asked. The phone seemed a long way across the room.

Josh was carrying on quite a conversation, but Dustin tuned it out. He was staring, rather blankly, at the wall. It took him a while to realise he wasn't thinking about anything.

Correction. He was thinking about how much his leg hurt, and how much he wasn't going to think about it.

"Let's go," Josh said curtly. He helped Dustin to his feet and pulled an arm over his shoulder.

"What's up?" Dustin asked, confused.

"You are. All the way out to the car," he muttered, half-carrying him down the hall. "They cultured the bacteria in your leg -"

"From the spine," Dustin said confusedly.

"Yeah," Josh said worriedly. "They've never seen it before. They're going to hit you with some other antibiotics."

"Who was on the phone?" Dustin asked.

"Valterzar. He wanted to come by and pick you up, but I told him I'd handle it."

Dustin took it about the way Josh had figured he would. He pulled away and leaned back against the wall. "No. He's *not* my doctor. I've talked to my doctor," he said quietly, "and he suggested I come by tomorrow."

"This isn't something to play with, Dusty."

"He's management. I don't need a manager." Dustin hobbled back down the hall. The heat in his body inflamed his temper. "*It's a free country!*" he yelled at Josh. "*Who do they think they are?* Why would they tell 'Valterzar' first, before they'd tell me?!"

Josh followed him down the hall. At Dusty's words, though, he stopped. "I don't know," he admitted. "The 'Bail-Out Squad'. Because we're not normal -"

"*But don't you see it?*" Dustin roared. Today, because of Ren, because of the dreams he'd dared to hope for, it was more important than ever. "We'll never get a shot at it, Josh! Not if we don't make a stand now!"

"But it'd make a hell of a lot more sense to make a 'stand' when you can stand up!" Josh bellowed back. He lowered his voice slightly. "I'll call Erik -"

"*Fuck Erik!*" Dustin yelled. "He's an easy out. Always the easy out! We never take

responsibility for the havoc. *Fuck it all!*” At the expression on Josh’s face, he slammed a fist into the wall. “I don’t *need* a manager,” he repeated, but most of his anger was gone now, lost in something resembling despair. “I just want to live, Josh,” he whispered. “*Really* live.”

“I’ll take you to another hospital. No Valterzar. No connection - to anything. They can call for the results. Just come with me, Dusty.” He put a hand on his shoulder. “Come with me,” he urged.

Dustin stared at him for a moment. His eyes looked so glassy with fever that Josh wondered how he was seeing.

“It’s a friend thing,” Josh assured him. “No easy out. Friends help each other.”

Dusty nodded slowly, and let Josh take his arm. “Just do me a favour,” he said, with a trace of a smile.

“What?” Josh tugged Dusty’s arm over his shoulder. Dusty sagged against him and Josh boosted him up.

Dusty turned his head and grimaced at Josh. “No dinosaurs,” he begged.

Josh grinned back. “Wouldn’t think of it,” he said.

\*

“I can’t go now.”

She realised, as soon as she’d said it, that she’d been too blunt. Now they’d want an explanation. She wasn’t stupid or naive enough to think they hadn’t already checked her current work projects, to see whether she could be spared without jeopardising her employment. They were always very careful about that. If there wasn’t a good enough explanation, and if she persisted in her refusal, then they’d find a way to “convince” her.

She wondered whether the others received calls like this. Urgent requests for help couched in a neediness she couldn’t refuse. They knew how sensitive she was; how a negative answer would haunt her later. It was only lately that she’d also begun to wonder whether that negative feedback was also predetermined and set up - against the unlikely contingency of a refusal. Feedback modelled and analysed to offer maximum regret, so refusals wouldn’t become the norm.

The last time, refusal had been succeeded by immediate fill-in duty at an Australasian plant pathology conference. Since she’d been planning to attend anyway, there was no excuse she could use not to lecture. After all, *Fusarium* was the subject of her research, and she was considered an expert in her field.

As a student, she’d managed many of the lectures the same way a lot of the other students did: by tape recorder. There were some classes she couldn’t miss, of course, but she’d always had a very small exam room to test in. It wasn’t until later that she wondered why and how she’d been singled out for exam privileges. With the egocentricity of the young, she’d come to the conclusion it must owe, at least in part, to her superior grades. After a while, she’d taken it in her stride and not bothered to ask why. The alternative was too uncomfortable in many instances for her to tolerate; the interference, with everyone in the lecture theatre so tense and agitated, nearly unbearable. It destroyed her own focus, so she couldn’t concentrate. Wrong answers, and right answers, anger and angst were being flung at her from all directions. She’d nearly flunked out her first quarter.

But then, it had all changed. She’d learned to substitute the tape recorder for her presence, and transcribe the lectures in peace, and exams had somehow been arranged to minimise her problems. She’d been so grateful that she hadn’t allowed herself to consider too deeply the whos and whys - then. She’d graduated magna cum laude, and gone on to do a doctorate.

Conferences were considered an important part of professional development, and she’d figured out a way to manage those, too. Generally, with the focus on the lecturers, the situation

differed from those university classes where attention was frequently scattered. A third of the crowd at a conference might be students, but at that point, they were out to impress potential employers. It made a lecture scene nearly bearable for her. That, and the fact that what she couldn't bear she could recoup from abstracts and transcripts of the talks. Acceptable, and definitely more tolerable.

Except when she was the lecturer. She had a feeling they'd set her up for it as surely as they'd set her up for singular exams. With the intense focus centred on her, her mind was no longer her own. She'd prepped for her talk, of course, but she could never have prepared for those moments behind the podium. Never have known how scattered her concentration could become, or how desperate she'd feel as her own thoughts were displaced by those of a hundred others. How the tension of a speech-giver could give way to panic as she spoke words that weren't her own, but fragments of others' thoughts. Or how much angst she'd feel as her hard-won professionalism was ripped apart in front of her peers, and her reputation ridiculed by the unheard laughter of the students. In the end, her focus had given way completely, and she'd gone into deep shock, and collapsed on-stage, in front of everyone. They'd carted her away by ambulance, made some excuse about delirium brought on by a recurrence of malaria, and flown her home.

Covered her ass, her reputation. Saved her. Bailed her out.

But the lesson had been learned. Thwart the "system", and you were in for it. They might cover for you afterwards, but you'd have to pay first.

It had been the single worst moment of her life.

Until recently - when she'd seen Dustin in that bed. She'd realised then that she valued his life more than her own. It was why she didn't want to leave now, when he was so sick.

It wasn't hard to guess it was also the reason why they were so insistent that she go.

\*

Dustin never remembered the drive to the hospital. All he was aware of was the endlessness of it. He was so hot he would cheerfully have shed his skin, if someone had asked. And then he thought someone had, and he remembered arguing - telling them to leave his skin alone - but they poked and prodded him anyway.

When he woke up, the room was dark. Then, his vision cleared, and he noticed the nightlight, above his bed. The agitated beeping of the monitor assured him he was still alive. The way his body felt assured him that Josh had respected his wishes. No insta-cures. Dustin felt a brief surge of pride, and gave a wide smile. *I can do this*, he thought.

"Never figured you for the gutsy type," came a cool voice from his right.

*Erik.*

Dustin's niggings of pride burnt out in a surge of anger. He didn't know who to be angrier with: Josh or Erik.

Dusty turned to look at him - his mouth opened to comment. He snapped it shut when he saw him. Erik looked exhausted. There were circles under his eyes, he needed a shave, and his clothes were wrinkled. "How long have you been here?" Dusty asked.

"Three days, five hours, and -" Erik looked at his watch, "- eighteen minutes. Josh said you didn't want to go for the cure, but -"

"But what?"

Erik shot him an embarrassed grin. "People don't always know what's best for them." He shrugged. "I was scared to leave," he admitted baldly. He came over to the bed and rested his hand on Dustin's arm. "You gonna live now?"

Dustin didn't know what to say. This was the old Erik - the one he used to know, before he

got rich and famous. Dustin could only nod, and grin.

It was enough for Erik. “Good,” he said, giving his arm a quick squeeze. “Cause I’m leaving now.” His eyes were moist as he turned back, at the door. “Welcome back, my Friend.”

\*

“But we want to know why -”

Valterzar stood up abruptly. Fatigue was making his temper short. Not only was Dustin his responsibility, he was a friend - even if the man didn’t know it. “It’s covered,” he snapped, knowing that he sounded far from the psychiatric professional they’d hired him as. “If he wants to go it alone, it’s his business -”

“We have a certain investment in his welfa-”

“His *right*,” Valterzar practically growled at him. “He’s not under arrest, is he?” His eyes narrowed. “I didn’t think so. That means he still retains the rights of a self-governing, self-determining individual. I respect his decision.” He headed for the door. “Enough said.”

“You can be replaced,” Smythe warned him.

“Probably,” Valterzar told him, shrugging. He stood there for a moment, thought it over, then said, “Try telling someone who gives a damn.”

Without another word, he turned and walked out of the room.

## Chapter Three

“Don’t look so distracted,” Josh told her. He grinned as he added in an exaggerated whisper, “People will begin to think you’re *strange*.”

They were walking down a muddy street, lined with narrow, tin-roofed houses. Ren was reading as they went, but Josh was doing an on-going battle with a persistent pig. It was a young boar that had broken out of somebody’s pen and it kept coming around, to sniff his boots. Ren thought it was hilarious. Josh thought it was a pain in the ass.

“They’ll be too busy looking at you and the pig to notice.” She continued searching through a report on gene therapy.

Josh was bored. He discreetly kicked the pig out of the way for the fourth time. It gave an irritated squeal and turned on him.

*Thank God for steel-toed boots.* “You could’ve helped me,” Josh complained.

“I don’t want to smell like pig.”

“What’s so interesting, anyway? Not that I really care.”

“Triggers.” She glanced at him, uncertain whether to tell him what she’d been thinking. “Have they ever sent you out with anyone before?”

“No. What’re you thinking? That I’m the ‘trigger’ for what happened to Dusty?” It was what he’d been worried about himself.

“Or vice versa.”

“One drawback - we’ve spent time together before. Most of our lives, in fact. Never had any results like that.”

“I know. That’s what’s bothering me.” She lowered her voice. “This is about genetic triggers. Maybe we have built-in timers, set to go off.” She looked embarrassed. “I know it sounds stupid, but I wonder. Two years ago, and that thing with Erik. You and Dusty.” She hesitated, then closed her eyes. Josh guessed she was checking their surroundings for negative feedback, to see whether anyone was monitoring them. “I just don’t want to stir up anything, or give them any ideas.”

Josh’s jaw was set. “They shouldn’t have trained us as scientists if they didn’t want us to do some self-analysis. Do you really think we might have built-in detonators?” With Ren, you had to take these things seriously. You never knew whether it was something she’d come up with on her own, or that she’d “picked up” from someone else at Symtech.

“All I’m saying is that we should watch out.” She put the paper back in her bag. “Dusty’s right. I’m sick of being a victim. It makes me feel so - so -”

“Wimpy?” Josh asked.

She grinned. “Yeah. The ‘predictable’ doesn’t help, either.”

“I think, for the moment, I’ll put your little trigger idea out of my head.” Josh looked at her in disgust. “Or - I would - if certain people hadn’t made such a big deal about it.”

She was still smiling. “Well, you *did* ask.”

“‘You asked for it,’” he mimicked. He complained, “Now, all I can see is your damned paper in the background.”

“I put it away,” she told him.

“Big deal. With me, it doesn’t matter. My brain’s focussed on it.”

“Better than focussing it on that pig’s backside,” she told him.

He grimaced. “Stop that!” he hissed. “You’re driving me nuts.”

She grinned. "Here's another one for you: did you ever think maybe the reason we're so predictable, is that they have someone precognitive on their team?"

"I hope Dusty never marries you," Josh told her irritably, but there was a flicker of amusement in his eyes. "You'd drive him crazy, inside of a week."

\*

She was, indeed, the merriest person he knew. Meredith Feiderman was as intense a personality as any of the others - *and just as much in denial*, Lawrence Valterzar thought. In her, though, it took the form of a zestful appreciation for life.

Lawrence walked up to her door, grinning as he noticed the new paint. The colours had changed yet again. This time, the panels were bright yellow, with a lavender frame. Cheerful. Alive. Enough to ward away the most fearful of spirits.

He wondered if it was enough to bring her peace. Merrie was a frenetic goer and doer. In the six years he'd known her, Lawrence had been constantly on the watch for burnout. He knew what drove her, but couldn't help but admire the ways she'd found to manage it. Her house was nearly always filled with people. That was the other thing about Merrie - her dread of being alone.

She'd explained it to him once. "It's not loneliness," she'd sighed, after a particularly frenzied round of people, painting, and partying. "As long as there're people present, I don't have to worry about their state." At his blank look, she'd added kindly, "About whether they're alive - or dead." She'd grinned a little flippantly then. "They're just people."

It sounded like a sensible approach. Sometimes her flippant remarks seemed to be the only sensible thing about her. As long as she kept moving, and didn't linger too long on anything, she didn't have to think. She fed herself and her constant guests with a seemingly endless quotient of children's stories, which she illustrated herself - all in the bright colours she so favoured in her surroundings. Merrie had a brilliant mind when channelled, but she didn't take any chances. She made sure the stimulus was present, to occupy her brain, before she'd let down her guard. And because writing could be such a solitary occupation, she ensured hers wasn't, by doing her artwork and prose in company.

Lawrence also knew about her education. She hadn't used her comparative religion studies to delve more deeply into her "gift". She'd used them to protect herself - to find some way to control it. Not for Merrie the obscurities of ectoplasmic artforms, or the etheric darkness of oblique pentagons or magic. No - Merrie had found a way to live, without dwelling upon her body's preoccupation with death.

He knocked, and Merrie answered the door herself. "Dusty okay?" she asked quickly.

"Why?" Lawrence quipped. "Did he come calling?"

She grinned in appreciation, then threw her arms around him, and gave him a spontaneous hug. "Glad you're here, Zar. Everybody's leaving in five." She kissed the side of his cheek, then whispered into his ear, "I don't want to be alone, you see."

"What happens if you goof up? And everybody takes off to a better party?"

"There are no better parties," she said confidently. "And if my public vanishes, I go out." She gave him a kiss on the other cheek, then nestled against him. "Or else I call my Zar," she murmured. She pulled back, to look him straight in the eye. "He's never failed me yet," she said.

\*

Ren looked out over the arid landscape, but all she could see were skeletal paloverdes, saguaros, ocotillos, and a scattering of mesquite. "This is ridiculous," she muttered. "I'm supposed to be checking for fungal damage."

"That white leftover certainly fits the bill," Josh told her, pointing to an ocotillo. "That's

damage, if I ever saw it.”

She snorted. “I was hoping to see something a little more generalised - patterns of damage, that kind of thing. I’ll have to check them close-up.”

“One by one?” Josh asked, dismayed.

“Do you complain like this when you get out your toothbrush and scrape for dinosaur rubble?”

“Point taken. Watch yourself,” he warned. “There’s a snake under that rock - and that one.” He pointed to a rock on her left. “Scorpion.”

Ren moved back a little gingerly, until she was clear. “Safe now?”

Josh nodded. “Far as I can tell. If it’s so obvious there’s no big fungal problem, then why are we here?”

“I have to assume it’s a serious request, Josh.” She admitted, “Makes me feel less used.”

“Used for your brain, rather than your ‘brain’.” He indicated a large, flat rock. “Scorpions,” he said, with a mock shiver. “Lots of ‘em.” As he followed her around it, he asked, “What fungus is this, anyway?”

“*Fusarium oxysporum*. A mycoherbicide used for biocontrol. It’s been in development for years. Two-sided assault on the Colombian drug trade - against the coca plants, and the cash flow for insurgents. Not too nice for the locals, though.”

He looked up quickly. “Why? Ups the violence?”

“Fusariosis. People with immune deficiencies are susceptible to toxins in the fungus. Unfortunately, they’ve found poor diet can compromise the immune system *into* a susceptible state. In poverty-stricken areas it can be fatal.”

Josh frowned. “How bad is it?”

“Seventy-six percent mortality, in one study.”

“Biowarfare.”

“It could be considered that way. They didn’t tell me all this, just in case you’re wondering. Once I knew what I was searching for, I looked up the rest.”

“Why here?” Josh looked disparagingly at the miserably sparse plant numbers, somehow eking out a living in dust-dry soils. “I mean, far be it from me to forego a chance to dig, but...” His expression said it all.

Ren shrugged. “Collateral damage? If they’re having me look for it, it must mean some got away.” She grimaced. “I don’t think they have too much to worry about. This isn’t exactly fungus heaven.” Poking a finger warily between the spines of a saguaro, Ren added, “Even if it took out one, it’d take a bloody miracle to hit another susceptible host. I don’t even know if it can affect cactus.”

“That would have been a good thing to look up,” Josh said practically.

“I wasn’t exactly given much time -” she began.

Josh just looked at her.

She laughed. “Okay! I admit it! Once they told me what I was looking for I got so involved considering the possibilities that I didn’t do all my homework. Is that what you wanted to hear?”

“It’ll do for a start.” Josh scanned from horizon to horizon. *Pretty open ground*. “This area used to be underwater. Did you know that?” He scanned the arid surface, searching for unusual features. He pointed to a distant lump of rock, reddish sandy soil, and scrubby creosote. “That one looks promising.”

“Not for fungus.”

Josh had a glint in his eyes. “I’m not looking for fungus.”

"If a stegosaurus seeps out of the sand, I'll let you know." Ren followed him down off the rocks then said, "Go for it, Josh. You might never get this 'opportunity' again." She looked around at the heat waves rising off the dried sand and sighed. "I'll just be strolling through, checking leaves and stems."

"Watch your pit stops."

"Peeping Tomases?"

Josh grinned. "That's Peeping Joshes, and I wouldn't have felt the need to warn you. Rattlesnakes."

"Oh."

"Yeah. Has to do with ambient temperature. Sometimes, in the middle of the day, they prefer a little shade. I'd hate to see you get a bite in the backside."

"Glad you know the desert. Thanks."

"See you at the Plesiosaur." Josh set off determinedly for his lump of dirt in the distance.

"Don't let the mirages bite!" Ren yelled, turning back to the ocotillo and pulling out her magnifying lens. She focused it carefully on the leaf, then made a note in her PDA. She yelped when her specimen caught fire.

Her phone buzzed. "Did I hear a distant cry of dismay?"

She twisted to look at him and gave him a big thumbs up. "Just set my leaf on fire."

His chuckle sounded like hissy static in the phone. "That's what Dusty said you do for him - and here, I didn't believe him."

\*

"What about your nights?"

"You mean, when I run out of money?"

He looked slightly shocked at that, and Merrie chuckled. "I don't mean whores, Zar," she laughed. "Male or otherwise. I meant when I'm broke, and there's no more food or entertainment."

He saw the sadness in her eyes and knew this was one of the rare times she'd truly let down her guard.

"My nights are indescribably terrifying."

He put an arm around her, and she leaned back into it. They were on the couch and he knew damn well this wasn't professional behaviour, but he damn well didn't care. In defiance of his ethics, he tightened his grip, a glint in his eyes. *Ethics be hanged...*

She went on, trying to explain. "*They*'re just people, but I'm selective about the people who enter my house."

"Didn't you say they turned up anyway? Came to your parties?"

She shrugged, and he unconsciously brushed his lips across the top of her head.

"But the stats are against them. They're outnumbered by the 'living', even if it's only one extra." She took his hand. "It's when they get me alone..." Her voice tapered off.

"What? What do they do?"

"Angry, Zar?" she asked, smiling up at him. "Don't be. Not all people are 'nice', and even if they are, certain situations can set them off."

"The bully syndrome."

"Is that a real syndrome, or are you talking down to me?"

He grinned. "Talking down to you. Keeping it simple, so even you can understand."

She laughed appreciatively.

"Tell me why they bully you."

"Because I'm so open they use me, but then they see me as the living's greatest wimp,



because I'm so easy to circumvent. Even nice people watch violence, Zar - and get a thrill out of it, too. Very few will stand up to a bully in school. Most will decide he's on the winning side and go with him instead."

But, Lawrence had latched on to her mention of violence. "What kind of violence? Poltergeist activity?" He glanced around the room, searching for signs of damage. It looked as it always did: colourful, full of lovely, glitteringly gaudy fairy hangings, crystals, flowers, fluffy cushions, and cheerful furnishings. *So vital. So Merrie.* He smiled.

Her next words knocked the smile right off his face.

She sat forward and lifted her shirt. There was heavy bruising across her rib cage, and when she pulled up her sleeve, he could see what looked like a bite mark. She wouldn't look at him, but he knew there'd be terror in her eyes. "H-He attacked me last night, when I was asleep." A sob escaped, and she scrunched up her fists. He knew she was angry with herself for that sob, that sign of weakness. It took her a moment to regain control, and he didn't say anything.

Because, she wasn't the only one fighting for control. Her "Zar" had just been swept with a nearly overwhelming urge to do violence to whomever, or whatever, had harmed her.

He guessed it was the next admission that had really crushed her, though - even more than a singular entity's decision to violate her. Lawrence knew how she loved people, and surrounded herself not only for protection, but enjoyment. She worked hard at happiness for others, and in return, people flocked to her.

How could they resist?

She was used to being liked, and though she could admit to aberrance in an individual, she expected something different from the majority. Some sign of friendship, maybe even support against a challenge. Apparently, last night she'd found neither, and he guessed she'd been trying all day to make excuses for them. To rationalise away her terror. Hence, the "greatest wimp" and "winning side" comments. Now, she sighed, her expression dismal as she showed him her back, and the scratch marks there. He could barely hear her when she whispered, "The worst of it was, the others were all cheering him on."

\*

Her phone buzzed again, and Ren jumped. She'd been concentrating so hard she'd tuned out everything else. "Yeah?" she asked distractedly.

"Are you drinking your water?"

"No."

"Well, get on it. Heat stroke's a killer."

Ren lifted her head, to stare blankly at the distant horizon. "That's not why you called," she said. "Do you need me?"

"I think so," Josh told her. "I'm beginning to realise why they needed us both."

She stuffed her specimens into her bag; moving rapidly while she held the phone in place with her shoulder. "Want I should use the earpiece, so I can stay on-line?" She zipped the pack and slung it over one shoulder, then started jogging in Josh's direction.

"Better not waste the battery," Josh warned.

"Wait!" she puffed. "Why?"

"Why not waste the battery? You stupid, Woman?"

"No!" she panted impatiently. "Why the two of us? For back-up?"

"No-o," he said slowly. "Triangulation."

\*

"You won't be alone tonight." It was a statement. Lawrence Valterzar had seen a lot in the

last six years. Cheery furnishings and bright knickknacks grew shadows in the night, creating their own sense of threat. Reds bled into black. Darkness travelled. In Merrie's case, the air around her took form.

He recalled the near-desperation with which Dustin had confronted his illness. He'd heard his words, as he thrashed in delirium. They'd let Erik "come out", because he'd arrived almost before they'd realised what he was doing. His theatrics had diminished his usefulness to them, but had done a lot to enhance the "psychic" image, so they'd let him go. Dustin wouldn't find it that easy. He was a cripple, who was bound by the complexities of his own mind. As much as he might find it abhorrent to rely on someone else, he'd always have to have someone there, to bail him out.

Lawrence wondered what they'd do to convince him. He still remembered the time they'd nearly shattered Ren. He'd been newer then, but it had still seemed like overkill for refusal. Nothing had been said, but he'd known, much as Ren had, that it was a setup. The difference was, he'd still been naive. He'd only figured it out after-the-fact. After Ren had already suffered through it.

That incident had made him question everything. Paranoia in the making. When James Wickham's "accident" with the rocks had triggered a call for psychiatric intervention, why had he been summoned? He had his own practice, and although he was listed on-call for the hospital, his name was way down the list. Had everyone else been busy? Or had there been a specific reason for the call - to him?

Now, as he found himself peering around Merrie's apartment, he recalled some of the horror stories he'd seen. Could she be living over some ancient graveyard? Had someone set it up so her gift was "active"?

He was lost in his thoughts when Merrie nudged him. They were still on the sofa, and he knew he had a decision to make. He wasn't about to leave her, but he didn't want to be just one more person to use her, either. It wouldn't be like that, but she'd never be sure, and he guessed she'd take any out he offered if it could see her through the night without fear.

"I'm never 'alone', Zar. That's the problem." She admitted, "I'd walk the streets before I'd let him at me again."

She didn't have to translate. She wasn't talking about a casual stroll - she'd go whoring, if that's what it took, to keep herself from being alone.

Lawrence's lips curved in a smile. "That won't be necessary," he said. He tilted his head and narrowed his eyes, staring at the curve of her lips.

*Not ethical, Valterzar.*

"My Zar," she said, rubbing her hand against his chest.

*To hell with it.* "Or maybe it will -" He bent his head and kissed her, and then just kept kissing her. He started with her mouth, then nibbled and kissed down her jaw, and the line of her neck. Damn, she tasted good!

Merrie was breathing heavily now; her eyes dilated. But she pushed him away - holding him off with a trembling hand. He had to know. It wouldn't be fair if he didn't know. "He-He won't like it," she whispered. Her eyes were wet now - fierce with wanting him, but not prepared to have him go in defenceless. "He'll fight you -"

She averted her head and stood up, on shaky legs - taking a few steps to widen the distance between them. It hurt her to say this. She'd wanted him to love her for so long. Longer than the eternity she sometimes glimpsed in the shadows. Now, he was willing, and she couldn't let him - because it wouldn't be right. She took a shuddery breath and forced a smile. "I didn't tell you, just so you'd have to -" She shook her head, unable to finish.

"I know you didn't." He could read her so clearly. She wanted so much to do the right thing. It went beyond any fears of karmic requital. It was her innate decency, coming to the fore.

He moved over to her slowly. "There are 'things' I can stop," he told her. "Rockfalls, for one. Who knows what else?"

"Things you can stop?" she whispered. Her arms were around his neck now, as his lips moved with that irresistible nibble along her neck.

"Many things," he murmured, picking her up, and burying his face for a moment in her breasts. "But this -"

He kissed her long and hard, then gave her a half-smile as he kicked open her bedroom door.

"- isn't one of them."

\*

"So much better to be on this side of things for a change," someone said.

Dustin opened his eyes. "How'd you know I wasn't asleep?"

"I'm an expert at feigning sleep. Anything to avoid discerning eyes - after one of my 'episodes'."

Dustin smiled. "Expert at feigning everything."

"Heard you refused 'The Dainler's' help. The way he tells it, he hung out here, suffering from champagne- and limo- deprivation, while you insisted on healing naturally." James Wickham grinned. "Made it sound as though you tortured him."

"Have to admit, though, it was good to see him when I woke up. Just like the old days." Dusty grinned at James. "Been to any good 'rock and roll' parties lately?"

"Aren't we snide. It's obvious how much *you* have things under control." James' voice lowered dramatically. "Don't know if I can trust you, even now..."

"Look who's talking! When you tell someone you live a 'stone's throw' away, you really mean it!"

James burst out laughing. "Never could hold onto it when you were around, Dusty." He plunked down in the chair, and some of the amusement faded from his voice. "They want us to do a job together." At Dusty's expression, James said, "Believe me, I understand how you feel. I'm so dependent on the fuckers I can barely screw myself -"

It was Dusty's turn to laugh. "What do they want? A 'fresh' sample of Cretaceous granite? If it's dinosaurs, I'm not going to sit there while you fling rocks in their faces -"

"Rocks aren't my only forte," James argued. "Just what I'm famous for." He leaned back and put his hands behind his head, and his feet up on the bed. "It's all very innocent. Supposedly, they need a 3D animation of an eruption. I'm the expert on all things geological, and you're the graphics man. To get the feel, we're getting an all-expenses paid trip to some remote, volcanically active island. Remote from here, anyway."

"Isolated," Dusty commented.

James nodded. "Very. The trip's short-term - just to give us the 'feel' of fire and brimstone. The problem is, they know it's a trek I'd kill for."

"And they need to find out whether I'm still in the fold. Valterzar coming along?"

James shook his head. "Zar's -" he began.

Dustin looked at him strangely.

"Merrie's word," he explained.

Dusty nodded. "Ah-h."

James grinned. "Anyway, Zar's been standing up to them. Had it from Merrie."

“She’s getting pretty chummy with him, isn’t she?”

“She’d get a lot more chummy with him if he’d let her.”

Dustin thought about it. Merrie was generally a pretty good judge of character.

James saw his expression and laughed. “Can’t have all the women!” he complained. “Isn’t Ren enough?!”

“It’s not Merrie I’m wondering about.” Dusty hesitated, then blurted, “Ren hasn’t been around.” He heard something like self-pity in his voice, and clamped his lips shut.

“And here you did all that big, brave suffering, and she didn’t even bother to come and watch.” James was smiling again. “What a waste of angst.”

Dustin looked embarrassed.

“For your information, she’s too far away.” He sobered. “She’s with Josh - in Mexico.”

“Another ‘field trip’?” Dustin asked, worried.

“Unfortunately, yes. If it helps, Ren only went once she knew Dainler was here.”

Dustin smiled.

“Symtech has it all set up to maximise their results,” James said, somewhat bitterly. “Pairing us off to see what happens. Josh and Ren, you and me, Merrie and Zar.”

“Zar?” Dustin asked.

James looked amused. “Haven’t you guessed? Come to think of it, I don’t think old Zar knows it himself. Whether he realises it or not, Valterzar is one of us.”

## Chapter Four

Josh made her sit in his shade and drink some water. “You’re going to look like a broiled lobster,” he remarked.

“I feel like one,” she said, lifting her face as the faintest of breezes swept her face. “Damn it,” she sighed. “Just a teaser.” As she shifted, the rocky sand crackled and crunched beneath her hiking boots. She closed her eyes to dream of more breezes. “Tell me about -” she began. Her eyes popped open and she told Josh, “There’s someone...a man. It’s close.”

“Good,” Josh sighed. “Because I’m getting the wreckage.”

“A plane?”

“Yeah. Stay here, while I go about 100 metres that way.” He headed down the slight incline, moving nearly at a jog across the sandy soil. Ren listened to the crunching steps, and watched the untouched surface marked with the pattern of his boots. When he waved at her, she punched in his number. “What direction do you get?” she asked.

“Northwest. What about you?”

She focused on the wavelength of that other individual - the one who was emitting all kinds of distress and fear. “Just east of north,” she said.

She could hear the smile in Josh’s voice. “See you there,” he replied.

\*

“What do you think you’re doing?” James had to scoot the chair to one side so Dustin could finish climbing out of the bed. The plastic at the base of the chair legs gave out an obnoxious rubbery squawk that grated on his nerves. “Damn, but you’re rude! Still visiting, you know.”

“And I can’t tell you how much I’m enjoying it.” Dustin turned his back, hopped over to the closet, and pulled out the small suitcase Josh had brought over - *when was it? two days ago?*

“Duty call. If I’d known it was going to make you crazed I would’ve waited.” James lifted his eyebrows when Dusty got impatient with the IV stand and yanked out the needle. “Excuse me, but I don’t think that’s part of your therapy.”

“I should’ve known that my stunt with Josh would have some kind of backlash,” Dustin said angrily, as he tugged on a shirt. “Either that, or this is payback for Ren’s healing efforts. Moving her far away so she can’t be contaminated by my ‘fight for freedom’.”

“Damned insurgent,” James said calmly. “Maybe they want to switch the mix to find out if Josh is the trigger.”

“Or me. Doesn’t that worry you a little?” He perched on the edge of the bed and gingerly slid his sore leg into his pants.

“Hey, I work in geological time. Old rock, new rock, what do I care? If you’re going somewhere, you’d better take along a prescription. Unless you prefer being dead.”

“More complications. There must be some prescription written up somewhere, if they planned on having me go off, filming volcanoes.”

“Animating them. No gyrating lava or tapdancing pumice, please. Besides, that was a future event. Say, two to three weeks in the future. Something to occupy your mind while you healed.”

“Or convince me to run to Erik for help.” Dustin was stuffing miscellanea out of the drawer into his bag now. “More manipulation. Even when we think we’re fucking them, they’re actually fucking us.” He sounded tired, and he sat down on the edge of the bed.

“*Calmase.*” James told him.

“Not likely,” Dustin said grimly. He went to stand up again, but he just didn’t have the strength. “I’m not going to go running -”

“*Silencio*. It’s obvious you’re not running anywhere.” James forced him back into bed and propped his leg on a pillow. “*Bueno*.”

“What are you on about?” Dustin asked irritably.

“Practicing my Spanish. Don’t worry about it. I’ll do the talking for you,” James said with exaggerated kindness. “‘*Mi amigo es muy gordo*.’ Things like that.”

“‘My friend is very fat’?”

“Loses something in the translation.”

“‘Gains’ is more like it. You’re coming to Mexico with me?”

“I’m a volcanophile. I can’t deny my calling.”

“We’ll look for one in Mexico. C’mon, Jamie. Maybe I’ll find you a nice rock.”

“Some incentive,” James retorted sarcastically. He gave a dramatic sigh. “I should’ve known the only pyroclastics I was going to get on this trip were your half-baked ideas.”

\*

Merrie was asleep in his arms, her head on his shoulder, one hand on his chest. Lawrence Valterzar was feeling raw - as new and exposed as an open wound. The only thing was, it didn’t hurt - yet.

But it would. He’d read too much, seen too much. Talked to too many patients. Witnessed too many of life’s failures in the voices of those who’d suffered emotional turmoil. It was this - this angst - that had kept him at a distance for so long.

Except, he could no longer live vicariously. His avoidance had gone from being the pure gesture of the objective observer, to the unhealthy vicarious role of the voyeur. If he’d denied what he was feeling for this woman at his side, after she’d so willingly exposed her spirit to him, he would have been wronging her - and himself. She hadn’t confided in him because she needed a friend, or because he was supposed to be the one with solutions. She’d spoken because he was her “Zar”, and she was vulnerable. In too much pain and fear to continue the charade. She’d needed *him* - not the role he’d agreed to play.

He loved her. He’d loved her and denied it for so long that he’d no longer known which was stronger - the truth or the lie. Until, for the first time, she’d needed him, and it broke down all the barriers. Her need had made it natural - easy, even - to surmount any obstacles his logic laid in his path. Things like ethics, and the need to keep his distance in order to perform his job; the problems of viewing all members of his “Cluster” in an equal light, so that he could make judgment calls without discrimination. His responsibility to make himself available to the others, when all he could think of was being with her.

Now, his being with her was about to be challenged. He could sense it coming, even as she lay innocently asleep. From what she’d said, he guessed that there’d been little sleep for her recently - that she’d fought off the advances of her admirer by giving him no openings. It was only when exhaustion had trapped her that he’d sneaked in, to catch her unaware.

In those moments, Zar was more naked than he’d ever been in his life. If he’d felt vulnerable moments before, it was nothing to what he was feeling now.

It was filling the corners of the room. A condensation of space that made the dimensions of the room so much smaller. So dense, and chill.

Like the confines of his coffin. Zar sensed it - the bitterness, the twisted anger that could only be assuaged by tormenting the weak. Pseudo-strength bought by diminishing others. Zar moved to wake her, to warn her, then paused. The bully would taunt, would threaten if she were

awake - but he wouldn't show himself. He needed to use a weakness to bring himself forth. Then, he'd manipulate that weakness to belittle a woman.

With him, it would always be women. Zar knew him then. Just another predator who preyed on a woman's trust. Zar's eyes narrowed. *Come in*, he pleaded. *Come in*. Something savage was stirring inside Zar, as he lay there, deceptively silent, and stared at the gathering darkness through narrowed lids. The churning inside owed nothing to nerves - if anything, it was anticipation. Zar fought to suppress a smile.

Some part of his brain was trying to shout a warning, but he ignored it. "That" part of his brain didn't know how to handle this, but there was some instinctive part that did. Some part that was actually looking forward to it.

*Come in...*

Merrie stirred now, and stiffened, as she sensed the violence in the room. She reached for him but he shook his head. "Best if you don't touch me," he warned. He stood up, naked, but feeling far from vulnerable now. The darkness gathered around him.

It was trying to crowd him. Waves of billowing black with odd glimmers of light that could mould a hand, or an arm. Pseudo-humanity attempting to prove itself through an act of remembered virulence. Zar wanted to laugh as it attempted to jostle him - to crowd him much as a knife-wielder might in a dark alley. "Wanna rumble?" Zar said harshly. He was actually smiling, as, palm-extended, he shoved his hand into the densest mass of swirling black. "*Die*, Fucker," he said calmly.

The black began to whirl faster, and Merrie covered her ears against the wails that filled the room. The black condensed still further, becoming swirling strings of black matter - thick, gooey, with a viscousness that flowed back and forth between layers.

Zar squinted and slowly drew his fingers into a fist. As his fingers curved, they seemed to draw the black with them. The gyrating vortex upped in intensity, but it now had an irregular wobble that grew worse as the vortex narrowed. As his hand closed, the blackness tore into his fist with a whine reminiscent of swift-singing wind.

It disappeared, with a tremendous bang that shivered the walls of the room.

Zar dusted off his palm distastefully, then turned to look at her. It would be a while before he could calm down. His adrenaline was still pulsing, and some of that primitive sense of domination was still with him.

She reached for him, but he shook his head. "If I take you now, it won't be love," he warned her in a growl. Lust, pure and simple. The need to dominate. To rape, if that's what it took to make her his.

She had to know.

She pulled back the covers and spread her legs. As he mounted her in a frenzied, passion-pounding release that bore no resemblance to their former lovemaking, her insides swelled to meet him, and she came, again and again. *Not love? With Zar?* She whispered huskily, "It is for me."

\*

*They could have warned us*, Ren thought worriedly as she hauled her sweaty body across yet another empty-looking swathe of desert. Josh was emitting similar patterns of worried impatience, and the beginnings of frustration. There was a huge difference between liberating a few leaves from a plant, and liberating a person from a downed plane.

*I'm not that kind of doctor!* She hoped Josh was better versed in first aid than she was. The mini kits they were carrying in their packs were hardly stocked to cope with a severe injury. The

most they could hope for was to keep the man alive while they broke radio silence and called for help.

*They should have asked Erik along. Maybe they thought he wouldn't go - or maybe they thought the pilot was already dead.*

Josh was of a different opinion. She punched in his number. "I don't think you should be so negative, Josh. If they didn't care, they wouldn't have sent us."

"*Will you cut that out!*" he complained. "I let down my guard for an instant, and you're in there, picking my brain!"

"It wasn't that way. I was thinking how hard this might be, and what may have motivated them to send us instead of Erik. And your thoughts sort of 'sifted in'." She sounded slightly embarrassed.

Josh was hot and sweaty and frustrated. "Maybe. It's still unethical."

"What about those times you described my underwear to Dustin?" she flared.

"That was years ago -" he began.

"Are you trying to tell me you never do that kind of thing now? You never meet somebody and pry, just a little, to see what they're made of?" There was silence on the other end. Ren added, "Seems to me I recall, just last week, some jokes about Dr. Armadillo's -"

"Arbuthott's," Josh corrected.

"- Arbuthott's inadequate lecture notes. Something about how lucky he was to bullshit his way through it." She sniffed loudly, into the phone. "I thought we were working together," Ren went on sadly. "I mean that, Josh - I never would've pried. I-I didn't mean to."

"That's okay, Ren. I was just giving you a hard time. Don't take it so hard -" He went quiet when the sound of her laughter came buzzing through the phone. He grinned and shook his head. "I'll get you for that one, Magnus." The tone of his voice changed. "Ren, how close are you?"

"Dammit if I know! Why?"

"I think I've found it," he said seriously.

She took a nervous breath. "Wait for me, Josh. I'll hurry." She tuned into him for a moment, sensed he was deliberating going in without her, and added, "Promise me. Because if you damn well hurt yourself, I'm probably going to have to heal you - and you'll have to live with that!"

It was circuitous, but he got it. "All right," he grouched. "But quit picking the flowers and move your butt."

Ren smirked, shoved the last of the plant samples in her pack, and took off at a run.

\*

"Could you ask the nurse for something? For pain?" Dustin leaned back against the pillows.

"No problem." At the door James hesitated, looked at him obliquely, then said jokingly, "Don't go anywhere, okay?"

Once the door had swooshed closed, Dusty counted to five, then climbed back out of bed. He snatched up the IV bag and its replacement, plus the antibiotic infusion that was meant to feed into it. Enough to get him to Mexico, then he'd find a pharmacy to refill the prescription. He wrapped the lot in a spare shirt and then in a plastic bag.

There was no way he could carry the suitcase. Instead, he popped it open, snatched up his wallet and phone and headed for the window. After checking for foot traffic, he tossed out the crutches, then eyed the distance to the ground. One floor. *No problemo.*

James would be pissed off, but he'd get over it. He'd also know why. He'd want to put the



trip off. Jamie was a bugger for caution. No wonder, given the nature of his gift. He'd want to wait, until Dustin was stronger.

It didn't matter that Jamie was right. Because he hadn't been there when a dinosaur had come charging out of the past and into the present. Dustin doubted whether even the evidence of his holey leg could get through to James or Merrie or Valterzar. It was like happening on an accident, after the victims had been patched up. Erik might have some idea, because he'd done some of the patching. But the others wouldn't. As much as they might object to being experimented on, they wouldn't really know what they were dealing with.

Any more than Symtech did.

Dustin was more scared than he wanted to admit. He and Josh had spent lots of time together, but this kind of thing had never happened before. Oh, Dusty had bouts of retro, but nothing with the "graphic" intensity of those moments in the flatlands.

He had to know. He wouldn't be able to sleep until he knew. Whether it was a fluke, weird timing, their proximity, sunspots, or the way his life was going to be from now on. Whether standing on a nonexistent road would send a chariot careening into his body, or if landing in an empty field would end with a broadsword in the butt. Whether something about him had changed, to bring his "retro" into the present.

If he was the catalyst for this, then they shouldn't be pairing him - with anybody. And he certainly shouldn't be considering pairing himself permanently with Ren.

Which made an impromptu trip to Mexico foolish, irresponsible - perhaps, even, reprehensible. A disaster, from the antibiotics he needed for his leg to the uncertainty about what he'd do when he got there.

When it came down to it, though, none of that mattered. Because Ren was there, and Josh, who was one of his closest friends. If he was worried about them, he had every right to pay them a visit.

He swung down from the window, gritted his teeth and let go.

He lay there, his world momentarily eclipsed by pain. Then he grabbed his plastic bag and his crutches and forced himself to his feet.

Every right in the world...

\*

Lawrence Valterzar clicked "End" then sat there, tapping the phone against his chin. He was trying to decide what to do. They'd alerted him, of course, as soon as Dustin had left the hospital.

Lawrence stared a little dubiously at the phone. Despite their threats, they apparently had no intention of firing him.

The first person he'd phoned had been James Wickham. James had sounded surprised - so surprised that Lawrence suspected he knew exactly where Dustin had gone.

It would be easy enough to trace Dusty's movements through Symtech - to track his credit cards or ATM, but that's not the way Lawrence wanted to do it. Not if he believed his own claims that Dustin Mallory was both independent and self-determined.

This wasn't merely an extension of Dustin's independence day - he was headed somewhere. After all, he'd pulled off the self-save, without Erik's intervention. He had no need to leave unless he had somewhere better to go. Lawrence could think of only one place that would seem "better" to Dustin - and that was wherever Ren happened to be.

Once again, Lawrence felt that repugnance at interfering with the man's life. He'd hate it if someone did it to him. Why did they have to follow Mallory around as though he were a child?

Because he was acting like one? Taking off, telling no one where he was going to be?  
*And if I wanted to do that?*

*Why not?*

*Why shouldn't he?* Dustin was smart - maybe he had all the logistics worked out. If he wanted to visit his girlfriend in Mexico, who had the right to stop him?

*And if his girlfriend's engaged in some government brouhaha that doesn't bear close examination? Who draws the lines then?*

Lawrence was in a bind. If he sent people in to bring Dustin back, it could alienate him from the man forever. That wasn't something Lawrence wanted to do. Not only did he consider Dusty a friend - he had a lot of respect for him, too. A token of that respect had been his own nonappearance at the hospital while Dustin was recuperating. That way, there could be no misinterpretation or misunderstanding. Lawrence had hoped he'd make it clear that noninterference was the new status quo. That help would only be forthcoming if Mallory wanted it.

In its own way, it was a fantasy, because Charles Smythe and Marc Jekkes were not about to allow Dustin or any of the others to wander around unprotected. They had too much to lose through a misstep - whether *by* their charges or *to* them. That was what was getting them now: Dustin had managed to lose his "protectors", too.

Which made the question of whether Lawrence Valterzar was going to Mexico merely an exercise in rhetoric. For all intents and purposes, he was already on his way.

\*

Dustin knew he had a major problem. He'd already run into two Olmecs and a couple of Santa Anna's men. He'd nearly been hit by a bus, because a steer had charged him somewhere in the centre of town. Now, he was in the middle of a square, surrounded by women in long dresses. So far, nothing out of the past had tackled him, but the present was a far greater threat. Usually, his episodes were intermittent. Today - probably due to the medication he was taking - he'd had three episodes in as many hours.

He'd never make it to wherever Ren was at this point. That was the other thing: he had no way of knowing exactly where she was. He'd somehow thought, given their natures, that some kind of "psychic beacon" would flare up in the muddle of his mind. It was obvious now that the painkillers had worn off - *boy, had they worn off!* - that he hadn't been thinking clearly. At the rate he was going, he'd be more likely to see what happened to her yesterday, than today...

Gooseflesh danced across his skin, and some of the weariness left his face. He'd never tried it, but it might just work. He grinned, and flagged down a taxi. Time to go back to the airport.

\*

"What do you see?" Ren asked him.

"Why are you whispering?" Josh asked. "Afraid a stray lizard might hear?"

"There's a man in there," Ren explained, "so don't be cynical."

Josh looked dubiously at the wreckage. The small cargo plane had slid along the desert floor, then ploughed into one of the sandstone mini mounts. It was more than a little crunched, and layered with sandy soil and rock. "He's not going to be too healthy," Josh remarked unhappily.

"How's your first aid?"

"Probably on a par with yours."

"You realise that doesn't say much. Can't you focus on a medical manual or something?"

He realised she was halfway serious. "No real focal point. What about you?" he asked hopefully. "Any chance of getting internet access on your phone, so we can get some ideas?"

She shook her head. "The best I could do is send out the emergency signal, and hope they

hear it.”

Josh nodded, and started across the rubble. “They never leave us alone, and then the one time we’d really like to see them, they play hard to find.”

“Maybe they didn’t expect us to wander so far away from where they’d sent us.”

The rocks crunched under Josh’s feet, making each step uncomfortably loud. “Wish I could tiptoe,” he hissed. He squatted down and began to paw at the soil that was blocking the door.

“Hotcha-la-lacha!” he complained. “And this is in the shade.”

“Why are you whispering?” Ren asked him. Josh shrugged. “I’ll try the other side.” Her crunch, though quieter, was still too conspicuous. *Why am I worried about it?* she thought.

The answer filtered into her head the next second. She’d been interpreting the victim’s mindset as indicative of pain, panic, terror. She’d just realised something else: this was not a “nice” man. He had murder on his mind.

Ren came tearing back around the fuselage, and ran smack into Josh, who’d been running back the other way. The thud stunned them both, and they splayed on the ground.

“Didn’t your ‘telepathy’ tell you where I was?” Josh griped.

Ren was panting in the heat, and she jerked her hands away from the burning soil. “He’s a bad guy, you jerk!” she hissed to Josh.

He nodded, rubbing his head where it had hit the metal. “And he has a gun,” Josh replied. He looked warily at the bent fuselage. “What the hell are we going to do now?”

\*

He’d never tried “directing” it before. He’d never had a reason to. The closest he’d come had been that time with Josh, when he’d tried hunting for his dinosaur.

Should that be a warning? Was that what had gone wrong? Had he been concentrating so hard that he’d not only brought part of the past into his head - he’d brought part of himself into the past?

Not the happiest conclusion, but it might be one he could live with. As long as he didn’t willingly call events forth, they might remain what they were before: a glimpse, a scene, a small enactment of the past.

*Sooner or later, I’m going to have to test it out.*

It sounded like a good excuse for doing exactly what he wanted to do. Common sense told him he’d be a lot better off running his “tests” in a less public location, with a suitable back-up. That plan had several marks against it, though: the only ones who would really tolerate the “testing” were the very people who might interfere with it. And, if his back-up included someone like Valterzar, any feedback would soon be in a report on somebody else’s desk.

*If it’s me, all by my lonesome, who caused this* - his hand pressed the sore spot on his thigh - then it was on a “need to know” basis only. In Dusty’s mind, the only people who needed to know were Josh and Ren. Josh, so he wouldn’t have to worry about himself any more, and Ren because she needed to make an informed decision. If necessary, he’d inform her, tell her he’d try like hell not to do it again, and see if she’d take him on, flaws and all.

It sounded good - almost enough to excuse his present bout of stupidity. Besides, what was one more botch? Dusty smirked. He’d created a climate for himself - an atmosphere of freedom. Dependency be damned. *I can do this.*

If he could just focus, on Ren or Josh...

Obviously, it’d be easiest to pick up on Ren. All the rest of his body was focussed on her. Why not that part of his brain, too?

They would have picked up a rental car. Dustin headed for the rental desks.

He was a little surprised at his own enthusiasm.

*Don't get cocky.*

*Remember what happened last time...*

But it did little to daunt him. His excitement was building. This was only the second time in his entire life he'd actively summoned a "vision", and the last time it had been a "roaring" success. He grinned. "Roaring" in all aspects of the word.

He realised this was also one of the few times he'd actually felt free. The freedom he'd gained at the hospital, or even by leaving it - was a farce. He'd spent his life working around his retrocognition; trying to survive the episodes; trying to hide how much he was haunted by the past from everyone around him in the present. He'd played the bumbling fool who tripped and fell and was laughed at or pitied, for a clumsiness he didn't possess. He'd been crippled by his loss of focus on this world because he was grasping the next. Was it really possible he could control it?

*If I can focus enough to bring it in, logic suggests I can control an episode - make it on my terms.* He knew better than to think he could stop them. When they came, it was like something opening inside that burst into being.

*But if I can control the "when" and the "where", then I really will be free.* Gooseflesh rode his skin once more, and his eyes glinted with excitement.

He sat down on a bench, and watched the rental desk. The more he considered it, the less risky it seemed. Hell, the world hadn't changed much in the last three days. He should be able to manoeuvre all right, too, if he needed to follow them.

He rubbed his hands together. *History, and none of it ancient...*

It was all a matter of mindset. The feeling was easy to recognise. Most of the time when he felt it, he was trying to avoid a "lapse". Right now, he'd welcome one.

*Ren. His Kitten.*

He wondered, if they went their separate ways, if he'd just vegetate, using any newfound control to replay the scenes with her, again and again...

*Focus, Dustin.*

It sometimes made him sick - almost like motion sickness - at the sudden transition of time and place. It was something he'd begun to emulate in his graphics work, but some customers had complained. *Too much vertigo, they'd claimed. Throws the viewer off-balance.*

If they only knew the number of times he'd ended up on his knees...

It was happening now and Dustin clung to the bench; glad to see that it, at least, was remaining the same. The people, the luggage, even some of the signs, did a fast-whirring fade-out that made him giddy. Dustin was beginning to realise that a total transition was easier on his equilibrium than this half-assed skipping he'd somehow initiated. He closed his eyes and focussed on Ren. Any more jouncing and bouncing and he'd toss his cookies - right here in the middle of the airport.

He counted to three and opened his eyes - and she was there.

\*

"We *can't* just 'leave him to it'!" Ren complained. "He's a human being - despite his warped personality."

"He's an *armed* human being," Josh retorted. "Armed and alarmed do not a good combination make."

"Wish we had Jamie here."

Josh snorted. "What do you expect? Him to whip that gun right out of the creep's hand?"

Ren flared. "Or something else, to distract him -"

“You’re nuts!” Josh told her. “You can’t stop a bullet with good intentions!”

“At least I *have* ‘good intentions’! ‘So gather your fungus and let *them* come get him’,” she mimicked. “What kind of compassion is that?”

“I don’t need to show compassion for someone trying to kill -”

Their argument was interrupted by the sound of a gunshot. It was muffled by the fuselage, but still loud enough to make them both jump back.

A voice rose plaintively from inside the plane. “*Will you shut up?!*” it shouted. “Or the next one’s through my head - so this ‘creep’ can put his ‘warped personality’ out of its misery!”

\*

He tried to remember that she wasn’t seeing him the way he was seeing her. In some ways, it made him feel like a sicko - as though he was some perverted voyeur watching homespun movies. To rid himself of the less than virtuous thoughts that were suddenly running through his head, he studiously ignored the curve of her breasts, the way her butt looked in those jeans -

*Stop it!*

He switched his eyes to Josh’s face, and it brought a smile to his own. Apparently, Josh and Ren had been arguing again. Now, it was over who was going to drive.

“I’ve driven desert roads before!” Josh was saying. “Do it all the t-”

“‘Deserted’, I’d trust you on. Curved, I won’t,” she interrupted.

Dustin could feel his grasp slipping slightly. He came in closer and tripped over something he couldn’t see. His slipped on his dark glasses. He’d learned a long time ago people would forgive a blind man any degree of clumsiness. One on crutches they’d do their best to avoid.

*Where are you going? Say something...*

They wouldn’t want to, because it was supposed to be hush-hush.

That didn’t bother Josh. “Where do you think Chihuahua is?” he asked angrily. “Why do you have to be so damned difficult?”

“I’m being reasonable -”

Dustin couldn’t resist. He leaned forward, and brushed a kiss across those agitated lips.

Ren froze, mid-word.

“What?” Josh asked, a little alarmed at her expression. “What is it?”

“Dusty,” she replied. In that instant, she looked right at him. “Are you okay?” she asked.

All Dustin had time for was a smile. In the next moment, she and Josh and that brief glimpse of history, were gone.

## Chapter Five

Josh looked from the dented fuselage to Ren and smirked. “Don’t *we* feel stupid!” he said.

“Speak for yourself, *Joshua*.” She smiled at him irritatingly.

“Shut up, *Kithren*.” He yelled to the guy inside, “Where’s the best place to get in?”

“Why did they send stupid people?” the man complained in response.

“I think that means he wants us to use the door,” Ren said. She grabbed a piece of debris, wrapped it with her shirttail and started digging.

It took them nearly an hour to clear the door enough to open it. By that time, the sun was beating down on their backs. They were both soaked in sweat with blistered hands. Ren didn’t know if the blisters were more from the work or the heat.

“What’s taking so long?” the man asked. “It’s like an oven in here.”

“You’re lucky there’s a door left to clear,” Josh retorted. “And as to that ‘stupid people’ comment? We weren’t the ones flying the plane.”

“Good one, Josh,” Ren said.

“I have my moments,” he said.

\*

His world spun back in another violent swirl of colour and noise. This kind of purposeful retrocognition seemed to wobble his brain. Even after a glimpse of his surroundings told him he was back where he’d started, the vertigo continued. Dustin stood there, eyes closed, leaning on the crutches. He remained still, trying to tune out the anxious inquires around him. He shook his head, which only made it worse.

The truth was, he was terrified to move. He’d never had vertigo like this before.

He was going to lose it. He knew it right now and there was nothing he could do. His flesh had that ice-cold feel and his stomach was churning. The next moment, there was a hand under his arm, holding him up. “Take the crutches,” someone said. Then, whoever it was held a bag while Dustin heaved his guts out. It was mortifying, damn weakening, and it seemed to take forever. At the end of it, he couldn’t even stand.

There were bodies on either side of him now, hauling him out of the airport, and a familiar voice said, “Way to be discreet, Dusty.”

The next second Merrie’s despair cut through his distress. She sounded shocked - appalled, even. Horror-stricken. “*Zar!*” she gasped. “Josh - Ren!”

They halted, and Dustin realised it was Valterzar on his right. He could feel his muscles tense.

“What about them?” Valterzar asked worriedly. But this was Merrie talking, and they already knew. Even Dustin knew - but until she said the words, there was still hope.

*No hope.* She’d started sobbing; rough, choking gasps that came from deep inside. “Josh and Ren - they-they’re dead.”

At her words, Dustin opened his eyes. He tried to focus on her, and for a brief moment, their eyes locked. Then, his eyes rolled up in his head, and he sagged into their arms.

\*

They were gone. All of them. It took Erik only a few minutes to realise that what he was feeling was panic.

It was stupid. Old friends, yeah, but he could live without ’em. He’d been practising that very thing for the last four years. Practised it so well, in fact, that he’d alienated Dusty and James.

Josh thought his showmanship was amusing, but Ren - the only one he really cared about impressing - was disgusted with him. She thought he should be doing it for free. Merrie didn't make judgment calls, but then, she had too much other shit to deal with to worry about minor matters like ingratitude and greed.

Erik went to visit her a lot. Despite his claims to the contrary, it gave him a good feeling to think he could absolve a failure at her door. A friend to tell him it was okay - that failures came in the life and death business both.

*Even if you're getting paid well for your successes...*

Merrie's specialties were in distractions for the living and the dead. She, like he, was caught somewhere in-between. Between his guilt, his efforts for people that sometimes left him feeling soiled, and his occasional losses, Erik needed all the distractions he could get.

There'd been a time two years ago when his ego had gotten out of line. He'd found he was beginning to hate some of the people he was working on, and believed he could pick and choose - selectively heal. For a kid who'd grown up with a staunch religious upbringing - which had become even stauncher once his parents realised what he could do - his healing had seemed like some kind of gift from God. He'd healed scraped knees on the playground, bloody noses and papercuts. Only, he couldn't heal his own. His efforts were frequently repaid with fists in the face - with punches and pounding and kicks in the butt. Then there'd come the day when one of the persecutors had scraped a knee. He'd looked at Erik expectantly: *Heal me, you little dickweed*. Erik couldn't refuse him - his religious upbringing wouldn't allow it. "Turn the other cheek." But, something had gone wrong.

The scrape hadn't crusted and healed over - it had begun to bleed and bleed, the ripped portion spreading halfway down the bully's calf. Erik jerked his hands away, but by that time, both he and the bully were screaming.

They'd moved him to a special school after that. Very special, but he'd met the best friends he'd ever had. People who were troubled by phenomena, just as he was. He could relax and be himself.

It was only when he'd tried to be more than himself that he'd run into trouble again. His success had led him to think of his former allies as failures. Worse than that: fools. He wanted to leave them behind to wallow in whatever subjugation Symtech put on them, while he moved on to bigger things. He'd become so sure of himself and his own abilities that he'd opted to up his prices and deselect the undeserving.

He'd had two incidents that he'd never forget. He'd made a woman's tumour grow by mistake, and occluded a man's arteries. He'd tried to think of it as a bad week, when cosmic forces were somehow aligned against him, but he knew the next time, as his hands hovered over a diamond-studded beltbuckle, that it wasn't anything external.

It was him.

His hatred and self-disgust were mutating his healing into something else. It was the bully in the playground problem all over again. Only this time, he had a feeling the "bully" was his own distorted self-image. He'd taken the role of judge on himself, and he was meting out punishments to his clients.

He'd lowered his hands quickly, before he could damage the diamond belt-owner's health further.

Symtech had bailed him out of his failures - all without a word, of course - which had made him realise he was nowhere near as "free" as he'd claimed. He hadn't killed anyone; merely made their lives a whole lot more uncomfortable, and surgery a lot more imperative, which had almost

been enough to make him discount it. Almost - but not quite. He'd no longer gone into a healing flippantly.

And he'd no longer been selective about whom he was going to heal.

Now, though, as he knocked, again and again, on Josh's door, he realised how close he'd come to losing more than his healing spirit. Where were they? Just like with Dustin, Erik wanted to be there, to back them up.

As much as he'd once wanted to leave them behind, he now regretted whatever decision they'd made, to leave him.

\*

The metal had buckled in the crash. "More goddamn complications!" Josh complained. "You still alive in there?" he bellowed.

"You're taking so long I was gonna ask you the same thing!"

Ren scowled. "It's so irritating, to have an ungrateful victim."

Josh just glared at her.

"Don't give me that look! If we had the truck, we could have been out of here an hour ago! And we wouldn't have to walk back across the goddamn desert!"

"They said 'sneak'. How the hell can you sneak with a goddamn truck?"

She didn't say any more - just looked around till she found a metal rod they could use as a crowbar. With both of them heaving and tugging, the door finally gave, with an enormously loud cracking boom. Josh and Ren gave, too, landing in a heap as the door was sprung open.

Josh got up into a crouch, then poked his head into the cabin. "Yoo hoo!" he yelled. Frowning, he climbed in. Ren came in behind him. "Come out, come out, wherever you are!"

They called, they threatened, they cajoled and in the end they gave up. The fungus was there, Ren was certain, in the doctored rice that stood in bags along the fuselage. But that was all.

The cabin was empty.

\*

"It's been twelve hours," James remarked. He watched Valterzar adjust the IV and take Dustin's pulse. Zar checked his pupils again, took his temperature, then rolled him on his side and checked the dressing on his leg for signs of suppuration.

James got the impression Zar was busying himself to take his mind off his concerns - and his grief. Jamie didn't have to be telepathic to realise Josh's and Ren's deaths had hit Valterzar hard.

"He should be in a hospital, but that's not in the programme," Valterzar told him. "I'm doing all I can, short of calling Erik."

"Erik'll be here," Merrie told him. "You don't have to call him."

James looked at her doubtfully. He didn't say it, but she knew what he was thinking.

"He had a lot of resentment to work through, but he misses you, Jamie. All of you."

James settled back in a chair. "How can you tell?" he asked Merrie. There was more than a trace of bitterness in his voice. Josh, Ren gone. Dusty could well be on his way out. Somehow, he'd never thought his circle of friends would be narrowed down to Merrie, Erik and "Zar". He wanted to cry, but he couldn't. Wanted to yell, but that was out, too.

*I'd settle for punching someone's face in -*

He was looking in the mirror. All of a sudden, a vase full of artificial flowers flew across the room and slammed into the glass, shattering it. Valterzar shot him an angry look.

James merely slumped further in the chair. "Pardon," he said flippantly.

"Better you than someone else," Zar retorted, deliberately turning his back. Unwilling to



turn his frustration on someone else, James had shattered his own reflection.

Suddenly, James couldn't stand it any more. "I need to know how it happened," he told Merrie.

"Merrie -" Valterzar began.

"Please," James whispered.

"It's all right, Zar." She sat down on the chair, and took an unseeing look around the hotel room. Zar knew she was trying to steady herself enough to speak without crying again. She sighed deeply, then described that last, horrific scene, "A crashed plane. In the desert. J-Josh had holes in-in his b-back."

"And Ren?" It was Dusty's voice. He was lying there, one hand clasped over his eyes. His voice was husky. "What happened to Ren?"

"Her head," Merrie cried, tears now pouring down her face. "The bastard shot her in the head."

"No - he - *didn't*," Dustin whispered.

Valterzar folded Merrie in his arms. His voice was raspy with unshed tears. "I'm sorry, Dustin." It was obvious he meant it.

Dusty lowered a trembling hand. His eyes, moist and bloodshot, met Valterzar's determinedly. "He hasn't - and he won't," he said firmly. "Because I'm going to stop him."

Valterzar opened his mouth to argue, and then it just hung open. There was a glint in Dustin's eyes that told Lawrence the man meant it. Merrie must have thought so, too. She took a shuddery breath, her expression sad, but at the same time, hopeful.

It was Jamie who spoke up, though. He'd seen the determination in Dusty's eyes, too, and it had reminded him of his own, just before he'd slung the vase across the room. Stranger things had happened... He told Zar, "You heard the man. Leave a note for Pretty Boy Erik, and let's get going. We have a plane to find."

\*

"We may have a problem," Marcus Jekkes said. Smythe had told him to take a seat, because his agitated pacing was getting on his nerves.

Jekkes wondered how nervous Smythe would be, after he heard the report. It would be Smythe's fault, for setting his people up, but Jekkes would bear some of the brunt. It was his job to point out hazards. He'd missed a big one.

"What?"

"We're running counter to a drug control programme - for eliminating illegal crops."

Smythe snorted. "We're helping to find the fucking plane. In other words, to clean up *their* mistake. They're field-testing an unauthorised mycoherbicide: one that's being labelled a 'terrorist' threat to agriculture."

"They didn't bother to mention any hazard - until now."

"Fusariosis? Magnus will pick up on that one."

Jekkes shook his head. "They had a self-destruct order. If, for any reason, the plane went down, the plane and its payload were to be destroyed."

"A suicide mission?" Smythe sounded incredulous. "Over a mycoherbicide?"

"Nothing so drastic. The pilot could bail out, but if the plane didn't blow up on impact, the pilot was expected to eliminate any evidence."

"And any witnesses?"

"Dead. Same thing with anyone attempting to interfere. The pilot is a commando, operating under special orders. He'll do whatever it takes to insure his mission is carried out."

\*

Dustin was absolutely silent as they climbed into the trucks. Valterzar didn't even bother trying to change his mind. If Dusty truly thought there was a chance for altering the outcome, it was worth attempting.

"Humouring me?" Dustin asked as he stretched out across the back seat. It was the first time he'd spoken since he'd announced his intentions.

"Probably," Lawrence told him. His smile, however, belied the coolness of his tone. "About now, I'd prefer to grasp at straws than face the truth. Give me a healthy dose of unreality." He put the truck in gear, then looked in the mirror. "You okay?"

Dustin gave him a thumbs up. At this point, with his head pounding, it sure beat a nod.

Lawrence went on, "For the moment, I'd like to think we're 'exploring our options'. So, get some sleep if you can. When it's time, I want to make sure you're up to the challenge."

They'd driven for a while when Dustin's voice sounded from the back. "I owe you," he admitted. "Thanks."

"That's my job," Lawrence replied, and Dusty was sure he picked up a tinge - just the tiniest trace - of bitterness in the other man's voice. If James was right, and Valterzar was "one of them", he was probably feeling pretty resentful right now.

Dusty realised how amusing it would be if "Zar" was a fellow psi-guy, and didn't even know it. "You know, a 'czar's' a kind of tyrant," he joked.

Lawrence glanced at him in the mirror, caught the glint in Dusty's eyes, and his lips creased in a smile. "Suits me," he said.

\*

He was determined to find them. If they were all gone at the same time, it made sense that they were all in one place, sent at the behest of the "agency".

Erik had decided a long time ago not to let Charles Smythe screw with his head. Smythe was merely the latest in a long line of insensitive cretins who tried to wield other people's abilities like some kind of sword. It had been "test" "test" "test" for years, but the real "tests", Erik suspected, had been how well they'd handled themselves with members of the public - how well they could function in camouflage.

It hadn't started out that way. Years ago, each of their mothers had been given an illicit drug at twelve weeks to "sustain" a difficult pregnancy. Unfortunately, the compound was found to greatly increase the risk of a crib death during the first six months. Worried about their offspring, the parents had opted for supplemental treatment. Erik wondered whether they would have taken their chances instead, had they realised how much they'd have to worry about later.

It had been hell for kids like Ren, who had normal siblings. Erik still didn't know which of the treatments had set them up for what each of them had become, but he guessed the prenatal treatment had been a primer, and the postnatal some kind of genetic stimulant for proteins that would "switch on" specific areas of the brain. James had spoken angrily about "gene therapy" and Erik knew he had good reason for his anger. If Dusty and Ren had suffered for their "gifts", Jamie had had it worse. Now, he could control his temper, but when he'd first come to their school, his anger had been, quite literally, all over the place.

That school had saved their lives. It had been a first opportunity to relax, to find peace, to be "at home". They were encouraged to develop their abilities, and taught how to hide them.

A scam. Set up, all the way. Given hell, taught to be hellions, then made to be grateful for the opportunity to be among other, similarly hellacious personalities. All a farce.

To some extent, it had backfired. Erik knew they were supposed to be some kind of team,

and the word “Cluster” had been used within his hearing once or twice. Each of them had a different skill that could be called upon to complement the others. In the beginning it may have been something less profit-oriented and more humanitarian - maybe even an honest attempt to correct a pharmacological mistake. But for a long time now, there’d been a commercial aspect to it that had made Erik cynical enough to want to take the profit-making for his healing into his own hands.

But Symtech would be making its profits elsewhere. Even now, it might be trying to recoup some of its investment in this particular Cluster. Erik knew they’d take advantage of anything he’d offer: not only was he one of the “Cluster”, but his interest could only prove beneficial to the others - some security for the investment. As he went in, unannounced, to visit Charles Smythe, his reception was much different from the greeting six years ago when he’d declared his independence. Smythe appeared not only pleased, but greatly relieved, to see him. Within fifteen minutes he’d booked Erik on a flight, arranged his hotel and transport, and given him a general idea of where to look.

As he sat on the plane an hour later, Erik had to admit that Smythe’s eagerness, and the degree of cooperation, was enough to scare him nearly out of his wits.

\*

They found the truck. It was easy enough, in the end. Zar, keeping a cautious eye on Dustin’s condition, decided it was no time for playing games. He asked Symtech for help. The GPS led them right to it.

From there, Zar had expected it to be hit and miss. If the plane had been easy to find on satellite reconnaissance, they wouldn’t have needed Josh and Ren. Symtech had even been amenable to his suggestion that they check the satellite photos.

It was then they had baulked. Not initially, when he’d put in his request - afterwards, when they’d had time to see the photos. Zar could only conclude that something about the scene had changed. Their hesitancy wasn’t because they were still confused about the plane’s location. They were recalcitrant because they now knew exactly where it was.

Maybe they could even see the bodies. Zar thought fast. It was obvious they could see something. He ended the call, and sat quietly, his hands on the steering wheel, to work it through.

“They know where it is,” he told Dusty. “Only they won’t say.”

“Bodies?” Dustin asked in a hushed voice.

“Maybe. Could be a report from the murderer.”

“Who’s mos’ influechal?”

Zar heard the slurring, and was out of the seat in a flash. He pulled open the back door and told Dustin, “Let me see your eyes -”

“Don’!” Dustin tried to push his hands away.

Zar waved Merrie and James over from the other truck, and punched in a number on his phone. “Most influential?” he repeated calmly to Dustin. “Right now, Erik is.” Zar left Merrie to cradle Dustin’s head in her lap, and pulled James aside. Zar told him firmly, “I don’t know how you’ll do it, but I want you to hold him in stasis, James.”

“Where and what?”

“Bleeding in the brain. The pressure’s building. He’s -” Erik’s voice came on the line, interrupting him. Zar spoke into the phone. “We’re on the outskirts of Tres Hermanos, Erik. How far away are you?” Zar listened, then said, “Get a helicopter. Be here within the hour. While en route, make a call to Smythe and get the coordinates for the crash site. Tell him if he doesn’t, you won’t be able to meet us to heal the others.”

“Zar!”

Dustin was vomiting now, and Zar said quickly into the phone, “Hold it!” When Merrie nodded to him, he put the phone up to his ear. “I’m back.” He listened to Erik, then retorted, “Of course it doesn’t make sense! *Lie, for crissake!*” He ended the call and turned back to James. “My guess is the bleeding’s here.” He tapped the left side of his head. “Can you do it?”

“What if I cut off the blood flow?” James asked worriedly. “What then?”

“Then his brain will die. And Josh and Ren won’t be the only ones we lose this trip.”

## Chapter Six

"I don't get it," Josh complained. "We came all this way, dug through sand and soil and metal, all for that?!" His expression indicated what he thought of the bags of contaminated rice stacked against the fuselage. "How thrilling," he said flatly.

"I want to know where the man went. You heard his voice, too -"

"Did I?" Josh asked. "I don't seem to recall that."

"Bastard. I suppose that gunshot was a product of my imagination."

"Slut." He glanced around. "I do kind of wonder where the pilot went."

"Pile it here, pile it there'," she quoted. "I suppose, if these were bags of dinosaur bones, instead of rice grains -"

"- at least they'd be interesting," Josh finished. "Amazing!"

Ren glanced quickly around. "What?"

"The way you glow in the dark. That shade of puce is really very becoming."

"Josh, let's go," Ren told him impatiently. "I have the weirdest feeling about that voice..."

"Considering the source, I can't say I'm too impressed..."

Ren shoved him out the door.

\*

Erik had the helicopter circle around till he spotted Valterzar's arms waving wildly. "Should I ask it to wait?" he yelled, as he disembarked.

"No!" Zar told him.

Merrie was practically in tears. She had Dustin's head in her lap, and he lay there, limp and unresponsive. James was squatting next to him, eyes squinted closed in concentration, as he fought to sustain the blood flow evenly, without putting undue pressure on Dustin's bruised brain. He was shaking with the effort, and Erik didn't interrupt him. He suspected that the cessation of Jamie's services, and the sudden influx of leaking blood could kill Dusty outright. It was only through James' efforts that the man was still alive at all.

Erik remembered the last time he'd seen Dusty, and the way he'd commended him on going it alone. Maybe he'd been too quick to offer praise, and Dustin may have been too quick to act on his body's returning strength. Whatever had messed him up now had done some major damage.

"I'll be damned if I'll waste three days watching you, Dusty - only to have you pull a stunt like this!" Erik rested the heel of his hand on Dusty's forehead, and another on his chest. Then, he tuned out everything - the roar of the helicopter, Merrie's tears, Jamie's shaky fingers, and Valterzar's anxious expression. This one wasn't going to be easy, and unless he wanted to leave some scar tissue, he had to concentrate.

Valterzar guessed as much, and made sure he stayed close. No one had told Erik about Josh or Ren, and that's the way Valterzar intended it to stay, until he was finished with Dusty.

\*

"I think he's dead," Josh said seriously. He was appalled by the blood coating the man's shirt. The shocked look on the man's face didn't help either. He tried to lower the man's lids, but the dead man seemed just as determined to have his eyes open. Afterwards, Josh grimaced, gave a shiver, and discreetly tried to wipe his fingers on the man's sleeve.

"He's dead," Ren agreed. She couldn't pick up any reading from him at all - no sensations of any kind - and she'd dreaded even trying. "It-It's horrible," she murmured. The blood and the

horrific violence sickened her.

Josh took a wary look around that attempted to appear as though it wasn't a look at all. "He hasn't been dead that long," he hissed. "Pick up any readings?"

"You think the killer -" Ren's eyes widened in alarm.

"- is still here. Never mind the ESP." Josh didn't waste any more time. He focussed his eyes on the horizon, latched onto Ren's arm, and took off at a run. Ren didn't argue, but she interjected a dodging motion to their escape: violently weaving side to side as they hot-footed it out of range.

"I think we did it!" Josh exclaimed, after a while, and he started to slow, panting under the hot sun.

Ren nodded, but didn't slacken her speed. She yanked Josh forward with a jerk that seemed to twang his arm. "They'll never catch us now!" she said.

\*

"Dusty."

Dustin felt as though he were hearing the voice from a long way off. He was in a deep cavern, but he was floating now; gradually drifting toward light and warmth and voices. He wondered if this was the white light he'd heard so much about...

The voices were familiar, and there was a hint of impatience as they called his name, over and over. Dustin's lips twitched and he muttered, "Use it, don't abuse it."

"You're awake, then." Erik sounded pleased with himself. "Had me worried for a minute. Thought I'd blown it."

"Comforting words," Valterzar commented.

Dustin opened one eye, expecting a return of that crushing headache that was the last thing he remembered.

"How's the head?" Erik's voice held a trace of anxiety. He really *had* been worried he'd blown it.

Dustin grinned. "Great!" He prodded his leg. Barely a twinge. "You do damn good work when you want, Dainler." He reached out a hand and gripped Erik's hand. "Thanks."

Erik nodded at Jamie. "He'd prefer to be self-effacing and humble, but you can thank the Wickham Widget here for holding your brains together till I arrived. He was shaking with the effort."

Jamie snorted. "Only because they were so scattered. I had to find 'em first. That was the hardest part."

Dustin grinned at him, then sobered, memory returning, when he looked at Zar. His face whitened, and he slumped against the seat. "Do we have the coordinates?" he asked quietly.

Zar knew he was wondering how he could have forgotten Ren and Josh, for even a moment. "Lucky to have any memory left at all, Dusty," Zar told him. "Don't beat yourself up over it."

Dusty's smile had no humour in it. "Maybe I didn't want to remember," he said darkly.

For the first time, Erik realised Merrie's tears might not be solely related to Dustin's near-miss. "What happened?" he asked tensely.

"Don't!" Dustin climbed out of the car. "I can't..." He averted his head and walked away, still limping slightly.

Erik saw it. He'd have to hit him again later, when it wasn't such a rush job. "Someone tell me."

Valterzar put a hand on his shoulder. "Josh and Ren are dead," he said bluntly.

Erik went ashen. His breath caught in his throat. He wobbled a little and Zar gripped his shoulder more tightly. Merrie came over and took his hand. Her eyes were wet. "It's going to be all right, Erik," she said.

"How can it *ever* be 'all right'?" he asked, distressed. In a sudden flash of insight, he realised how spoiled his gift had made him. The last time he'd had to face death this personally had been with his mom. In the years since then, he'd convinced himself that it wouldn't happen again - no more pain because he wouldn't let the "death" happen. He'd stop it, the same way he'd stopped it with Dusty.

He'd always been able to fix things - to halt the Grim Reaper. In all his adult years, he'd never had to face the inevitable - that someone he loved was gone forever.

He couldn't accept it now. He just didn't know what the alternative was. He looked a little blankly at Dustin's retreat. *Dustin doesn't know what to do, either*, he thought.

He realised the next moment he was wrong. Valterzar was speaking now, and Erik forced himself to focus. "...thinks he can change it."

"What?" Erik asked incredulously.

"Dustin is convinced he can get there first - and find a way to stop it."

\*

"Merrie's with me," Valterzar told them. He took Merrie's hand, and tossed James the keys to the crew cab.

"So I surmised," Jamie retorted, looking from one to the other.

"Why can't we take the helicopter?" Erik asked. "It'd be faster."

"Security," Valterzar told them. "Send it off."

"The czar has spoken." There was a trace of anger in Dustin's tone.

"At this point, secrecy matters more than speed."

"Does he still think he's your boss?" Erik sounded surprised, but there was a trace of derision there, too.

Valterzar's jaw tightened.

"I know," James said, seeing Valterzar's frown. "Weight of the world on your shoulders. Impossible to get good help in these out-of-the-way spots."

"They may come back in and strip the site, if they think there's a threat."

"But that's not what you're worried about," Dustin said quietly.

Valterzar's eyes met his. "Right. I'm more concerned that if their payload was so important to protect the first time through, they may consider it even more vital the second."

\*

Valterzar drove out of town, then set off across the desert. Merrie was silent in her corner, and he beckoned her over. "I miss you," he said.

She gave him a sad smile and scooted over, so he could put an arm around her. She rested his head against his chest.

Zar didn't say anything more. He knew there were no words he could give her to counter what she'd seen. What they were all trying to avoid thinking about, Merrie had shared with the victims. As the last of the life had been sucked out of them, Merrie had been there, to have all the anguish pass through her shadow on that other plane.

It was as he bent his head, to brush his lips across the top of her head, that he saw it. A glint of glass, off a pair of binoculars. He punched in James' number on his phone.

"Didn't I tell you not to call me here?" James said. "Oh, it's you, Zar," he added with mock surprise.

“Binoculars. Could mean trouble.” Zar was watching the other truck in his rearview mirror. At that moment, it swerved, dipped, then did a spectacular roll down a nearly non-existent embankment.

“*Shit!*” Valterzar slammed on the brakes, and went tearing out his door, Merrie right on his heels. They were running toward the steaming truck when Merrie caught a flash, much as Zar had. She knew what it was, though, because she’d seen it before - when Ren had toppled, in a spattering of blood and bone, onto the sunbaked sand. It was the reflective glint off a rifle scope.

“*No!*” she screamed, and threw herself against Zar, tripping him onto the dirt.

Valterzar lay there, momentarily stunned, the weight of her sprawled across him. Some terrible knowledge was seeping into his brain - into his gut. He felt a darkness, chilling and incontrovertible, slicing his insides. A forbidding bleakness that took away his inner light.

A small rivulet dripped across his shoulder and down his chest. Then, it just kept running.

*Too wet for the desert. Makes no sense...* He wouldn’t look at it, couldn’t look at it. It was a warm river, and she was heavy against his back. His Merrie Girl. Gone and taking all the joy with her.

He rolled over, careful not to dislodge her - careful not to shift the hand that, even in death, draped him so lovingly. For a moment, she lay atop him as she had a few nights since. So little time. So much left undone. There’d barely been time for that - for that one lovers’ night. He kissed her fingers, wanting to hang on to the warmth - of body, of personality - that was her.

Zar began to weep, in great, shuddery gasps. *Merrie. My Merrie.* He got up on his knees - then, wobbling, sobbing in those terrible shudders, he pushed himself to his feet, Merrie still in his arms. He buried his face in her hair.

It reminded him of that night, when he’d saturated himself in her scent. He’d inhaled all of her, and it was forever imprinted on his brain.

*I love you, Merrie.* He wished he’d said the words. Then. When there was time.

He jerked, when the first of the bullets hit him, but he just kept walking. It took a second shot - and a third - before he was brought once more to his knees. His sobbing dissipated in a long drawn-out sigh that became a groan. When he toppled face-first onto the harsh sand, his arms remained around her, his face still buried in her hair.

\*

“We’re upside down.”

It was the third time Erik had said it. He didn’t sound capable of saying anything else right now. Dusty realised he’d fared better in the back than Erik or Jamie. Closer to the rollbar...

He undid his belt and lowered himself onto the roof. Then he crawled forward and peered at Erik. “You okay?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Erik said. “Don’t feel anything.”

His words gave Dusty a lurch of fear in his gut. “I’ll see you clear, Erik,” he promised. He rolled over and booted out the side window. He managed to shimmy out, but he wished halfway through that they hadn’t piled up so much behind the cab. It would have been a heck of a lot easier to climb out the back.

Dustin knocked on Jamie’s window, but he was out cold. He had a knot on his head that made Dusty flinch. So, Dusty ran around to Erik’s window instead.

There was a hole in the glass. A relatively small hole, with shimmering glass spiderwebbing that showed Erik’s face in an oddly disjointed distortion. Dustin slid his pinkie in the hole and tugged. The glass, barely intact, fell in shattered fragments.

“How you doing, Erik?” Dustin asked, but he already knew. The bullet hadn’t stopped at



the window.

“Can’t move!” Erik told him, panic making his voice rise.

“Shock,” Dusty told him confidently. *Nothing to lose by lying.*

*Nothing left, after today.*

Erik must have been leaning forward when it hit. Dusty guessed it had hit his spinal column at an angle, done its damage, then headed out, through his chest.

“Gotta get you out of here, so you can heal Jamie. He’d got a lump on his head you wouldn’t believe,” Dusty told him.

Erik couldn’t heal himself. All his life he’d healed everyone else. Hell - he’d fly a thousand miles to heal a friend, if that’s what it took.

But he couldn’t heal himself.

Erik was having trouble breathing now, and Dusty guessed his lung was filling with blood. He could read the panic in Erik’s eyes, and he took his hand in a tight grasp. Then, he realised Erik couldn’t feel it, so he pushed his head in, and rested his forehead against the other man’s ear. “I’ll see you clear, Erik,” he promised again. He held him close and talked to him about when they were kids - about the time Jamie had tossed a chair at him in a fit of temper - and the day Erik had layered the foxy teacher’s chair with multiple tacks, claimed it was someone else, then insisted on “healing” her. “Remember that one, Erik?” Dusty asked, smiling through the lump in his throat. “How you told her it had to be ‘hands on’, and she believed you?”

He guessed it was sometime during that last story that Erik died. When Dusty pulled back a little, Erik was staring blankly at the dashboard, a slight smile on his face.

“You saw him clear, Dusty.” Jamie sounded like he was choking. There were tears running down his face. He reached over and gripped Erik’s shoulder. “Wish I could tell him...” He couldn’t finish. He shook his head. “Better your way.” His breath caught. “He never knew...”

Dusty reached out and gripped his arm. “I’m getting you out of here, Jamie.”

“Do you really think you can change it, Dusty?” For a moment, he sounded like the kid Dusty had once known.

“I don’t know,” Dusty told him honestly, as he yanked Jamie out through the broken windscreen. James was wobbling, so Dustin took one of his arms over his shoulder and moved toward the other vehicle. Zar and Merrie were lying there, in the dirt -

“*Oh, Jesus!*” Jamie turned away, to be sick.

Dusty closed his eyes and hauled James rapidly past them. *The sniper. Get clear of the sniper.*

He started up Valterzar’s truck and took off, across the sand. He couldn’t get the pictures out of his head: Erik, Merrie, Zar. Josh and Ren. Ren - his Kitten.

“One thing’s sure, Jamie,” he said, through gritted teeth. “We’re going to give this a damn good try. God knows, we’ve got nothing left to lose.”

\*

“Know anything about coordinates?” Dusty asked him, a short time later.

“Yeah,” Jamie said. He seemed to be coming out of his shock a little now. Dustin was tempted to ask him about his head, then realised it wouldn’t do any good - only remind him he was hurting. There wasn’t much either of them could do about it out here. “Helps me find my volcanoes.”

Dustin smirked. “Doesn’t say much for your powers of observation.”

“Hey, when I run into the lava dome, then I know I’m in the right place.”

It was conversation, to fill the gaps and shorten an uncomfortable silence.

*Silence that'd give us too much time to think.*

"James, if I take a detour, do whatever it takes to bring me back."

"Sure thing." Jamie glanced at him. "Something coming on? Want me to drive?" He added, "It might be better if you were practising a little 'conservation' here - of energy."

"I'd rather be practising a little 'concentration' on my driving."

"Good," Jamie said.

Dusty glanced at him. "What?"

"I've had enough driving for the day anyway."

"It must have been a bullet in the tyre -"

"I know," James told him. "Not for the first time do I wish my abilities leaned a little less toward the punch and push, and a little more toward the -"

"- precognitive," Dusty finished with a sigh. "You're not the only one."

\*

There wasn't much left. Part of the hillside had collapsed, in what could have been an avalanche of erosion, if it hadn't been for the scar tissue in a reddish gash across the face. "This has to be it," Dusty said determinedly.

"If not, we're going to waste a lot of time digging for nothing." The sun was halfway to the horizon now, which made it cooler, but when the darkness came, it'd be complete.

"We have gear," Dustin told him.

"Yeah, but we don't know what. Half was on the other truck." James looked at his expression and said hastily, "I'm not saying we don't have to do something. Valterzar talked about secrecy, and what could happen. As it is, we're probably being followed by that sniper guy. If not, he may asked for some reinforcements to head our way."

Dusty nodded curtly, and headed for the back of the truck.

"What did you think?" Jamie asked in exasperation. "That I was going to put this off? Preach about 'since it's all in the past anyway...?'"

Dusty turned back to look at him. "Weren't you?"

"Shit, no!" Jamie complained. "The more that happens, the harder it's going to be to fix. All I was going to suggest was that we look around, for some metal or something - some clue to tell us this is the right place. So we don't waste the little time we have left."

Dusty put the suggestion into action. He'd only gone a few metres when he squatted, and gently wrested a shiny piece of metal from the ground.

"What is it?" Jamie asked.

Dustin couldn't speak. He lifted it, so James could see the "K", twisted and melted from the explosion.

James took a deep breath, then nodded. He went over to the truck and untied two spades, a pick, and a couple of shovels. Dustin's expression was as desolate as the dried sands, but Jamie ignored it.

Time to call him back to the present.

James gave a sharp whistle, to get his attention, then tossed him a spade. "We have to dig down to cabin level, right?" Dustin nodded. "Well, my Boy, you're about to find out what a geologist's life is like."

\*

Jamie opened the door for Merrie, but when she seemed inclined to hover in the corner he sighed dramatically, and concentrated briefly. Merrie, taken by surprise, was flung against Valterzar. "Much better." James winked at Zar, slammed the door firmly, and went over to the

other truck.

“Cute couple,” Erik remarked.

“I’m beginning to think all the people I know think like me -” James complained.

“God forbid,” Erik muttered.

Dusty flashed a grin from the back. “How’s that?”

“In geological time. Takes them aeons to sort everything out. It’s a wonder some of those feelings don’t metamorphose with the amount of time they take.”

“That’s what I’m counting on,” Erik said, with a smooth smile. He looked deliberately at Dustin, and offered him an irreverent salute.

“Snowballs in hell, Dainler,” Dustin said, grinning.

They drove out of town and several kilometres across the desert. It was bouncy and jolting, and Erik was glad when Valterzar finally called a halt. “To think I could have taken a helicopter,” he complained.

“It’s a test,” Jamie told him. “Just to see how well we function with our brains bounced out.”

“With them screwed on half-assed backwards,” Dustin corrected. “That way Dainler won’t feel so unique.”

Valterzar got out of the truck and came back, to knock on the window. Jamie rolled it down. “How can you stand it with the window up?” Zar asked.

“Dust or heat. Dust or heat. Hmm-m, big decision. Heat,” Jamie retorted. “Makes me think magma.” Zar looked past him at Erik, who had one of those battery-operated mini fans, and was plying it around his face. Zar snorted.

Dustin raised his hands. “Don’t look at me. Mis ventanas estan gordas.” He grinned, his eyes and teeth appearing exceptionally white in his dirty face.

“Just call him ‘Dusty’,” Erik put in.

“If you need any translating done, I taught him everything he knows,” James added.

Valterzar rolled his eyes. “I’ll keep that in mind. According to the coordinates, it shouldn’t be far.” He looked at Dusty assessingly. “How’re you holding up?”

“Fine. Despite all claims to the contrary,” Dustin said mockingly, “Erik *is* good for something.”

“Symtech says we may get interference.”

“Yeah. They *did* seem a little overly enthusiastic to get me down here,” Erik commented.

“Sounds like they acted first, then thought about it later,” Dustin remarked.

“Sounds like somebody else we know,” Erik said sarcastically. “You should be damn glad they did. Otherwise, I might not have been playing touristo at Tres Hermanos.”

“What happened to the back-up details we usually can’t get rid of?” James asked.

“This time, we’re it. There were complications of some sort,” Zar admitted. “Careless.”

“D’you think Ren and Josh are in danger?” Dustin asked seriously. He’d been worried their danger would be internal, rather than external.

“I think there’s a chance someone could shoot first, ask questions later.”

“Which is why Symtech’s so hyper,” Erik murmured.

“Are they still on radio silence?” Dustin asked anxiously.

Valterzar hesitated. “Hard to tell,” he said. “I’m no expert on these things, but either we’re out of range, or someone’s jamming the signal. Other than telling the agency the coordinates, there’s been no word.” He sounded worried. “We know they’re on foot, and the desert can be pretty unforgiving. Keep your eyes open - for anything.”

\*

A tremendous amount of mini mountain had collapsed onto the downed aircraft. Dustin wondered whether he shouldn't be too fussed about where he did his retrovision - for now. Technically, he supposed he could sit up here above the crash site and watch it all from a bird's eye view. If he was on the far side of the plane, though, he might not see much - and he wouldn't have much of a chance to stop it. "This 'trip', I have to see what happens. I may have to go back a second time to stop it." He gulped, dreading what was going to happen.

"Whatever it takes," Jamie said solemnly, and re-applied himself to slinging soil.

*Only, there may be no second time. I may only get one shot,* Dustin realised. Last time, he'd practically blown out his brain doing this. Was that going to happen again? There was no Erik to bail him out.

*This time, I'm the one trying to bail Erik out.* Dustin shovelled harder. One shot, to try to help them all.

*Make it a good one.*

## Chapter Seven

“Zar!” Merrie stared across the distant sands, trying to see past the orangy glow reflecting off the sand. “There’s a dead man.”

Zar looked at her quickly.

“No,” she told him thankfully. “It’s not Josh.”

“Which way?”

She pointed toward the line of the setting sun. Zar’s arm around her shoulder tightened briefly, then he released her to put both hands on the wheel. This way it was even bumpier than before.

He wondered who - or what - they were going to find.

\*

The shadows of the saguaro were getting quite long across the desert when they heard the first metallic clang. Jamie tapped along the heat-warped metal with the shovel, until he found the place where the wing tapered down. Around here somewhere, there would have been a door...

He and Dustin went at it with a will. There was a sense of urgency in both of them now - some need to be done with it before dark. One day had already fallen on Josh’s and Ren’s bodies; he couldn’t bear the finality of having it close once again - on them and the others - without a resolution.

*I have to know, he thought dismally. How far the darkness spreads...*

Dustin noticed that more sand was flying that either of their shovels could account for. He glanced at Jamie, and saw how he was concentrating. “Josh could use you out in the field,” he said.

James grinned, pleased to see Dusty was still thinking positively. *As long as Josh is alive in his brain...* “I’ll keep that in mind,” he replied. “Sure beats a toothbrush.”

\*

They hurried across the sand, looking for some sign of trespass. It was Erik who spotted the traces first: two pairs of footsteps, that seemed to weave all over the place. “Think it’s them?” he asked.

“Looks like they were running,” Jamie suggested.

Valterzar eyed the prints and nodded. “Let’s hope they didn’t get caught.”

“Zar!” Merrie grabbed his arm. She was watching Dustin.

At first, Zar thought he was tracing the prints back to their source, but then he realised Dustin wasn’t looking at the ground. He was limping determinedly up the crusted slope, eyes straight ahead, face set. Zar paralleled him; watching his expression. He was pale - dreading what he was going to see.

Erik saw the way Zar was watching Dustin. He came up swiftly behind him and asked, almost defensively, “What’s up?”

“I don’t know.”

Dustin stopped and forced himself to look down. He was shaking as he stood there, staring at the body. The blood. Dribbling out the man’s mouth. It was dried now, and fat blowflies had already been at work. Dusty’s eyes moved downward, to the chest, and it was as though a hot poker stabbed through his right side. He gasped, and went to his knees. For a moment he was blinded by the searing pain that exploded behind his eyes.

“Dusty!”

It was Erik, and Dusty turned to look at him - at them. Zar’s face was impassive, and Dustin

knew he was trying to make sense of this - to categorise it. Merrie merely looked distressed, and Jamie anxious. James wanted to move things along; to find Ren and Josh before dark.

Dustin's eyes were bloodshot; dark circles rimming them. For a moment, Erik wondered if he was having another haemorrhage. Valterzar obviously wondered the same thing. "Retro, Dusty?" he asked quietly.

"Deja vu," Dusty replied. He looked past him, past them all, to where the metallic glint of the downed plane showed through its coating of debris. "If we want to see Ren and Josh alive again," he muttered hoarsely, "we'll have to go there."

\*

The plane was a mangled wreck. What Jamie had taken for a wing was actually part of the fuselage. It took some imaginative reconstruction before they could figure out where they were.

Neither said a thing, but Dustin knew James was as worried as he was about the sniper. If he'd sent word to his bosses, they could be getting company. Dustin had the terrible impression that they were running out of time - that all the retro-effort in the world wouldn't change a thing unless it happened soon.

Half an hour later Jamie looked at him, and gave a nod. "Lucky you don't need any special equipment for this." His smile was forced.

In that instant, Dusty wavered. James had lost so much today. Should he tell him? How much this type of transition rattled his brain? That it was his bout of retro, rather than the infection, which had triggered his collapse at the airport?

No, Dustin thought. *What's the point?* Dusty wasn't about to let it stop him, and it would just give James one more thing to worry about.

*He'll be watching me instead of watching our backs.*

At the same time, it wasn't fair. James was in on the gamble because the outcome would be worth it, and God knows, things couldn't get any worse. Only, they could, and Dustin knew it. There was a chance James might be stuck here with another dead man on his hands.

But if he knew, he'd probably call a halt to this insanity. That's how he'd see it - as unacceptable risk. After all, he had only Dusty's determination to go on. No proof. And if he decided to stop things, there was no doubt Jamie could do it, if he put his mind to it.

Dustin had already reconciled himself to the thought that there might be one victim of the plane crash, no matter what. Maybe it was the price to be paid for dabbling with the Fates. Even if he were able to reverse or realign some of the things that had happened, there was a good chance Dustin Mallory wouldn't survive it.

One thing was certain: if he had to go in a second time, he'd probably need Jamie's PK to hold his brains together for the jaunt.

Dustin decided he'd rather not think about it. As Jamie had said, "*Whatever it takes...*"

\*

"I think we should go after them," Erik argued. "*Fuck the plane!*" He was angry that they were all being so obtuse. It was obvious Ren and Josh could be in danger, and that's what they'd come for - to save them. Visiting the wreck would only delay the rescue - and Dusty had already delayed it enough. After his collapse at the airport, Valterzar's group had been forced to hole up in a motel until Dusty could travel. The fool had somehow convinced Valterzar he was fit, and it had nearly gotten him killed. *More delays.*

At this point, Erik didn't care who did the rescuing - he just wanted Ren and Josh safe. If Dusty hadn't delayed the group, the rescue may well have been a *fait accompli* by now.

*He shouldn't even be here,* Erik thought. *Dusty should be back at the hospital. Not in*

*Mexico.* “Mallory’s not precognitive. In all the testing, he’s *never* been precognitive,” he told Valterzar firmly.

“I agree with Erik,” Jamie said. “We’re here to find Josh and Ren - not to get mixed up in whatever got that guy killed!” It was the most persuasive argument of them all. Stay here, and they might all go the same way.

“You’re ‘humouring’ him,” Erik told Valterzar disgustedly, as though Dustin wasn’t there. “If this is one of those psychiatrist things, you can count me out. Give me a few minutes with him, and I’ll put him right.” He turned to Dustin. “Sorry, Dusty, but this is crazy. The only thing I can figure is that you don’t know what you’re saying. I’ll try it again -”

“No.” Dustin took the first tentative step toward the downed plane, well aware that not one of them was in agreement with him. *Why should they be?* Despite what Erik believed, Dusty *did* know how insane this appeared. “At least James,” he said. He looked over at him. “Leave James here.” He wiped sand from his face with a shaking hand.

“Why?” Valterzar studied him. His inclination was to turn Dusty over to Erik. There was obviously some physical basis for his behaviour, given the way he was looking. Zar couldn’t deny his instincts, though, which were telling him Dustin might be basing this on something else as well. Something he’d seen.

It was Merrie, though, who reached out and laid a gentle hand against Dustin’s face. “Horrible to be amidst disbelievers,” she joked softly.

He smiled at her, realising that what he’d seen was just a fraction of what this woman must have to endure. Merrie’s gift tended to capture those last moments; that uncertain time when the soul is leaving the body - and neither body nor soul is quite certain of the separation. He looked at her seriously -

- *easier than facing Valterzar*, he thought -

- and said, “I have to be in the plane.”

“Why the plane?” James asked impatiently. Geological time wasn’t working for him today. He was as keen as any of the others to find Josh and Ren and get out of here. The idea of a bunch of murderers coming to kill him didn’t exactly appeal.

“Because -” Dustin said. He looked at the plane, and staggered slightly.

Erik reached out to him, concerned, but Valterzar shook his head and put a hand under Dustin’s elbow, to steady him. “Tell us *why*. ”

Dusty was staring at the plane now, his eyes distant. “I have to stop him -”

“Who?”

Dustin turned to look at the dead man. “Him,” he whispered, his eyes dark with horror. There was only one explanation that would satisfy the anguished visions in his head. He looked at Merrie, and her sudden shocked expression held echoes of his own horror.

“You have to kill him,” she said.

\*

He knew it was going to be bad. Merrie had warned them - told them about the bullet wounds in Josh’s back, and the bullet hole in Ren’s head. What he’d seen since, with Erik and Lawrence and Merrie, had told him the rest. If there was any way he could have avoided this, he would have.

*I should be used to death.*

In his own way, he was as close to death as Merrie. She saw them as shades, spirits, metaphysical wanderers - he saw them as they’d once stood, and walked, and talked - before they were hidden in dust and ash. This latent ability, this chance to interact - was it real? Or was he

really as much of a metaphysical wanderer as Merrie's ghosts?

It didn't matter - because in Dustin's mind, there were no choices. Any selective process had vanished when the killer had raised the gun, pelted Josh, then blasted half Ren's head away. Whether this was a cosmic no-no, or karma to be revisited on him ten times over, he had to do something - even if it was as simple as a warning.

*Maybe it should have been before*, he suddenly thought with despair. Waiting till the last minute - trying to arrest the moment of death - what kind of fool's game was that? Especially when dealing with something as unknown, as untried, as his retrocognitive influence.

*Fuck it!* He should have thought with logic, rather than desperation. But when he'd begun this, he'd been no more certain of his ability to deal with this than he was now. He'd been thinking defensively (*get in there and stop the bullet!*) rather than reasonably. How much more sensible to stop a snowball than an avalanche...

He couldn't go back, again and again, to put it right. After one trek, maybe two, he didn't think there'd be enough left of his brain to recall why and where.

He took a shuddery breath, and James rested a hand on his shoulder. Most of the time he and James had been digging Dustin had been unconsciously fearing the worst - fearing that he'd find some recognisable part. Even though the plane had been incinerated, he was afraid some charred remnant, like the necklace, may have survived the blast.

So far, though, the necklace had been the only find. The only clue. To what? Time to find out; to see it happen. *Because if I don't, I won't have a clue how to stop it.*

Dustin sat on the scorched sand, and his eyes met Jamie's. They were both sombre, and Dusty wondered whether Jamie did, in fact, have some idea what this could do to him. James gave his shoulder a quick squeeze. "Don't worry, Dusty," he said. "I won't stray too far."

Dustin nodded, and focused on the plane's chronological ghost. With the jerky disjointedness of a broken film reel, the world began to spin around him.

\*

The door to the cabin had been forced open. Valterzar, in his role as leader, went in first, probed around a little, then shrugged. There were a few guns and some explosives, but they weren't the payload. The bulk of the shipment consisted of sack after sack of grain. "Nothing but rice. Must have to do with the mycoherbicide."

"Stupid place to try to grow rice," Erik complained. "Hot as Hades out here." He had his mini fan going again, and was alternating between fanning himself, and fanning Merrie.

"I doubt this was their final destination," Valterzar told him drily.

"Just a 'drop-in' spot on the route," James remarked.

"Wonder where Ren and Josh are," Erik hinted loudly, kicking at some of the footprints gouged in the sand. "Seems a shame to waste such an obvious track," he told Valterzar.

"It'll be dark soon," Dustin said. "Maybe you'd better find them."

"First, Dusty," Erik said firmly, "you and I are heading in the cabin for a little quiet time. You look like shit."

"Later," Dustin told him, a little desperately. "When you get back. James'll stay with me."

James didn't look too happy at the suggestion. "Thanks so much for your offer," he said sarcastically, "but this place looks like a hangout for thugs. James Wickham has no desire to become a victim. He prefers to put any holes in his shirts himself."

"He needs you, Jamie," Merrie told him. "Don't be so difficult."

"Then *you* stay. I'm not the one talking about killing people. I have some standards, and one of them is: you don't murder strangers."



"Only people you know?" Erik suggested.

"More tempting with some people than others," James told him. "Put yourself on the 'some people' list."

Valterzar was frowning at Dustin. "You're certainly anxious for us to go. Why?"

"You mean, 'can't I kill my victim as well with you here as without you?' *Shit!*" he exclaimed. "*I don't know!*" Dustin was frustrated by his own uncertainty, and angry that Valterzar was doing that psychiatry thing of picking apart everything he said. "You don't fit in! That's all I can tell you." He sat down on the sand, and rested his arms on his drawn-up knees. He felt as if he'd already had a bad "trip" - like he'd already taken one of his retrograde jaunts, and come off the worse for it. "Can't you just go?" he said angrily.

"James?" Valterzar looked at him.

"Guess I'll stay," he said resignedly. "Just don't be gone too long, all right?"

"I'd feel better if the phones worked."

"Wouldn't we all?" said Erik. "I'd better stay, too -"

"No, Erik." It was Merrie, and she was looking off across the desert. "We'd better go," she urged, as though she'd suddenly realised haste was important.

They drove off in the crew cab, leaving the other truck for James and Dusty. James stood there and watched dismally until the reflected light off the truck body blended into the reddish refraction of the late day sun. "She sure seemed amenable to your 'plan'. Almost eager for you to hop right to it," he commented sarcastically.

"No plan, Jamie," Dusty admitted. "Just a suspicion."

"How mysterious," James said flatly. "Suspicion of what?"

Dustin sighed. "That if I blow this, none of them will be coming back."

\*

*"A little blood goes a long way..."*

Something he'd heard once, but never really thought about. By the time the blood filled his vision, Dustin was concentrating hard - trying not to go too far too fast. It was a backwards avalanche of dirt and grit followed by flashes and flickers of black smoke - and then it was blood. Soaked up by the soil, splayed across his hands. Josh dead, then dying, then all the pieces of him rushing back together in some sick parody; Ren, shattered and bloody, being elevated up, onto her feet, as bits of brain and bone flew back into her head. Dustin felt like he was dying himself now, choking on vomit and gasping for breath, as he fought to keep from passing out - fought to find his moment - that all-important instant when he could stop it from happening. Then, for an instant, he thought he had it: through watering eyes he saw a not-so-distant glint. What was it? Binoculars? A gun?

Dustin didn't realise he wasn't alone - that Jamie's hand on the shoulder, combined with the intensity of Dusty's reaction, had flashed some of Dustin's gut-gagging visions into Jamie's head.

*Jesus Christ!* Jamie wondered, in that split second of sunglint on glass, whether he could somehow effect a change - to influence the scene, if Dusty couldn't. He even tried it, concentrating fiercely on the would-be murderer. But the effort was too much for Dustin, and Jamie saw it in the widening of his eyes, the sweat running down his face. There was no way he could maintain them both. Jamie lifted his hand off Dusty's shoulder, then sat there helplessly, wondering what the hell to do next.

Whatever Dusty was going to try, there wouldn't be much time. His strength was failing fast. There might only be one shot at this, and Jamie found himself mumbling prayers. Wherever

Dusty's backwards motion movie stopped, he'd have to put it on play.

The thought made Jamie feel more nauseous than he did already. No one should have to live through this twice...

\*

He was on the slope. Long before Ren and Josh had left their aeroplane, the man had left his. He'd returned to his plane by parachute, floating serenely down onto the hill.

No - not serenely. Limply. He'd had some trouble during bailout. Dustin could see it now: the torn chute, the uneven flight. He'd landed hard, atop the hill. The pilot had watched and waited, until he could manoeuvre enough to make his way down, to destroy his plane and its questionable cargo. Only, Ren and Josh had gotten there first...

Dustin's replay was running in "Forward" now, and he saw the distant specks on the horizon. He doubted that the pilot, even then, could have been any more tense than Dusty was now.

*Maybe if I can warn them, about the pilot...*

They'd want to help him. Ren would blame any of the man's harsher emanations on pain and angst, and go to render first aid. She and Josh would be just as dead as if they'd stayed by the plane.

If the pilot had been anywhere else but on the hill - some place away from the plane, where he wouldn't have to be in defensive mode. Where they could have rendered him first aid without dying for their efforts...

Ren's telepathy was one of the reasons she'd be valuable in this kind of setting: someone to locate a lost pilot, when all technology had failed. They must have suspected he'd still be alive - otherwise, they would have sent in Merrie instead.

Once focussed, Ren would have followed her internal compass. She'd have the heading down, but the sight of the plane would fool her. Direction yes, altitude, no. As a kid, she'd always been killer at hide 'n seek - until they'd discovered she could be fooled. Elevation, whether high in a closet, or at the top of a hill, fooled her every time. Because Ren just wasn't sly enough. Despite any insights she might have into the human soul, she'd always remained selective. She preferred not to acknowledge the devious or dark, and largely tuned it out. She refused to relinquish her naive conviction that whatever bad she sensed could be offset by the good. The last thing she'd expect would be someone lying in wait, atop a hill, to take her life.

Josh? Josh wasn't much better. Easy-going, he frequently took his clairvoyance for granted. To Josh, there wasn't anything better in the world than a well-preserved dinosaur bone - especially if he'd been able to find it first. No, the last thing Josh would expect was death to be lurking at his back.

Only, it wasn't at his back - yet. Death was finding his way down, off the hill.

Ren would assume any errors in her "reading" were induced by the metal sheathing on the fuselage. Something to upset the signals. Despite the "esoteric" nature of their gifts, all of them realised there was some basis in physics; in electrochemical signals and biological receptors. Something that could be confused by an overdose of static or an electrical conductor. That's what Ren was thinking now. It was obvious, from the way she and Josh were acting, that they thought the victim was trapped inside the plane.

*Was there someone there?*

Could that be why the pilot was staying so close?

Dustin had to know. In his rapid replay he recalled a flash of the doorway as a gaping black hole. Ren and Josh had opened the door and died. But Dustin wasn't certain, even now, where the gunfire had come from. He'd been too focused on the bloodied bodies of his friends, to get more

than a glimpse of gleaming metal. He had to know whether the gunshots had come from without, or within.

*I have to get inside the plane.*

He'd always followed the spatial limitations of his retro visions. This duality was confusing enough, without trying to remember where lay a door, or a curb, or a wall in the future. Now, he sat there, clinging to these fragments of the past, while trying to recall the way it looked in his present.

In his own time, there was no door to the cabin. It had been demolished; forcibly mangled in the blast. *There's nothing to stop me going in.* It was one thing rationalising it, though, and another doing it. Part of him was working so hard at clinging to this vision that his eyes throbbed and his nose bled. Now, he had to force himself to acknowledge that the door wasn't really here. It wasn't solid enough to bar his entry.

He closed his eyes so they wouldn't sabotage his intent, and crawled forward, into the cabin.

*Rice.* Sacks of it. Was this it? Was this what the murderer was trying so hard to protect? An illicit cargo of rotten rice? Dustin's head throbbed at the pointlessness of it all.

*How am I going to stop it?* He was gripped with despair. Someone willing to kill over something so meaningless bordered on the psychopathic. He wouldn't be swayed by pleas or arguments.

*I'll take away his gun.*

It was the answer for almost thirty seconds, until Dustin saw the weapons cached in the back. Guns, explosives. Materialising enough to take away his gun might work once, but it wouldn't stop him. It'd only make the man more eager to defend himself.

He'd just dig out another gun, and finish what he started...

The pressure in Dustin's head was building; an ache so intense he couldn't think. *I should have stopped them, way back when. Stopped them before they reached the plane; convinced them before they were in range.*

*Too late - too stupid.* Now that he was here, he could see a dozen ways he could have intercepted them at a distance - gone back and ended this before it had even begun.

He crawled to the back of the plane, to look at the weapons. There were explosives. It didn't take much to recognise "plastique". It had been the explosive of choice for years on TV. There were also several handguns, plus a rifle with some kind of magnifying scope. Was this the one he'd seen the man holding? Or did he have another?

Outside, he could hear Ren and Josh arguing.

"We *can't* just 'leave him to it'!" Ren was saying. "He's a human being - despite his warped personality."

Dusty's took a shuddery breath. Was this the last time he'd hear her voice?

"He's an *armed* human being," Josh retorted. "Armed and alarmed do not a good combination make."

Josh had picked up on the weapons cache.

*He knows the man's armed - no, he thinks I am.*

*Am I?* Dusty put his head in his hands and tried to think.

He'd never fired a gun before. There was one way to learn - he could follow this through, move to the other slope, and watch the killer fire his. But the idea of it filled Dusty with revulsion - and fear. *What if I can't go back again? To stop it?*

Physically, he knew he couldn't tolerate much more. The pressure was building in his head,

and he didn't know whether the nausea was more from the migraine, or from the horrific things he'd had to witness.

The argument was still going on in the background. All Dusty could think was that he might have only one shot at this - and he might have to take it.

"You're nuts!" Josh told her. "You can't stop a bullet with good intentions!"

"At least I *have* 'good intentions'! 'So gather your fungus and let *them* come get him'," she mimicked. "What kind of compassion is that?"

Dusty reached for the rifle - the one with the sniper's site. He concentrated on grabbing it - on solidifying his fingers enough to pick it up...

In his determination, Dustin's fingers gripped and squeezed.

"I don't need to show compassion for someone trying to kill -"

The words pounded in Dustin's brain, and for a moment, he felt as guilty as the man on prowl without. It was followed by a blast of anger that these two should be so damned naive, and too blind to spot a killer at their backs.

His anger squeezed the trigger - literally. The stupid gun jerked in his hands. Dustin jolted at the boom, jarring his aching head.

He took his anger out on the two outside the plane - the two who were being so damned difficult to save.

"*Will you shut up?!*" he shouted. "Or the next one's through my head - so this 'creep' can put his 'warped personality' out of its misery!"

He never expected them to hear him.

\*

The bickering had halted at the shot, but then it picked up again. Josh was yelling now, "Where's the best place to get in?"

Dusty froze, and his eyes widened. Josh was talking to him. Yelling at him, as though he expected a response.

*He heard me. That means I can warn them, about the sniper.*

*Except the sniper's already on his way down. It might be more of a challenge, but he'll just shoot them sooner, rather than later.*

*What would a warped personality reply?*

*That's easy, Dusty. What would you say to Josh at this point?*

*What you're feeling. "Why did they send stupid people?"*

"I think that means he wants us to use the door," he heard his Kitten comment.

It was a lifetime waiting. Dusty hung on, afraid to let go - afraid to fast forward for fear of missing his chance. *Get them in the plane and keep them in. Keep them safe.*

*Save them.*

It was hot as Hades in the plane, and Dustin didn't know whether it was his time, or their time, or both. He felt like he was dying, but he couldn't die yet. *Lure them in and warn them. Slam the door and lock the killer out.*

*What about Jamie? He'll get Jamie...*

*No. Jamie isn't here.*

The pain, the heat, the confusion were tearing him apart.

And then Jamie was there, and Dustin panicked, thinking he'd blown it. But no - he was still in the plane. It was only Jamie's hand on his shoulder again. No mistakes. Jamie didn't want any mistakes, because then he'd be alone. Nobody left.

Because the killer would leave here, and head back along Ren's and Josh's trail. Until he

happened on the two trucks, that had no business heading toward his cremated plane. So, he'd take them out, too. Just in case. No witnesses. No survivors.

No mistakes.

Only, he and James had made a big one. They'd left the bodies and the gear back at the truck. The phones, the radios. The lone killer might not be alone for long...

*Get out.* James had to get out. That way, if this failed, Jamie wouldn't die, too.

He didn't realise he was muttering it aloud until Jamie's voice repeated it. Dustin also realised he was no longer sitting; but lying on his back. For a flicker of time Jamie was there, and he looked - there was no other way to describe it - bereft.

\*

All James wanted to ask him was if there was a chance - if there was any way things might somehow be put "right". But when he saw the bleak look in Dustin's eyes, he didn't have the nerve. Dusty's eyes were bloodshot, and there were dark circles beneath. The man looked white, sick as a dog, and absolutely gutted.

"I saw it," James told him. "And I'm staying."

It was enough. Jamie was smart. He would have figured it out. Dusty's eyes met his in understanding.

There were no more words to say.

This was one of those times when "I'm sorry" would never be enough.

Then, Jamie was gone. And Dusty was, once again, alone in the plane.

\*

He had to know. *Did I drift? Am I still "on time"?* Experimentally, he griped, in his best bad-guy voice, "What's taking so long? It's like an oven in here."

"You're lucky there's a door left to clear," Josh retorted. "And as for that 'stupid people' comment? We weren't the ones flying the plane."

"Good one, Josh," Ren said.

"I have my moments," Josh replied.

Dusty gave a sigh of relief. *Still here.*

*No mistakes.*

\*

"You still alive in there?" *Josh.* Josh was yelling at him.

Dustin groaned. "You're taking so long I was gonna ask you the same thing!"

"Don't give me that look! If we had the truck, we could have been out of here an hour ago! And we wouldn't have to walk back across the goddamn desert!"

At first, Dusty thought Ren was yelling at him, too. But, no - it must be at Josh. *She's yelling at Josh...*

Because Josh was bellowing back. "They said 'sneak'. How the hell can you sneak with a goddamn truck?"

Now, there was another sound besides the repetitious clanging Dusty associated with their digging efforts. This was a metallic scrape and screech. They'd cleared the door. Now they were prying it open.

*Get them inside...*

*No.* Something was trying to break through the pounding in his head. Abstractedly, he pinched his nose to stop a spurt of bleeding. He was vaguely aware that in that other time, Jamie's hand was on his head.

*Holding me together...*

Whatever Jamie did, helped Dusty's mind clear. In a gag-wrenching flash of memory, he suddenly recalled the sequence.

*There won't be time. Because, as soon as the door opens, Josh will get a bullet in the back.*  
Dusty shook off Jamie's hand, reached over, and picked up the gun.

## Chapter Eight

The first shot shattered the windscreen. Valterzar swerved the truck, then did a quick one eighty and headed back the way he'd come. "Anybody hit?" he asked tensely.

"You -"

He looked at his Merrie Girl in surprise and saw her pointing to the blood that was pouring down his arm. He hadn't even felt it. Stunned, he started to slam on the brakes, but Erik yelled at him, "Don't stop here!"

"I'll drive," Merrie said. She grabbed the wheel, leaned forward against the dashboard, and plunged her foot down on the accelerator.

"It doesn't even hurt," Zar argued.

"Have some *sensitivity*," Merrie told him. It lost something in the jarring up and down of her high-speed driving. "I'm worried, and I don't *want* to be worried about you."

"No kidding!" Erik interrupted. "Enough trouble worrying about the killers on our tail -"

They went up on two wheels, then slammed back onto the ground, the wheels digging in again with a splaying of sand.

"- and the killer behind the wheel," he hissed close to Valterzar's ear. Aloud, he said, "She wants her studmuffin intact."

"Especially the stud part," she said, with a smile in Zar's direction.

"Watch the road!" Erik yelled.

"What road?!" Merrie yelled back.

Valterzar frowned. "Let *me* drive -" he began, but he lost it, because just then they hit another big rut. They jarred and bounced and wobbled, as Merrie rammed her foot back down on the gas.

That last jounce had done it. Zar whitened as his upper arm gave a toothache-type pang. Once it started hurting, it didn't seem inclined to stop.

"First time on this end of things, eh?" Erik asked, watching his face. He'd reached over the seat and was trying to control the bleeding with compression.

"Don't make conversation with him, Rik," Merrie ordered. "Just fix him."

"Drive like a sane person and I might be able to -" Erik retorted. He wrapped his bandanna around Valterzar's upper arm. "How's that feel, Doc?"

Merrie glanced quickly at Erik's bandaging job and then back to the wheel. "Erik! Aren't you going to *do* something?!"

Another bullet shattered the glass in the back. Erik did a rapid clamber over the seat, so all three of them were in the front. "It's a little hard to concentrate!" he complained. To Valterzar, he muttered, "She doesn't want me to be taken out until I fix you first. What part do you want me to start with, Mer?" he asked.

"Only the parts that are broken," she said.

"You know, they probably wouldn't have spotted us if it hadn't been for that shirt -" Erik told her.

"I don't know," Zar said, looking at the bright peachy bit of fluff Merrie was wearing. He couldn't help but envision what she had underneath it. "If she'd gone without it, they might have spotted us even faster."

\*

James thought the sound of the other truck returning would be a welcome relief. In the

distance, though, over the roar, pop and whine of the straining engine, there were a number of distant “cracks”, that sounded remarkably like gunshots. “What the hell?” he mumbled.

He wanted to shake Dusty - to bring him back from wherever he’d gone. But, something held him back.

Maybe it was the way Dustin looked. Jamie had the impression the man was falling apart, right before his eyes. His nose was bleeding heavily, and there was a trickle of blood just starting to drip out his ear. Jamie laid a hand on his head, much as he had before Erik had arrived the last time. Jamie was afraid to move; afraid Dusty would die if he didn’t get back soon from wherever his mind had gone. He was tempted to interrupt, but Dusty had issued that warning. There was no way Dusty could be unaware of the bleeding; he must be in pain. He’d nearly died after the airport - he must know what he was risking. Obviously, whatever this was, he considered it worth the risk.

The truck came tearing in, balanced on two wheels again, then settled to the ground, the motor still racing. Erik flung open the door and bellowed, “*Time to go!*” When James squatted there still, his hand on Dustin’s head, Erik jumped out and did a crouched run toward the plane. “*Move it!*” he yelled. “*They’re coming!*”

There were two trucks coming up fast, and one of the gunmen hanging out the window had a sniper’s scope, much like the dead man’s on the slope. The first of the bullets plunged through the wing. “What’s the *holdup?*” Erik asked desperately. “Oh, *shit!*” he said, seeing Dusty’s face, and the blood pouring out his ear.

“If I let go -” James warned.

When Dusty suddenly stood up, it took James by surprise. Dusty was standing there foolishly now, his hands clinging to a gun.

“Get *down!*” Jamie yelled.

“What’s he *doing?!*” Valterzar’s voice rang out.

\*

Dusty gripped the gun with shaking hands, and narrowed his concentration to this. This moment. This one chance to see things through.

*I’m a murderer. It’s not self-defence till after the fact. I’m taking him out because of what he’s going to do...*

Were there choices? *Chances for him to change, like the chance I’m taking?* Could it be that the sniper would change his mind, at the last moment?

Dustin would have grasped at it, if he’d thought there was a chance. Anything other than levelling the gun and taking him out.

The door popped open, and the moment for thinking, for choices, was gone. There was only the glint of that gun in the distance, and Josh’s feet, just visible where he’d fallen. For an instant, Dustin thought the deed had been done, and that he’d missed it. Then he heard Josh mutter a complaint.

Josh would lift his head now, *for the last time...*

No more thinking. Dustin squeezed the trigger.

\*

It had never occurred to him that the man would see him, in that same instant. That his aim would shift from Josh to himself.

\*

“*Get him down!*” Erik was shouting, lunging to yank him out of the doorway.

\*

In a sudden gunburst that sent blood splashing across the sacks of rice, Dustin was blasted



back, out of sight.

“*James!*” Valterzar yelled. James was staring blankly at the spot where Dusty had been, a bemused look on his face. In that last moment, as he’d grasped Dusty’s leg, he’d experienced a loss of equilibrium that he couldn’t explain - as though he’d suddenly seen some altered vision of events past - and present. He still didn’t know quite where he was, and after that momentary glimpse of bloodshed and loss, he wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

“*Jamie! Wake up!*” It was Erik, shaking him; pushing him aside so he could get to Dusty. James looked up, and saw Merrie and Valterzar dive out of the truck and head his way.

“Up to you, James!” Valterzar was saying. James focused on him. “*Stop them!*”

The words penetrated. James’ vision was still overlain with that horrific vision of Josh and Ren lying in bits and pieces - the victims of a gun, much like the one that was aiming now, at Meredith’s back. In that moment, it was all one. James Wickham focussed on the not-so-distant truck, and lifted his hand.

He was the truck. Melded metal and synthetic rubber; plastic and glass. A metal frame, garbed and decked out - rolling forward in hot cycles of pump and grind.

Only now, he was rolling backwards. Crunching back, into what was now a squashed Persian visage of his metallic counterpart. As the second truck ground to a jarring halt, Jamie concentrated on getting undressed.

Valterzar grabbed Dustin’s rifle, and hovered next to James as the first truck shuddered to a halt, then began, literally, to come apart at the seams. Bits and pieces when flying: nuts and bolts, bedliner and tyres, glass and gauges. It was smashing, cascading, pelting the truck to the rear.

And, everywhere, panic. The would-be assault team disbanded in a scurrying run, chased by the pieces of their own vehicle. Tyres mowed them down; windshield wipers came at them like lances. The worst of it was the engine, that flung itself off its motor mounts and did a churningly loud slide - cylinders pumping and exhaust streaming - across the sand.

Zar dropped his guard now and dove into the cabin, where Merrie and Erik hovered over Dustin. “I need Jamie!” Erik said tensely.

Zar climbed back out and touched James’ arm. The next instant, he was tossed back, against the fuselage.

Erik heard the thunk from inside the cabin. “Forgot to warn him,” he grunted, flinching. “That’s gotta hurt.”

Merrie ran outside. Zar was rubbing the back of his head, but he nodded to her. She stooped down, next to James. “*Jamie!*” she whispered in his ear. “*Jamie!*”

James blinked, then blinked again. Abruptly, the rolling tyres exhausted their spin, did a final spiral, then dropped onto the sand. There was a distant clank and bang as the dissected pickup lost its momentum. Jamie’s eyes cleared.

“It’s Dusty, James,” Merrie told him. “Erik needs you.” Then she reached out a hand, to help Zar to his feet.

“*I’m losing him!*” Erik yelled a warning.

James wiped sweat off his brow. He alone knew what Dustin had gone through to salvage this little group - and he suspected there was a lot more he didn’t, but that he’d eventually coerce Dusty into telling him. He’d be damned if he’d let Dusty sacrifice himself, after doing so much else to help everyone else. He joined Erik, and now Zar, at Dustin’s side.

“I’ll be damned if you’re going anywhere, Dusty,” James told his limp form firmly. “Not if I have anything to say about it.”

Erik was looking frustrated. “Something’s wrong. He’s not coming back!”

Jamie touched Dustin's arm. "He's still there," he mumbled. "On the plane." He looked at Valterzar. "He's supposed to be gone. Or it could change things again."

"Do something, Zar!" Merrie urged. "Stop it - before it kills him!"

Erik looked at Valterzar curiously, as Zar reached out a hand, and rested it on Dusty's head. "He's one of us?" he asked.

Valterzar froze, startled by Erik's words. He'd suspected it, of course, even used it, but never openly acknowledged it.

"Get *on* with it!" James urged. Valterzar noticed he didn't seem in the least surprised by Erik's question.

"Hurry it up!" Erik said.

Valterzar laid his hand against Dustin's head and felt that churning of power in his gut. Only, this time, it was going to be a struggle. Because he wasn't battling James' rockshow or Merrie's rapacious ghost - things they wanted to stop but couldn't - he was battling Dusty's determination to hang on, and see his job through. "He's fighting me!" Zar told them. In that moment, he knew Dusty was afraid to let go. Zar forced some part of himself in, deeper - trying to break Dustin's mindset before he inadvertently ended his life. He'd gripped the past so firmly, and held on so hard, that he didn't know how to let it go.

In an array of blood-spattered visions, Zar saw what Dusty had. He nearly lost it when he witnessed Merrie sprawled, across the sand, entangled with his own lifeless body. A frisson of gooseflesh rode his skin as he viewed Erik entombed in the truck, and Ren and Josh splaying their brains and hearts across the plane's fuselage. *No wonder he doesn't want to come back!* Zar realised. He doesn't know what he'll find. The bullet in his side wasn't something he'd anticipated. *He doesn't know what's next - and as long as he stays there, in the past, he can still have hope...*

Dustin had been through too much. Battle fatigued. Weary, but unwilling to surrender. It was as though an artery had been severed, somewhere in Dustin's soul. No - more like a transfusion gone bad. Dusty refused to stop the bleeding, even though it was leaching his own life away. "*Enough*, Dusty!" Zar grunted, concentrating harder - but this time, he wasn't following the events that were running through Dusty's head: he was applying pressure; constricting the blood flow - slowing it, slowing it...stopped.

Zar gasped, and there was sweat on his brow. As he lifted his hand off Dustin's head, Merrie threw her arms around him. "You did it!"

Zar nodded, but didn't voice his worry: that if Dusty hadn't been in such bad shape, he might not have stood a chance. Almost automatically, he reached out to monitor Dusty's pulse. It felt stronger now, but his own head felt oddly woozy.

Erik glanced at him. "You okay?" he asked. At his nod, Erik added, "You're next."

Zar gave a shuddery sigh and sat back, a little weakly, against the nearest sack of rice. "It can wait," he said. "Till you've revamped yourself."

"Uh-uh," Erik told him. "Have you looked at yourself?"

Zar became aware that Merrie was doing something to his arm, and he suddenly realised his shirt and pants were soaked with blood. He looked confused.

James explained it to him. "When you were getting Dusty to shut down? You were spurting blood all over the place. We were beginning to wonder which of you would die first."

\*

"You should have worn a long-sleeved shirt," Josh said. "I warned you -"

Ren was fried. Her skin was magenta, and her face puffy; her eyes swollen. "I never want to see the sun again," she groaned. There were already blisters on her shoulders and the top of her

nose was so burnt it was starting to scab. "I feel sick," she complained.

"Heat exhaustion. Here, have some water."

"Josh!" she warned. They were slowly passing the spot where Josh's overly friendly pig had paid him multiple visits a couple of days before.

"Don't tell me," Josh complained. "It's that damned pig again, isn't it?"

"It's a pig, all right, but -"

But it was too late. Josh heard a snort at his rear. He brought back his heel, and gave the pig a sharp tap in the teeth.

The pig squealed angrily - and loudly. Josh stiffened. That wasn't the alarmed squeal of an annoying little porker; that was the deep, husky, full-throated squeal of a massive, adult, full-sized boar.

Josh chanced a glance over his shoulder. Two big, partially-trimmed tusks, beady little angry eyes, and a body that must have weighed as much as his car. The fucker was two metres long and nearly a metre high. Josh guessed he hadn't gone over the fence - he'd gone through it.

Nothing that big and heavy could make good time. Josh backed slowly away, but he could see it in his opponent's eyes: he was the enemy. Mr. Boar was about to charge. "*Run, Ren!*" Josh yelped, and took off at a sprint.

Ren had no precognitive powers, but she could picture it all now: death by boar. He was going to chomp Josh in half like a Great White Shark. The bloody thing was as big as a rhino, and probably just as heavy. Mass in motion.

Josh leaped a short wall, and nearly wet himself when massive Mr. Boar leaped it after him. In the background he could hear Ren screaming and yelling, and then he saw her: she had Mr. Boar by the tail and was trying to hold him back.

It was about as effective as a bunny trying to stymie a race horse. When the pig leapt the fence, Ren went flying over it, too - and onto her face.

Josh, meanwhile, knew he was losing it in his panic. *Pigs can't jump! Pigs can't jump!* It was beating a refrain in his brain. What a way to go - savaged by a pig.

While his brain dwelt on the probable outcome, his body was working on remote. Without even knowing what he was doing, he dodged one way, then another. His brain came out of hibernation long enough to note the smart way Mr. Boar was trying to corner him.

Josh grabbed the spiked top of the rough wood fence, and hoisted his feet off the ground. It didn't discourage Mr. Boar. He went for the nearest leg.

Ren was back on her feet. There was a loose fence post - a thick chunk of wood that came away heavy in her hands. Ren slammed it across the pig's rear end.

The Big Guy froze, grunted, then turned to face her. Ren wielded her wood like a broadsword, slamming it down onto Mr. Boar's snout.

*That's gotta hurt. No one can get hit in the nose and not get...*

Her thoughts froze right there. Right as Mr. Boar looked at her with evil little eyes, opened his mouth, and bit off the end of her wooden weapon.

Ren knew she was screaming then. She couldn't recall opening her mouth, but she could hear the screeches in her ears. She stood there, frozen in horror. Josh was yelling something, but she couldn't hear it, over the sound of her own squeals.

For, Mr. Boar was checking her out. Her telepathy was working overtime, and telling her something she didn't want to know. She was reading him, and it was obvious the pig had already made up his mind.

His enormous snout lifted in the air and he sniffed excitedly. She could swear his

nipped-off tusks rose in a smile as he trotted toward her.

Grunt-grunt-grunt, grunt-grunt-grunt.

There was no mistaking the amorous gleam in his eyes. He'd forgotten that Josh even existed. No, he was strutting his stuff for her now - all four hundred kilos of it - and he was determined to share it with her. Ren's eyes widened in horror.

Just when she thought she was doomed, Mr. Boar suddenly squealed, and he spun in anger. But by that time, Josh was already halfway over the fence. "Got him in the huevos!" Josh bellowed.

Ren dove over the wall and raced for the truck. Josh, running a parallel path, was soon right at her heels. He looked back only once, to see the would-be stud come ploughing right through the rough fence, like so much balsa wood.

Josh and Ren ran flat out.

He was almost on them now. No time for opening doors. "Up on the roof!" Josh panted, and he sensed, rather than saw, Ren's nod. He took her arm, and the two of them did a nearly synchronised bumper, trunk, roof manoeuvre that got them just barely out of reach.

But, Mr. Boar wasn't through. He prowled in circles around the truck, grunting and prodding at the metal. His girlfriend and his rival had somehow managed to make a getaway, and his adrenaline was still pumping thoughts of malice through his head.

"He's still mad," Ren whispered.

"Reading his mind?" Josh hissed, then gripped her arm to keep his balance. Mr. Boar was trying a new tactic now: putting his snout under the bumper, he was lifting the truck off the ground then dropping it, as he tried to dislodge them from the top.

"A lot like reading yours -"

Thud, jar. Thud, jar.

"What're we going to do?"

"He'll give up," Josh told her confidently.

Five minutes later, Ren remarked, "He's not giving up."

"Your fault for being such a 'dish'." Josh grinned.

"Oh, shit!" Ren muttered.

"What?" Josh asked.

"Company," she said dismally. "We'll never live this down." The next moment, two trucks came tearing up the road in a cloud of dust. To Ren's dismay, Dustin hopped out just as James slammed on the brakes. He went down on one knee, then pushed himself up and did a kind of weaving run in their direction.

"*Get the hell back!*" Josh started shouting. "*You can't take him on!*" At the same time Josh was trying to hang on to Ren. She was all for tossing herself off on the far side - sacrificing herself to Mr. Boar's sexual proclivities in order to save Dusty.

Jamie had climbed out and was standing in front of his vehicle, desperately trying to focus his energies on the pig in hopes of tripping it, or slamming its eyelids closed, or - or *something*. Merrie was jumping and shouting to attract the pig's attention, and was all for going after Dustin - who, in turn, was still determinedly heading toward Ren. A bloodied Valterzar had pulled out a rifle, and was looking slightly crazed. He was trying to place himself between the pig and any would-be pig victims - especially Merrie - but none of the victims would hold still. He finally gave up and just took aim at the pig.

A little girl of about six came skipping down the road, looking at them curiously. The strangers were all yelling and flapping at her now, "*Get back! Vaya! Peligro! Run for your life!*"

The little girl glared at the giant boar through narrowed eyes. She put her hands on her hips and shouted, her voice lost in the clamour of the others. “Pepito! Puerco malo!”

Pepito heard her. He lowered the bumper with a solid thud, and his tail lost its curl. His head went down and he cowered - four hundred kilos of blubbering baby.

“Puerco malo!! Vaya!” As Pepito went trotting past her, still cowering, the little girl waved at them and smiled, “Hasta luego!”

They all stared as, humming, she went skipping back down the road.

## Chapter Nine

Surprisingly enough, it was Erik who arranged the flight home. He chartered a plane and made sure it came with a well-stocked bar. “Just to replenish fluids,” he said cheerfully, “after our sojourn in the desert.”

“I would’ve preferred to take a train,” James told him ungratefully. “Or a boat.”

“You should have ordered him a kayak,” Josh said. “More of a challenge. Dug up any good rocks lately, Jimmy Boy?”

“I’ve been too busy avoiding all these nasty little dino artefacts that get in the way. All the good stuff seems to be underneath ’em.” James sighed dramatically. “Been chucking ’em right and left.”

“Dusty verified a suspicion I had, about a possible *Drepanosaurus* relative. Might be some interesting *geological* specimens out there, too,” Josh hinted.

“If he’s calling them ‘geological specimens’, it means he wants your department to come up with -” Ren began.

“I know,” Jamie told her disgustedly, “and I don’t even read minds. Try ‘half the funding’ for his lousy dig.”

“Not half. Besides, who says it’s going to be lousy?” Josh asked. “I haven’t even organised it yet.”

“Like hell,” Jamie snorted. “I’m gonna be too busy to waste time on dead stuff - excuse the reference, Merrie.”

She grinned, and said quietly, “I’d rather waste my time on the living, too.” She looked with loving eyes at Zar, whose head was resting on her shoulder. He’d fallen sound asleep as soon as they were in the air - head against hers, and hand possessively on her lap.

“Besides,” Jamie continued, “Dusty and I are being sent to some island, to check out volcanoes.”

“No,” Zar interrupted. He punctuated it with a big yawn.

“‘No’ what? No volcanoes?” James sounded disappointed. “You’re dreaming.”

“No island. No trip.”

“Why not?” Merrie asked him, annoyed. “Don’t be so imperious!” she whispered.

In answer, he leaned over and kissed her on the lips.

“Okay, be imperious,” she said. “But not dogmatic!”

“Writers!” Ren complained, but she was smiling.

“Yes, Ms. 3D.”

“Shut it, Josh,” Ren warned him.

“Why couldn’t you have stayed asleep?” James asked Valterzar. “If you think I’m foregoing a chance to go volcano filming, you’re crazy. Dustin’s doing the graphics. He promised me some porno of Pele, dancing along a rim of fire.”

Ren snorted.

Jamie grinned. “He’s gonna model it on someone called ‘Kitten’.”

“And you plan on being there to observe the process.”

“Creative control. All the way.”

Erik told him, “The last time you went ‘all the way’ - oh, pardon me. I’ll put it in terms you can understand: ‘got your rocks off’ was in the Cenozoic era -”

“Cretaceous,” Josh interrupted. “Let’s not give him too much credit. But, hey, if a volcano

does it for him...”

“That’s not the point,” Valterzar said.

“Maybe it *is* the point,” Merrie argued. “Relax, Zar. Maybe everyone here is as tired as you are.”

“I’m not tired,” Josh said. “Sunburned as hell, but I’ve got nothing on Ren. She’s fried.”

“Shut up, Josh. That’s the last time I cross the desert with you.”

“Bet it’s not the last time you cross me, though.” Josh grinned.

“Zar’s only tired from blood loss,” Erik commented, to whoever was listening. He gestured toward him with a glass of champagne. “Want a steak sandwich?” he asked. “To build up your iron?”

Ren, meanwhile, was trying to ask Valterzar, “Do you think Dusty’s in for trouble?” She glanced worriedly to the back of the cabin, where Dusty lay stretched across several seats, sleeping soundly through it all.

“Can’t we have just a few minutes without worrying about something?” Josh complained. “Leave it to you, Kithren. For Dusty, this was nothing more than a bad bender,” he said confidently. “Let him sleep it off, and get past it.”

“It’s the ‘getting past it’ I’m concerned about,” Valterzar began, attempting to sound like the voice of reason.

“Dusty can handle himself all right. Didn’t he just prove it?” Erik told him. “Hell, he and Jamie saved all our asses - yours included.” He added, “This may have actually been good for him. Taught him some control.”

“You *told* them?” Valterzar asked Jamie coldly.

“Of course I did! Dusty should get the credit he deserves. *What?*” he asked, seeing Zar’s expression. “You want to hide it now? Pretend your little psi episode was some anomalous psychic fart?”

“The more people who know, the greater the chance Dustin’ll have problems.”

“Doubtful,” Erik retorted. “Besides, who’s going to narc on him?” He looked pointedly at Valterzar. “Only one person I can think of, and he already knows.”

\*

Before he’d left for Mexico, Lawrence Valterzar had considered himself an independent agent. He’d had his own practice, and a lucrative consultancy, working for Symtech. Some time, over the last six years, his “consultations” had become much more personal to him. His clients had become more like friends, and he’d found himself alternating between trying to analyse their actions, bail them out of difficulties, and be there if and when they needed to talk. Lately, he’d also attempted to justify their actions to Smythe - to defend some things that the man was apt to question.

In many ways, he’d thought of it as a “halfway house” type of arrangement. Intellectually, his clients were all above average, and appeared to be emotionally stable, considering their circumstances. Well-adjusted, actively contributing members of society - but each with a major flaw. Each incapable, at some point, of separating the real from the abstract. Each, in some way, a hazard to either himself or others.

Merrie had trouble distinguishing the living from the dead. She instilled the dead with so much solidity that they could walk through her house, and rape her in her bed. Ren could be prey to others’ thoughts so strongly that they could exclude her own. Josh was sometimes so lost in his clairvoyance that he’d reach for objects or walk into doorways that weren’t there. James? He had an intermittent problem with rockfalls, thrown objects, and other moving matter. His most serious

problem of recent years had been a regrettable tendency to live out his dreams - a cause of constant disturbance and little sleep. Dustin? So lost at times in the past, that there were major omissions in his present, so that he was a danger to himself. Not unheard of for him to be following a retro vision, and walk out in front of a bus.

Perhaps Erik was the most “normal” of them all - or perhaps not. He’d had a few problems with his healing, largely resulting from attitude and a poor self-image. When Erik’s healing ability was suffering, he also began to suffer - from severe depression. For, unlike the others, Erik had no other occupation to feed his self-esteem. He *was* his healing, when he could have been so much more. If his “gift” ever failed him entirely, someone would need to be there to bolster him up. As it was, Erik’s insecurity was showing. Dustin was having migraines, which Zar thought might owe something to scar tissue. The fact that Dustin was still somewhat incapacitated, after two healing sessions with him, was driving Erik nuts.

But, until recently, Zar had never thought of himself as one of them. It had crossed his mind, of course, but even after the episode at Merrie’s, where he’d eliminated her evil challenger, he’d considered his success at least partially due to his love for her: love triumphing over evil. It was much easier to accept that, than James’ assurances he was one of them.

There were so many differences. Zar was able to function without an overseer. He might answer on the pay side to Smythe, but, as far as he could recall, there’d never been a reason for Symtech to come to his rescue - to bail him out of a difficulty he’d created.

*Jamie’s wrong.* I’m not a “parabnormal”, as Dustin frequently called it. As much as it would make him part of this group, it was also too scary to contemplate - and Zar was still too close to losing his life from an event that should never have happened. He could understand why Erik and Merrie and the others might prefer him to be one of them, too - because it would make him less of an overseer, and more of a cohort, but he couldn’t do it - not even for Merrie. He could accept her and love her for what she was, but she’d have to do the same for him.

Because he wasn’t like them, and never would be.

\*

When he got home, there was letter waiting for him. It was formal and direct. “...*in changes to our departmental budget, and a requisite reduction in staff numbers. It is with great reluctance that we terminate your contract, effective immediately...*”

He remembered how he’d thrown it back in Smythe’s face when he’d made the threat. “*Tell it to someone who cares.*”

*Dammit.*

He suddenly saw something he’d been blind to before. He’d liked to consider his practise as his mainstay, while he dabbled on the side. It was safer that way - less of an involvement with his “Cluster”.

But it wasn’t true. As the years had gone by, he’d invested more and more time in those six “clients”. It had been a personal choice, that went beyond contract obligations.

It proved something to him, though. Jamie was wrong. He wasn’t one of the Cluster, or Symtech wouldn’t have terminated him. He’d been just what he’d claimed: an overseer. A professional they could turn to in times of stress or hazard. Someone to safeguard health and safety, monitor new developments, suggest practical methods for coping.

He wasn’t the member of the group sent to stopguard their actions; not the one with the power to lay a halt to paranormal phenomena spiralling out of control. The abilities he’d displayed? Simply a reflection of those other, far more gifted, individuals. Sense injected into nonsense, allowing them to forego the next step.



And Dustin? With his runaway retro and its near-lethal impact on his life?  
*I'm a doctor. I helped stop the bleeding. That's all there is, all there was, and all there's ever going to be.*

He'd been planning on arranging for Dustin to see a neurologist - to see if, with some laser treatment and Erik's help, they might be able to eliminate the cause of his headaches. Now, Lawrence didn't know whether he'd have any say, positive or negative. Whether his word would have any influence with any of them.

He'd gotten the ax, for crissake.

Why had they canned him? Because he'd been "difficult"? Disagreed with his supervisor? Refused them information about their investment? Or because he'd slept with one of the clients? If that was the case, he should feel relieved. He could carry on his relationship with Merrie with impunity now. No guilt, no remorse.

If she'd still have him. He was no longer, in any respect, one of "them". No excuses for turning up, unannounced, at her house. He had no more claim to her than any of her other guests. He wasn't stupid enough to think that a few nights of lovemaking would seal the deal.

He recalled Dusty's comment about a "czar". Well, this "czar" had toppled off his throne. And, despite his own feelings of connection, of friendship, he also wasn't foolish enough to think they'd consider him anything other than a domineering son-of-a-bitch with a dictator complex. He had no doubt they'd be celebrating, now that he was gone. Merrie, after shedding a few tears, would host the party, and Erik would supply the champagne.

\*

Merrie rang up Ren. "Zar was supposed to come here last night, and he never turned up. He's not answering his phone."

"Hold on -" Ren covered the mouthpiece and spoke to someone in the room.

Merrie smiled. It would be Dustin. Considering the early hour, he must have spent the night. *Good*, she thought. *Now, if I can just find Zar...*

"Dusty says he'll phone Josh and Jamie in a few minutes, but first he wants you to phone Erik."

"It's early for Erik."

"That's what Dusty said." Merrie could hear the smile in Ren's voice. "He wants you to do the calling, but he thinks it only fair we disturb Erik while the roosters are still crowing."

An hour later, Dusty rang Merrie back. "Bad night, huh?" he asked her.

"I was alone." She'd stayed at home and waited for Zar. Hopeful, at any moment, that he'd come.

As a statement, it wasn't much, but Dusty knew it covered a lot of unspoken angst. "Nothing from Josh or Jamie," he said, "and I've tried Zar's pager. Nothing. Do you know where he lives?"

"No." It sounded so pathetic. He'd never told any of them. In some ways, it made Merrie feel like a fool. Her Zar had tried so hard to keep his distance. His objectivity had been crumbling around him, and he hadn't even realised it. Any more than he probably realised how much they considered him a part of their Cluster.

"Hang on -" Dusty said. She could hear his cellphone ringing in the background.

Dusty came back on. His tone was angry. "Erik just had a go at Smythe."

"What happened?"

"Smythe says Valterzar's contract was up. In other words, because Zar came down to Mexico against orders to bail us out, Smythe has canned his ass."

"We would have died if he hadn't."

"Maybe that's what Smythe wanted." Dusty let her think about that for a moment, then said, "Josh is going to find his address on the files. He says it might take a while, because he has to sift through the riff-raff."

It brought a smile to Merrie's lips.

"Merrie, if he contacts you, let one of us know, okay? Ren has to work, and so does Jamie, but Erik and I are free agents."

\*

"You have a headache?" Josh told Dustin. "You didn't have to sort through thousands of records, searching out one name. I'll be having nightmares about it for years."

"You have a headache *again*?" Erik sounded exasperated. "I can't believe you're not fixed. As soon as we liberate Valterzar from his self-imposed prison, I'll put him to work."

"I'd like to see that," Jamie muttered.

"Maybe I'm happy the way things are. Did you ever think I might want to handle this myself?"

"Temper, temper," Ren told him.

"Do it myself, do it myself," Jamie mimicked. "Where have I heard that before?"

"Not from me," said Erik.

"Will you all just *shut up*?" Merrie said. "How am I going to hear if he's in there?"

"You're not going to hear it anyway," Erik said practically. "Not with that dog barking."

"Besides, you don't need to hear it. Ren can tell us," Josh said with exaggerated patience. "Ren loves telling people where to go and what to do."

"Shut up, Josh," Dusty said angrily. "Don't talk like that to her."

"He's here," Ren assured them.

"I could have told you that," Josh said. "Could have pictured him right there, *if my brain wasn't so burnt out from looking for the damn fool!*" He bellowed the last at the door.

"Go for it, James," Merrie urged.

"Aren't you going to knock first?" Ren asked.

"Listen to Ren, Everybody," Josh said. "Now that Valterzar's gone, she's in charge."

Ren had had enough. All through the desert, and now this. She did something she never would have considered under normal circumstances. If they hadn't been through hell over the last few days. If she hadn't been short on sleep for nearly a week. If Josh hadn't been such a pain in the ass in the desert. She launched herself at him and started pummeling him with her fists, much as she had when they were kids, and he'd pushed her too far. Jamie was laughing so hard he could barely stand up, Dustin looked as though his headache had gotten worse, Merrie was annoyed that they were distracting everybody when they should have been helping Zar, the dog inside was going crazy, and now making some weird squealing noise, and Erik was pounding on the door. "Save me!" he yelled. "Save me!"

\*

They'd found him. He was obscurely pleased, yet at the same time, he wanted to pretend he wasn't here.

*I'm better out of it*, he thought. He could expand his practice; go back to investing his time in people who wanted a "shrink" as a status symbol. Every once in a while he'd encounter someone who was really needy. It would make all the rest of the tedium worthwhile.

The truth was, it had taken him only a short time to become weary of his profession. There was a sameness to the complaints of many of those spoiled strangers. So much depression with so

little cause. So little appreciation for life - for normalcy. So little gratitude for what they had in a world where the had-nots outnumbered them. Valterzar personally felt - especially now, when he'd had too much to drink - that a lot of the depression could have been cured by taking up a worthwhile pursuit. By giving back a little of what his clients were so inclined to take. Despite the claims of the ad-men, designer labels, personal digital assistants, and "therapy" were no guarantees of happiness. A few more real problems, like finding a next meal, or getting up in the wee hours to hold down a job, and there wouldn't be time to indulge in depression.

He had to face it: most of his regular clients bored the hell out of him. He was going to miss this group.

*One of them in particular*, he thought, picturing Merrie's face.

*Time to let them know.* He wouldn't win any points for being gutless, and Jamie would probably let them in anyway. Better to face them, so he could move on.

\*

The door opened abruptly and Lawrence Valterzar stood there. He looked much as he had on the way home on the plane, and Merrie suspected he hadn't changed his clothes. He needed a shave, his eyes were bloodshot from fatigue and - she sniffed - booze, and he stunk of cigarette smoke. She flung herself into his arms.

He wrapped his arms around her, closed his eyes, and buried his face against her hair.

"Oh, is this one of those tender moments?" James asked.

Josh, under Ren's assault, had dropped to his knees, then knelt there, laughing, as she beat on him with her purse. Suddenly, he jerked back in horror as a black, bristly snout sniffed his face. "A-A-Ahh!" he yelped. His eyes wide with horror, he paled.

"Whoa, Josh!" Erik said. "Got any smelling salts, Zar?" he asked.

"Sit down, Josh, and put your head between your knees," Valterzar ordered.

"I would, if someone would move the pig," Josh mumbled.

"Josh, I'm sorry," said Ren. "If I'd known about the pig -"

Jamie was laughing again, but at Merrie's scowl, he tried to control it.

"You just don't know what it was like," Ren told Dusty, as he stood between her and the pig. "Did you know they can bite off shovel handles?" She looked warily at the black pig as though it had designs on her leg.

"Aren't you going to invite us in?" Erik asked, poking his nose in the door. "Hear you medical types live pretty well."

"No," Zar began.

Jamie sniffed. "Smells a little gamey in there," he remarked. He bent over, sniffed the pig, then asked, "Or is that you?"

"We'll go somewhere else," Valterzar said stiffly.

"So that's the way it is," Dustin said quietly. With his head this sore, he didn't have much patience for subtlety. "Let's go," he told the others. "He's busy."

"No. Not yet."

Dusty suddenly realised Valterzar was still half-drunk. He was not totally steady on his feet, and even his "not yet" had sounded slightly slurred.

"t's not that."

"What is it?" Merrie asked him. Her eyes were dark and serious.

"I have pets."

"I noticed," retorted Josh.

"I'm - I'm -"

Jamie peered in through the door. "You're a slob!" he said delightedly.

Zar gave up. Distressed, he flung out his hands in drunken drama, and tripped his way into his house. The pig trotted happily at his heels.

"Where does she sleep?" Erik asked, looking a little distastefully at the pig.

"Who?" Zar asked, with a lascivious look at Merrie.

"The pig."

"Angelina."

"O-okay." Erik repeated slowly.

"In her room." Zar wove his way through to the closet in his bedroom. There were some thick pink blankets on the floor, a bowl labelled "Angel", and some stuffed animals.

"I don't believe it," Josh said.

"I think it's great," Ren remarked. Here was a pig she could tolerate. "Angel!" she called. "Is she friendly?"

Zar nodded, with drunken enthusiasm. "Smart, too. Watch this. Angel! Can you get a drink? A drink, Angel?"

Angel grunted, then trotted over to the fridge. She pushed it open with her snout, grabbed a drink bottle off the shelf, tipped her head and loudly slurped it down.

"Sometimes she forgets to shut the door," Zar said fondly. "I keep her bottle filled with juice. She just loves the stuff."

"You don't share, do you?" Josh asked him doubtfully.

Dusty was sitting on Zar's lumpy sofa. He felt a lot more comfortable getting to know this side of Valterzar.

There was a scratching at the door of the other room.

James asked, "That your dog?"

"Yeah. Let him out if you want."

He opened the door and a Corgi came running out of the bedroom, barking enthusiastically.

"Scooter," Valterzar introduced him.

"Charmed, I'm sure," said Erik, as the dog came over to sniff his leg.

A fat grey cat came through the window, thudded onto the floor, and batted the dog on the nose while the pig sniffed its rear.

"Just one big, happy family," Ren remarked. She sat down next to Dusty and flashed him a smile. Dusty leaned back, comfortable, and held out his arm. Ren rested her head against his shoulder. A moment later, Dusty was snoring softly, while Slimeball the cat came over and curled up in his lap.

"How many creatures do you have?" Josh asked him. He was still having trouble absorbing this clash with Zar's public persona.

"Angel, Scooter, Foxy, Slimeball, Cherry, and Beelzebub. Oh, and the two axylotyls. Haven't named them."

"Course not," Jamie said with a smirk.

"What I want to know is how come I never noticed any dog hair on you." Erik still couldn't believe their stiff-necked team leader had this hidden side.

"I'm a professional," Zar told him.

"Beelzebub?" Josh was asking warily, as he looked around the room.

"The ferret," Zar explained.

"I'll never take you seriously again," Jamie joked.

"Reason I let you in. You never have to," Zar said. He sat down in a chair, and Angelina

jumped into his lap. He grunted a little under her weight. “She’s not usually this possessive,” he explained.

Merrie was grinning happily. She plopped on the side of Zar’s chair, and wrapped her arms around him. Angel gave a jealous snort.

“Sorry, Angel,” she said, kissing Zar’s temple. “But he’s mine.”

## Chapter Ten

Dustin was having lunch with Erik the next day. Or, rather, Erik had decided he was having lunch with Dustin. He'd walked into the office, bypassed the receptionist, and announced, "I've ordered up some D'Angelo's. Should be here in ten minutes."

It wasn't the first time Erik had done this - just the first time in several years.

"Hey, Erik!" Doug Bigelow, one of the graphics team, greeted him. "Haven't seen you in a while. How's the healing game?"

"Good. By the way, I ordered enough cannelloni for everyone. I know how you computer guys eat." He poked at a pile of M & M wrappers on Dusty's desk, then peered distastefully into a half-full can of Coke. "I think this was here on my last visit."

"Same brand, different issue." Dusty's smile was strained. "Can't we do this later? I have a client waiting for me to finish these designs."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Erik dismissed it with a wave of his hand. "I've been thinking. If we tell Smythe how Valterzar came through for us, he'll reinstate him. The way I see it, Smythe just doesn't know how valuable the man is."

Dusty diminished the screen, and turned to look at him. "Why the sudden interest in coercion?"

"You were there last night, too -"

"As a gesture of support," Dusty lowered his voice. "He went out of his way to save my butt." He sighed. "Probably knew it wouldn't win him any points with Smythe."

"What? Saving your butt?" Erik grinned. "*A la contraire*. Smythe was so eager to save the team that he would have requisitioned the Concorde, if he'd thought it would have gotten me there any faster."

"There are better places to talk about this," Dusty told him warningly. He leaned back in the chair and said quietly, "I don't need a bloody overseer. None of us do." He regarded Erik curiously. "I thought you were the first one to realise that."

"'Overseer', no - 'support network', yes. Besides, I didn't realise until this trip that Valterzar was -" He looked at Doug, but he had the headphones on, and the receptionist had turned up the radio to give them some privacy. "- one of us."

"Which is why Smythe probably canned him. Because we know now. So does Valterzar."

Erik looked confused. "I don't get it. What sense does that make? We'd be more willing to work with him now."

"That's the point. Valterzar was the safety, in case one of us blew a gasket."

Erik raised an eyebrow, grinned at him, then casually inspected his fingernails. "Uh-huh."

"It worked. I blew, but Valterzar stopped it. So now, we all know he can 'stop' things."

Erik frowned. "So now they don't want him around?"

"Yep."

"You think they want to use us?"

"Mexico was probably a test run - just to see how we'd react. I bet they never expected us all to go."

"We showed them we really *are* a Cluster." Erik looked dismayed. "A cluster of numbskulls."

"Yeah. They'll probably interpret our joint effort as a need to stick together. Incapable of independent functioning."

Erik shook his head and opened his mouth, but Dusty interrupted him.

“Even you. Look where you turned up, when we all went walkabout.” He turned back to the computer. “Maybe they’re right. Maybe we do have dependency problems.”

“And we’re supposed to be so grateful to Symtech for watching over us all these years,” Erik muttered, “that we should be eager to give something back.”

Dusty sighed. “The last person they’d want involved is someone who could counter what we’re doing. Especially since we know about him, and might ask him to interfere.” He added firmly, “Zar’s better out of it. At least he’ll have some peace.”

Erik snorted. “Are you kidding? He’s with Merrie. Not even ‘Rest in Peace’ works with her.”

\*

Ren never knew exactly when the idea came into her head - only that once there, it wouldn’t go. She kept thinking about something Dusty had said, about their “Cluster”. About the way they’d all come together when there was trouble.

It was easy to tell that in some respect, it was bothering him. No sooner had he made a bid for independence than all hell had broken loose for some of the team.

What he wasn’t saying, was that the two people involved in trouble were the team members he’d been closest to in recent years. And that he wasn’t at all sure it was a coincidence.

*Neither am I.* Ren couldn’t help but wonder how they’d all come to be there, together, at the end. How they’d all happened to meet up in a remote town in the backside of nowhere. Dusty might be thinking in terms of overblown loyalties; possibly even some kind of conditioning to make them all react - “brainwashing”, of a sort. But now Ren was thinking of something else. She worked with biochemical signals in the lab: with plants that released ethylene after wounding, to warn other plants that an insect or fungal attack was on the way. The ethylene triggered defence mechanisms in those other plants, so they wouldn’t be as vulnerable to predation. Was there some kind of biochemical mechanism at work here? Biochemical, or bioelectrical? Some signal between them all that told them to “cluster”?

Her mind kept coming back to Myxomycetes. Slime moulds. They’d been a subject of study by botanists, cell biologists, and mycologists for a number of years, way back when, because of their singular behaviour, which was unlike that of any other creature. Some slime moulds could travel in a sheet, as a mass of protoplasm. This “plasmodium” could move from place to place, much like an amoeba. It could change characteristics, becoming more fungus-like, with fruiting bodies to produce spores.

The Dictyostelids, or cellular slime moulds, lived most of their lives as individual, amoeba-like cells. For all intents and purposes, each cell was an independent agent, functioning to gather its own food, and to survive in its own way. At certain times, however, the swarm of “amoeba” would suddenly come together, in response to a chemical cue. Then, they’d not only group - they’d coalesce into a fruiting body, which acted as a single unit. It was incredible - as if a leg which had functioned as an independent mass of cells suddenly came together on a signal, which then permitted it to take someone for a stroll.

Slime moulds were unique, and arguments had abounded about whether to place them in Fungi, for their fruiting bodies, or Protista, for their flagellate forms. Their behaviour was something that had fascinated mycologists, zoologists, and cell biologists for years.

Ren didn’t know why she kept thinking of this now, or why it was bothering her so much. She’d already been thinking in terms of triggers, and the way Erik’s and Dusty’s responses had changed. They’d all been through some episodes where their reactions had been overblown, or the

outcome unexpected. It had occurred to her there might be an age-related variable, similar to some genetic diseases that only became truly active when triggered by age, or protein production, or removal of masking support systems. Now, her mind kept going back to the gene therapy they'd supposedly had as infants. What kinds of genes had been introduced?

She'd suggested to Josh that maybe they were triggers for each other, somehow responsible for catalysing a response that might not otherwise have happened. Well, that didn't seem to be the case with Dusty - he claimed he'd been able to turn up, in that flash at the airport, with no external influence at all. Maybe, if they were triggers for each other, it was in the way of slime moulds - some stimulus that drew them together. If that was true, she might be able to live with it, but only if it was internal, and not external: *i.e.*, a friend needed her - she somehow sensed it - she reacted. If it was Symtech, using an ethylene-like response to stimulate a reaction, she wanted no part of it, and would do whatever it took to fight them.

It was one thing reacting to a biochemical stimulus, and quite another being trained to respond in a predictable way.

Less than human.

Ren shuddered. No matter how artfully they'd guised themselves in education, responsibilities, and relationships, there would always be ways they didn't "fit in". Ways in which they related so much better to each other, than anyone else.

Maybe because they had something more than the standard gene pool.

The thought was terrifying - so terrifying that she didn't want to share it with anyone, even Dusty. She didn't want any of the others to feel the way she did now.

Didn't want them to start wondering, the way she was, exactly what they were.

\*

Marc Jekkes had never seen Charles Smythe look so pleased with the results of an experiment.

As they sat in his office, Marcus looked out at their park-like surroundings and thought, *All a facade*. Just beyond the fences, the hustle-bustle of humanity raced by. The complex was far enough away from the city centre to avoid heavy foot traffic, but the freeway ran along one side, and the main thoroughfare through town did business down the other.

This was the site, many years ago, where some of the Clusters had been schooled. Many of the buildings had been replaced after Symbio was bought out, and the old dormitories were now offices. The only thing that had remained somewhat the same was the "medical wing". Now, it was a lab.

It hadn't been so very different then.

"Why'd you let Valterzar go?" Marcus asked. He hadn't intended to be so blunt, but it had been bothering him since he'd drafted the letter. It made no sense to liberate the only member of a Cluster who could hold the others in any kind of control.

Smythe's response was different from what he'd expected. Apparently, the Cluster Project had gone from being a piece of ancient history to something much more relevant.

For the last ten years, Charles Smythe had been stuck with it. It was a dinosaur, as far as today's gene technology was concerned: old methods, uncertain results. Smythe had been unlucky enough to inherit it when he'd taken this desk. At the time, the Cluster Project had been simply a series of files in a folder, with an unusually early commencement date, and an uncomfortably large chunk of his budget allotment. It was, perhaps, good that in those early days, Charles had been as uncertain of his job status as he was of the wisdom in sustaining an experiment that no longer seemed to have any relevance. He'd left everything in place; letting attrition and inflation balance



the budget as the years went by.

There'd been moments of relevance, of course - when he'd had to approve "hiring" Valterzar, or tolerate visits from Cluster members. They tended to walk right in, as though these was still school grounds and they were alumni paying a visit. Erik Dainler had been the most arrogant, and Lawrence Valterzar the most frequent. Charles suspected that neither man had any idea how inconsequential the Cluster Project had become.

Symbio Corporation had assumed a moral responsibility for the experiment, even though their decision had no basis in morals. It was a clear case of human experimentation, and could easily have been a matter of public record by now. The only reason it wasn't, owed largely to an agreement made many years before, in which Symbio had made financial commitments to train, oversee, and establish the "victims" in a near-normal lifestyle. Considering the unknown outcomes of the research, this was a far more acceptable resolution to a questionable procedure than a one-time payout, which would have brought both Symbio and its government affiliations into the limelight.

The victims' families had been fairly circumspect. No headlines, no accusations. They, too, had been compensated, but not to the extent that guilt would play a part in their decisions. Part of that compensation had been the removal of offspring whose symptoms were not only bizarre, but frightening. Special schooling, interspersed with frequent familial visits, had largely eliminated any of their concerns. Besides, in the days before molecules were regularly segmented, or protein patterns run on gels, dotted onto ELISA plates, and tagged in RAPD analyses, the individual families would have had trouble denying that the problem wasn't theirs to start with - some misconstruction of genetic chance. Many of them had been happy enough to have help with their problem - to find someone who would take their concerns seriously. Hard to explain how your child can read people's minds, see into locked rooms, or raise the dead. A dilemma for any parent. Symbio made no admissions of culpability, but offered what may have seemed like the only solution.

Insanity was institutionalised. Aberrant ESP needed to be rechannelled.

There were a few exceptions, whose problems went largely unnoticed, because the outcomes were internalised. Lawrence Valterzar was one of these, and he'd grown up in a normal family, but had gone on to specialise in the abnormal. It suggested to Symtech that he wasn't totally unaware of his "gift" - just of its possibilities.

"Valterzar? Besides the obvious reluctance to follow orders, he's discovered what he can do. They all know it now, which means they'd turn to him if they felt things were getting out of hand."

Jekkes didn't interrupt. He just stood there silently.

"Don't give me that look, Marcus. I've already told you we're here to push limits. With Valterzar involved, we wouldn't be pushing anything."

"Maybe you're wrong. Maybe having him there would make them feel they had a cushion - for some experimentation."

"Possibly. After all these years, things are finally beginning to get interesting. Only now, the Board's talking about pulling the plug."

Marcus frowned. "Did you tell them about Mexico? About how successful one of the Clusters was in finding that plane?"

Charles nodded. "Oh, the Board's happy enough to have some use for them, even if it's only as St. Bernards in search and rescue. But the agency's complained - wants to know why, in the guise of 'helping' them, we went counter to their efforts."

“Why their pilot ended up dead? What did they expect our Cluster to do? Stand there and take it?”

“It’s more like why -” Charles started chuckling, “- some of their equipment attacked them.”

“Maybe they’ll take the Project off our hands.”

“Except if they pick up a ‘dead’ Project, we’re not going to get any compensation for it.” Charles sounded frustrated. “We’ve invested money in this for years - more than matched what they put in. If we write it off, they’ll just take it over. Nothing for lost revenue.”

“Sounds like the Board needs to rethink things.”

“They’ve lost interest. Most of them feel we’ve done our bit to compensate the families. We’ve ‘served our sentence’. Drew Garris was our last physical link to the project, and he passed away last year.”

“The company doesn’t even have the same name,” Marcus added. “There’s no way the public’s going to hold us responsible for what our predecessors did.”

“Right.” Smythe’s eyes glinted with suppressed excitement. “And the agency is anxious to take over, because they’re beginning to see the possibilities. They’d rather be in control than adhere to any agreements for a payout.”

“Doesn’t the Board know about the clause in the maintenance agreement?”

“Compensation for ‘extracurricular activity’?”

Marcus nodded.

“I think that’s why the Board’s so eager to dump it. The agency wants it, and the Board wants to dump the responsibility. They’re afraid the backlash for ‘activity’ will be personal.”

“Jail time for participation?”

“Probably. Stupid, really. The ISO’s in the position to eliminate any incriminating information. I was hoping a demo - paid work in answer to a challenge - might get the Board members to change their minds.”

“That’s why you sent Wingot and Magnus to Mexico.”

“And now we’re supposed to get paid for it. Helping out another branch of the agency. Only, it backfired. Our damned partners may not even have to pay to take the Clusters off our hands. Not if the Board has its way.”

“So, if we want to keep the ‘Project’ going...?” Marcus prompted.

“We’re going to have to generate some money to cover expenses. Make the Project pay for itself. Convince the Board that it can, without collateral damage. I’ve already reminded them that after years spent covering for the Clusters, it’s only recently that some unusual side-effects have begun to manifest themselves.”

“Suddenly, they’re useful.”

“Something like that.”

Marcus smiled. “You’ve been talking to Hanover.”

Charles Smythe smirked. “Very enthusiastic, is Hanover. The only one on the Board who is. He can’t wait to see what they do next. So, the brief has changed. Time to get them to perform.”

\*

Dustin was still at his desk at eleven-thirty that night, when the security monitor came on. They had set it up so the screen would catch their attention, even with the headphones on. Most of the staff worked with headphones, including Dusty. Either you were synchronising sounds and music to an animation, inspiring yourself in order to sling something creative onto the screen, or trying to forget you were sitting on your butt in front of a monitor while the rest of the world went

by outside.

So far today, he'd fielded calls from Ren and Josh, Jamie had emailed him twice, and Erik had hung around far longer than was necessary. It seemed they were determined to look out for him, no matter what he did. Between the pounding headache, a work deadline in his face, and the constant feeling of exhaustion, they were driving him crazy. At this point, he didn't want to see anyone - not even Ren. He just wanted to be left alone.

The monitor wouldn't have flashed unless somebody was outside the building, wanting in. Unless it was Ren, or maybe Josh, out there, they couldn't be certain he was here. *Let them think I'm out, prowling the streets. Leave me to it, so I can meet my deadline.*

*Part of being independent, he thought. Making choices. I'm choosing to be left alone.*

"You've got mail" popped up in his face. *Damn Jamie!* If he went to the email programme, James would have one of those Reply to Sender things.

*I can always answer no.*

He picked up the phone, punched in his code, and changed the message on his answering machine. "I am not taking messages, answering the door, or opening my email. Will you kindly fuck off, so I can get my work done?"

*I'll have to remember to change that, before the office opens...*

\*

Ren couldn't sleep. She'd smiled when she'd listened to Dusty's answering machine, and even now, she didn't feel hurt. He was going through a lot right now, and he wasn't the only one longing to disappear for a while to sort things out. Ever since these ideas about genetic influences had entered her brain, she couldn't seem to get rid of them. There was no one she could talk to, who wasn't directly involved.

In a way, she was really glad everyone was focussed on Dusty. Having Valterzar out of the picture helped, too. She knew she was being insensitive, even cruel, but she didn't think she could hold up under his probing gaze right now. He'd know something was wrong.

Zar with Merrie, Dusty with her. It was the other thing that was getting to her. Was their attraction real, or just a response to some chemical cue? Was there a correlation between the changes in Dustin's retro, and his attraction to her? Like the Myxomycetes which came together to spawn? Ren began to cry.

Once she'd started, she couldn't stop. It seemed like she'd loved him forever, but did she love him any more than Josh or Jamie did? Than Merrie or Erik? Than Valterzar? Was she being a victim to some influence beyond her control, that had nothing to do with loving someone?

It had been brought back to her forcibly today - the way they all clung together. They were all worried about Dustin, just as they'd all been worried about Zar. Was this the way normal people acted? Would I do this for any of my other friends? The work friends, on the "outside"?

*I'd visit them if they were sick...*

*If one of them was in the hospital, maybe, or rang me up to ask for help.*

*But this is different. We've known each other since we were kids...*

*Not Valterzar. Yet we stormed his house, too.*

For the first time, Ren was glad Dusty wasn't here. As she paced restlessly, she planned what she was going to say. It was time to pay Charles Smythe a visit.

## Chapter Eleven

*I have a right to know.* It was probably the hundredth time she'd thought it, and it got her through the door and into his office. She was concentrating so hard on her own nervousness, that it took her a moment to recognise his.

He was petrified. Of her. She looked up, all her own fears forgotten, and met his eyes. *He knows I'll be able to read him, and he doesn't want me to.* "I'd like to see the original files on the Project," she blurted.

He'd never expected this. It had been easy for him to think of Valterzar as an employee, and Erik as a glorified clown, but neither one had ever wanted background information. Erik, because he knew he didn't have the technical training to understand, and Valterzar, because he'd probably guessed his own genome was suspect, and didn't want to know more. But Smythe had controlled the others, Kithren Magnus included, for ten years now. What had triggered this sudden interest?

"Why?" It was obvious why, but he was stalling. She knew it, too.

"Because I want to know what kind of 'gene therapy' we were given."

"It saved your life," he began.

"I want to know if it was human." The moment she'd said it, she regretted her choice of words. It was as though some bell had gone off in his brain. He wanted to know why she wondered about the "human" part - what manifestations had brought her to this point.

And he was going to do his damndest to find out.

She stared at him, suddenly aware of something else, that sent gooseflesh dancing across her skin. He was going to tell somebody - a partner - an agency. Somebody who was much better than he was at finding things out.

*I've been so blind.* Most of her life she'd been watched. It was another thing that she'd taken for granted. In its own way it had been comforting, to know there was someone there, to catch her if she fell from a podium, as she had that day at the conference. It had been all one with the special schooling, the isolation for exams, and the acknowledgment that none of them were quite "normal".

"That's an odd statement."

She realised he was talking to her, and she tried to pretend she was still in control. Tried to make it seem as though some part of her wasn't cringing, and trying to run away. She swallowed hard. "Dr. Drewsome -"

*Shit! What's wrong with me?* She'd reverted to the nickname they'd used for him as kids. It was as though all her confidence had deserted her, after tuning in on Smythe's thoughts.

She cleared her throat. "Dr. Garris said something once -" she thought quickly, "- about how experiments could sometimes be dehumanising," she lied. "It just got me thinking."

*Cover. You've got to cover.*

*Be tough.* Somehow, she had to re-establish the mood he'd had when she'd entered the room. When he'd been afraid of her.

Ren stood up. "I have a right to know more about what was done to me. I'd like to see my file."

"Ancient history," Smythe told her. "I'll requisition it, but it'll take a while."

*Another lie.* He could access it on his computer. All he needed was the password.

"Tragedy," she muttered. She looked up, to find him staring at her aghast. That was the

password. “Nothing,” she mumbled, frightened at the way he was looking at her - the thoughts that were running through his head. “I-I didn’t say anything.” She didn’t know what to do.

She ran. His thoughts were racing now, and he was thinking about detaining her. He was scared, all right, but he was also thinking about the ways he could use her, after this little demo. The ways those others - the ones he was going to call - could use her, too. She’d never fight them, because she had too much to lose. Because they’d threaten the other members of her Cluster.

She slammed the door to his office, and then kept on running. Around her, voices and thoughts and words came pounding into her head. At one point, as she neared the front door, she found her feet slowing; reacting to some of the confusion in her brain.

*I should never have come...*

*They’ll be following me.*

*Go home. If you don’t, they’ll pick you up now. Go home.*

She stopped only once, at a pay phone. All around, she could sense eyes on her. They were watching now. They’d wonder who she was calling.

Valterzar picked up the phone. Ren didn’t wait for him to say hello. “Is Merrie there?” she asked urgently.

He frowned, worried. “What’s wrong, Ren?”

She was fighting back tears. “Let me talk to Merrie. Pleas-se.”

Merrie was on the line the next moment. “Are you okay?”

“I need you to do something for me,” she hissed. “Talk to Dr. Drewsome.”

Merrie froze. “What about?” she asked, through stiff lips.

“Find out if he had any backups, that aren’t on Symtech’s computers.”

“What’s happened, Ren?”

Ren glanced around. “I talked to Smythe.”

*Closing in...*

She suddenly realised something else. Merrie wouldn’t want to know if it wasn’t human DNA. None of them would. It was too horrifying to contemplate.

*Look how I’m reacting, and I’m a scientist.*

“I have to go...”

*Go. Get out. While you can...*

“Ren!” Merrie sounded scared.

They were going to get her if she didn’t run.

“Forget what I said!” Ren told her quickly. “It-It’s nothing!” She slammed down the phone, then picked it up again to throw them off. She punched in the first number that entered her head, then let it drop.

Trying to appear calm, she got back in the car and headed for home.

Behind her, at the phone booth, a man picked up the receiver and listened - stunned when he heard a familiar voice. “Dana?” he asked, incredulous.

“What happened to the phone, Max?” Dana asked him.

“Nothing - just a misdial. Must have been thinking about you,” he said.

“Who was that?” the other man asked, after Max had hung up.

“Believe it or not, that was my wife,” he replied. Max didn’t sound too happy about it.

Having a client punch in his home phone came across like a threat. His voice was angry as he told the other man, “Magnus punched in my number.”

\*

Merrie put down the phone slowly. She trusted Zar with her life - with all their lives - but

this wasn't his job any more. Very deliberately, she turned to him and gave him a lingering kiss.

His eyes glinted. "Distraction, Merrie?" he growled against her ear. He kissed her deeply, then asked, "What's up with Ren?"

It was so tempting. Whatever the official status, Zar was still their team leader.

*And my lover. My Love.* She wanted to blurt out her worries, but her sense of fair play wouldn't let her. Zar no longer had Symtech's support to back him up. Over the past six years they'd embroiled him in so many things that had cost him in headaches, time, and - during this last episode - injuries.

She knew, even better than the others, how hard Symtech's decision had hit him. He was gratified by the way the group of them had reacted, but that didn't mean he needed to resolve their problems any longer. Ren's difficulty, whatever it was, remained just one more in a long line of chaotic events. Merrie felt confident they could resolve it on their own.

*It's just that if Zar were handling it, whatever it is would be resolved a lot faster...*

But she couldn't do that to him. It would be like torture, involving him in this latest escapade when he had neither the means nor the support to act. Running counter to Symtech at this point might only involve him in some sticky legalities - or illegalities - that his psychiatric practice didn't need.

Merrie rubbed against him, then gave him a big smile. If it didn't quite reach her eyes, he didn't say anything. "She wants me to do something for her."

"What?"

"A favour."

Zar tilted his head.

*Suspicious.* Merrie's smile faded a little, and she looked around for her purse. "She's really worried about Dusty." At his expression, she admitted, with some asperity, "It's just one more glitch, Zar. No more or less than a dozen other glitches over the years." She wrapped her arms around him. "Just one more little problem."

"And you think I'm better out of it."

She met his gaze seriously. "Yes. Sometimes I wish I -" She froze, and her eyes brightened. *Why the hell not?* Why did she let Symtech dictate her life? Why did Ren let them frighten her? The only reason they were involved at all was because, years before, Symtech, or Symbio, or somebody who worked for them, had goofed. They'd used some form of human experimentation, and they were still paying the price.

*No longer.*

*I don't need them. I have Zar as my helpmate, and he has me. Dusty was right. We don't need Symtech.* They'd hurt her nearest and dearest, and dammit if she'd have anything more to do with them.

Excited now, she gave him another big kiss, her expression enthusiastic. "I love you," she told him, then ran out the door.

On the way home, she rang Dusty. He was answering the phone again, but he sounded grouchy as hell.

"You were right," she blurted.

"About what?"

"Symtech. Ren had some kind of a run-in with Smythe this morning, and she's all upset."

"Is she okay?" he asked quickly.

Merrie smiled. "I think so. Maybe you should ring her, though," she pushed. "Find out what it's about."

"Thank you, Merrie," Dustin told her drily.

"I'm writing them a letter."

"Who?" Sometimes he found it a little difficult to follow her reasoning.

"Symtech. Zar's letter made me think of it. They're supposed to be doing us a favour, not running our lives."

Dusty said slowly, "You're going to 'terminate their contract'." She could tell from the sound of his voice that he was smiling. "Dammit, Mer - that's *brilliant!* Technically, they can't do anything unless we want them to." He hesitated. "Are you going to tell the others?"

"Only the revolting ones," she chuckled. "Like you."

"In revolt, Woman. Get it right." Dustin sounded cheerful. "I may even beat you to it. I think I'll send ol' Charlie an email. Follow it up with a formal letter."

"Talk to Zar, Dusty."

"About the letter? Better a *fait accompli*. It'll mean more then."

"No, you fool - your head. You're driving everyone crazy." She added, "It's all about taking responsibility -"

Dusty smiled. "- for my own well-being."

"No point in having Symtech denounce your letter as the product of a deranged mind," she said brightly.

"Ever so positive, aren't we?" Dusty said sarcastically. He lowered his voice. "Look, I already called the neurosurgeon Zar suggested. I've got an appointment."

"Good. When is it? One of us'll drive you."

Dusty dug around on his desk, and found the slip of paper. *September twenty-fourth. Eight weeks from now.* He could guess how she'd react. "I have it here somewhere," he lied. "I'll get back to you." He hesitated. "I missed Ren last night. There's a possibility she's a little bit peeved. Put in a few points with her for me, okay?"

\*

Charles Smythe read Dusty's email, then leaned back in his chair. He punched in a number and spoke to Marc Jekkes. "I've just received a note from Dustin Mallory, 'resigning' from our programme. He extends his thanks, but says that since he's now entirely self-sufficient, he'd prefer to be self-governing as well." Charles' voice was amused. "Arrange to have Mr. Mallory sent somewhere he can test his self-sufficiency. Somewhere with an overdose of history, and some strong vibes. Like a battleground."

\*

*Dr. Drewsome.*

Ren knew Merrie didn't like to do this - not willingly, anyway. That must mean it was important to her - maybe important to them all. Drew Garris was a name from their past.

He'd run the Project, for a long time, anyway. He'd earned the name from their visits to the lab, and for the way he'd made them manifest their "gifts". "Show me," he'd say.

Merrie had hated him. For the most part, she remembered her childhood fondly. She and Jamie had always been close, and Erik had become the friend of her teen years. The patterns formed, broke apart, and reformed, endlessly. On again, off again, in the way of kids. "I'm not gonna be your friend", but then the next day, you were.

Erik had been Dr. Drewsome's favourite. It was probably the only "gift" he could see a use for, and Merrie had sometimes wondered whether Erik's decision, to go for the money, wasn't in some way influenced by Garris. He'd certainly made Erik feel he was worth any two of the rest of them.

*Or maybe he just made the rest of us feel we were worth only half of Erik...*

Garris had despised Jamie, which may have been part of the reason Merrie had disliked the man so much. Now she could see how his actions may have been based in fear. He also had trouble with Ren, because she could read him too well. He could control her, though, simply by overloading her nervous system with input - punishing her by taking her on a "field trip", usually to some place like the subway station, or the airport. Places where people were tense and focussed, especially toward anyone who was in the way. Ren always found herself in the way in places like that.

Ren must have a good reason for this. None of them had spilled tears over Garris' death, and Merrie recalled Ren remarking how his death coincided nicely with her desire never to see him again. A smile flickered in Merrie's eyes as she also remembered Ren's guilt, after making that comment. *Poor Ren!* She lived so much in other people's thoughts, that she couldn't help but see the reflection of her comments in their eyes.

Whatever Ren's reasons for wanting to see Garris' backup files, she must have felt he owed them enough to oblige. Perhaps he'd had enough fire and brimstone now to do them a favour.

Still, Merrie knew it wasn't going to be easy. Much harder to summon someone she really had no desire to see.

There were ways to beat her own resistance. The first thing she did at home was to head for the closet. She pulled down box after box from the top, until she found her "souvenirs". Not souvenirs, really, but memorabilia from years past, when "Symtech" had been "Symbio", and life had been a lot simpler. Before she'd realised how bizarre it was to raise the dead, or have friends who could toss things across the room with their minds.

*We should have known before.* Way back when, during the days when they'd driven their parents to rash action - to abandoning their children to the system. If Dr. Drewsome had succeeded in anything, though, it had been in that: despite the furore surrounding each arrival, it had somehow become unimportant once *in situ*. *Brainwashing? Maybe.* Merrie preferred to think it owed more to relief - and peace.

Last year, when Drew Garris had died, Merrie had performed this same ritual. Dug out the box, and laid the newspaper clipping - the obituary - on top. It had been closure, of a sort. Whatever hold Charles Smythe might have over them, it was nothing to Drewsome's. He was the authority figure of their youth, but it wasn't respect he motivated.

Smythe, despite his skills at manipulation, couldn't even come close. There was only one way to hold a Cluster of aberrant teenagers in line.

Dr. Drewsome did it with fear.

\*

"Fuck it!"

"Something wrong, Dusty?" Gene Davies asked. Ever since Dusty had come back from Mexico, he'd been looking lousy. First, he'd had that infection in his leg, and now, he was having headaches. Bad headaches. Gene wondered whether his immune system was so down that he'd picked up some other bug.

Doug had told him that Erik had come by to see him. Erik had a really amazing ability to heal. Why the hell hadn't he used it on Dusty?

"The client wants me to deliver the designs personally," Dusty was saying. "Give a presentation."

"Nothing unusual in that. Gene and I do it all the time," Doug said pointedly, swivelling his



chair. “Methinks you should let one of us take it this time, too. You take sick leave. Screw the client, screw everything. You’re gonna end up back in the hospital if you don’t watch out.”

“Fuck you,” Dusty said congenially. “They want me personally.”

“I, however, don’t. So spare me the ‘fuck yous’.” Doug grinned. “I’m heterosexual, even if Gene isn’t.”

“He’s right,” Miranda Blair said.

“About me being homosexual? I know that,” Gene said.

“No, Fool. That Dusty shouldn’t be here.”

“I’m surprised Erik didn’t notice how you were. Maybe you should call him up,” Doug told him. “See if he can help with the headaches.”

“That’s probably why he came,” Gene remarked.

Dusty was running out of patience. “I - have - a - doctor’s - appointment,” he said through gritted teeth.

“When?” Gene asked practically. “Did you tell him how bad you were feeling? I think you should see someone. Today.”

Dusty didn’t answer. He gathered his designs, and printed off a copy of the email. They’d made a reservation for him through a travel agent.

Real world stuff. Not to be delayed, defrayed, or interfered with by any damn corporation. One good thing that had come out of the “Mexican expedition”: he felt newly confident he could control his retro. There’d been no flashes, flickers, or bouts since his return. Nothing to take him by surprise.

This would be his second trip alone. The first one hadn’t turned out too well, but this was different. Completely unrelated to Symtech. He’d turned in his “resignation”, so there wouldn’t be anybody tailing him.

*No one to pick up the pieces...*

*Don’t think that way. There won’t be any pieces.* This was a normal business trip; the kind that Gene and Doug took.

“Going home?” Doug asked him.

“Yeah,” Dusty said. “But first I’m going to Dachau.”

\*

Some of the pictures were a little yellowed now. Merrie curled up against the headboard, her feet tucked under her. There weren’t all that many photos, but she’d found one of Drew Garriss. From an adult perspective, it wasn’t hard to spot the arrogance in his expression. It was as she looked at his face, that gooseflesh danced down her arms. She’d never been able to look at him from such a distance before. Her vision had always been overlain with memories of his cruelty, delivered in the name of science. She’d grown up thinking “science” made everything right.

*Which is why I got as far away from it as I could.*

*I must be wrong.* She deliberately put the photos aside, and went through some of the other things: schoolwork, and drawings. At the moment, looking at these things she’d drawn at ages what? seven? nine? her eyes filled. *No child of mine will ever suffer this way.*

She was never alone, but most of the pictures weren’t of Ren or Josh, Jamie, Erik or Dusty. They were pictures of other people who’d shared her childhood: old men, prostitutes, pregnant women, teenagers, children, infants. Perhaps the most poignant of all was the image of her, looking in a mirror. She stood alone, yet the reflection in the glass was full - like a crowd at a party.

*Party animal, even then.*

*Hellish nights, even then.*

She sniffed, and wiped her eyes on her sleeve. *No childhood's perfect...*

She picked up the photo again; the one which had caught her eye, that first time. Then she picked up another, and another.

Erik had been his favourite, but there may have been another reason, besides the nature of his "gift". The implication was appalling. It made Dr. Drewsome more of a monster than any of them had suspected.

Yet, it was so obvious it was a wonder none of them had made the connection before.

Drew Garris was Erik's father.

She swallowed hard, and tears filled her eyes and ran, unchecked down her face. The man - the monster - had experimented on his own unborn son.

\*

*Why do I want to know?*

*Worse - why this compulsion - this need to know? I'd be better off if I'd never thought of it at all...*

*No.* She'd panicked and run from Smythe's office. Since then - since she'd come home and bolted her doors - all her anger had been directed at herself, for acting the fool and the coward.

She was distant enough now from Smythe - from Symtech - from her panic - to take a step back. There was nothing foolish in wanting to know her origins. Foolhardy, maybe, when a company like Symtech was involved. But she had a right - they all had a right - to know. Whether the others availed themselves of the information was their business.

It had to do with freedom, and Ren knew that Dusty's anger had triggered some of her concerns. It was Symtech's decision, however, to send her and Josh to Mexico, that had done the rest. Why had their status - their involvement with Symtech - never changed? Why did they, as adults, have to answer to Symtech, and rely on the company for support? Why were they Symtech's responsibility? Why had they allowed a corporation to retain so much control over their lives?

Was it because they were truly "disabled", or because it had always been that way? Too easy to go along with it, and too difficult to fight?

*Erik fought it.* It was the example she'd always used when an itch for rebellion made her dissatisfied. But was Erik's freedom all an illusion? Because it suited Symtech to have the positive feedback, and "healing" was an acceptable gift? Because any connection drawn between his abilities and his former benefactor, would only add to Symtech's prestige?

But when there'd been trouble in Mexico, Erik had been jetted down - by Symtech.

That meant he wasn't as free as he liked to think. He was still close enough to walk into Smythe's office and make demands. Still close enough to permit demands on his time.

Not the kind of independence Dusty was talking about.

There'd been plans in Smythe's head - ideas for "teaching her a lesson". She'd known then it was the part of his overseer duty he really enjoyed - the chance to develop intricate plots to curb his wayward charges. The kind of effort that would use his knowledge of them to humiliate, and cripple.

There was something else, too: Smythe would never give her Garris' research. She'd see parts of it, but only after it had been modified.

Because that was one of the things that had frightened him - Garris' notes would be enough to take Symtech down. To take them all down.

At the same time, Smythe was confident - because he had a "partner" to deal with things like this. A partner who'd been in on the original research and who'd helped to fund it. The same

partner who'd wanted help to cover illegal shipments into Mexico airspace.

Smythe had been confident this "partner" would now find a use for her. It would distract her, keep her from making any more ludicrous requests, and help balance the books. She'd be "on loan". The responsibility had been shifted.

If she balked? She'd met his "partners" in Mexico. They weren't nearly as forgiving as he was.

\*

Gene looked up in surprise when someone tapped him on the back. He pulled off the headphones. "Hi, Erik," he said. "Doug said you were here yesterday."

Erik's forehead wrinkled. "Where's the 'Animation King'?" he asked.

"Damn fool's giving a presentation to a client."

Erik looked around. "Another part of the office?"

"No. Another part of the world." Gene nodded towards his desk. "Probably shouldn't do this, but go check his Inbox. It came in a couple of hours ago."

Erik read through the message. "*Fuck it!*" he hissed.

"He said that same thing. Told him he shouldn't go, but he insisted."

Erik was about to turn away when he saw the message above - a "Reply to Sender" from C. Smythe. Erik clicked on it, and read the message. He looked at the time. It had arrived half an hour before Dusty's travel arrangements. Plenty of time for Symtech to drum something up. Something to convince Dusty he wasn't as self-sufficient as he thought.

Only, Symtech didn't know what had happened to him in Mexico. Valterzar hadn't told them. None of them had. They might know Dusty was under the weather, but they wouldn't know how close he'd come to being under the ground.

Gene was still talking, "...instead of waiting for them to schedule him in."

"What?"

"Dusty should've asked you to fix him yesterday, instead of waiting for some damned appointment."

"Appointment? With a doctor?"

"Yeah. It's there, on the desk. 'Twenty-fourth of September'. Ridiculous."

"Yeah," Erik agreed. "I'm gonna see if I can catch up with him, Gene."

"And this time, do something about him, okay? The damn fool is so set on doing it all himself, he doesn't know when to quit."

"Or when not to," Erik muttered. He waved to Gene and Miranda, then went tearing out the door.

\*

"Jamie?"

It was Merrie, and she was sobbing. Jamie excused himself, and took the phone into another room. "What's wrong?"

"I need you -"

"Sounds like a job for Zar," he said delicately.

"Not this time. He wasn't there when we were." He guessed she was trying to reassure him when she added, "I'll go see him later."

Jamie sighed. "I'm sort of in a faculty meeting right now. Will anything - you included - die if you have to wait an hour?"

"No," she said miserably, but he sensed a smile behind her tears. "I'll wait to die until you get here."

“Thanks,” he said sarcastically. He hesitated. “I’m not gonna be doing anything that’ll make Zar jealous, am I?”

“No.”

“Dammit.” He heard her chuckle. *Good*, he thought. “See you soon, Merrie. Just hold that chuckle till I get there.”

\*

Valterzar was in his office with a client when the receptionist rang through.

“Sorry, Dr. Valterzar, but it’s Erik Dainler. He says it’s an emergency.”

“Put him through.”

Erik was yelling into the phone, and Zar guessed he was in heavy traffic somewhere. “*Mallory told Symtech to fuck off!*” he bellowed. “*That he was quitting!* Now he’s on some business trip, but I think they set it up - just to show him.”

“Where?”

“Bavaria. Little town called Dachau.”

“Dachau,” Valterzar repeated. The name was familiar, but he couldn’t think why.

“Concentration camp. The Holocaust,” Erik said. “Bad news for someone like Dusty.”

Zar didn’t have to think twice. He could have argued that this was no longer any of his business, but he would have been lying. Dusty had made it his business to save them, no matter the cost - and he wouldn’t have been this bad if he hadn’t nearly killed himself with the effort. Dusty wanted to go alone, to be self-sufficient, but this wasn’t the time. His weakness, the continued headaches, the dependency would undermine his efforts, and another bout of retro could kill him. He was crazy if he expected his friends to stand by and let it happen.

“When did he leave?”

“Almost three hours ago.”

*Shit!* Zar glanced at his watch. “I’ll meet you at the airport,” he said.

## Chapter Twelve

It was the combination of things that finally got to her. Her suspicions, the way Smythe was paid for callously dictating their lives, even the guards whom she always sensed in the background.

Guards who were also paid for keeping track of her foolish mistakes; for breaking her free of her paralysis and dragging her off to recover. Guards who were nameless and faceless - who didn't want to know her.

*So damn degrading.*

She'd never been so angry in her life.

The realisation that she'd been at least partly right, about Symbio's experiments, had initially horrified her - now, it merely added to her anger. For Erik's pseudo-freedom, she could feel only pity, because she had no doubt that he was watched every bit as zealously as she was. That made his "freedom" a farce. Dusty was struggling with it now, but if he achieved any independence, it would probably be a farce, too. It hurt her in a way she couldn't describe to see his pride diminished that way.

Her anger seldom went beyond annoyance. Even in Mexico, when Josh had driven her to distraction, she hadn't been truly furious.

Not like now. Not with a coldly dispassionate ire that cleared her head and eliminated her fear.

At the moment, she didn't fear Symtech, or its "partner".

And she wondered if that wasn't just a little foolish.

Something in her had changed, and the anger had triggered it. Ren had to admit it shocked her a little, but whatever it was, it kept her from thinking too deeply about the consequences. She had to act before Smythe's "friends" could get here, to take her in charge.

Ren changed into running shoes, and filled her rucksack with a few of the items she treasured most: some photos, a figurine Dusty had given her, some of her research notes. The photos almost took her down, but she fought it; grasping that chilling dispassion and hanging on.

She didn't let herself think as she went into the kitchen and poured oil into a frying pan. Nor did she consider any consequences but one when she turned the burner up to "high". Instead, she went back to the bedroom and waited, poised, at the window.

When the smoke alarm screamed, and kept on screaming, there was a giant crash as someone kicked in her barricaded front door. Another explosion of glass as someone else came in through a window.

Alarms down. Any burglar alarms would have already been triggered. Ren hesitated only a second, to place them all. Someone was yelling, "*Is it out?!*"

She touched her foot to the damp grass outside, then slid the rest of the way out the window.

*Freedom.*

*Is the fire out? No?*

*But I am.*

\*

Jamie's meeting took half an hour longer than he'd thought, but his driving helped make up for it. When he got to her house, Merrie brought him a beer, but then wouldn't let him drink it.

"Merrie," he complained. "I'm not gonna get drunk on one brew."

"I need your mind clear." She stood there waiting.

“What now?”

“Is it clear?” she asked impatiently.

“What?” he squawked.

“Honestly, Jamie! Sometimes you can be so thick! Is your mind clear?”

He shut his eyes, gritted his teeth, then said darkly, “Yes!”

“Look at this picture, and tell me who it reminds you of.”

“It’s -” Jamie stared at it, and his eyes widened. Merrie saw gooseflesh lift on his arms. *Good*, she thought. *He’s getting it.* “- Erik,” he whispered. “Does he know?”

Merrie stood up, and crossed her arms across her front. Her eyes had filled again, and James didn’t even try to coax her out of it. Truth was, he felt like crying himself.

“It would kill him. All the time he was growing up, there was only his mom. He used to talk about her, remember?”

Jamie’s eyes were wet. “Damn the bastard! How could he do it, to his own kid?”

“Maybe she was going to lose him. Maybe he thought he was doing the right thing -”

“He couldn’t have been certain she’d miscarry! None of our parents were. Somebody talked them into it! Told them it was the only way to go.”

“And one course of action determined the other.” She looked at Jamie. “But she *must* have known, Jamie! Garris wasn’t a physician! She must have known what he was into - and she went along with it.” She looked furious. “Erik’s mom - his precious mother - *did* this to him.”

“Or let it be done to him.” He tossed the photo back in the box. “Bury the bastard again. Erik never has to know.”

She shook her head. “Ren wants me to talk to him.”

James looked confused. “Erik?”

“No - Garris. She talked to Smythe this morning.”

“She went to see him?” James was surprised.

“I’m not sure. She sounded almost panicky.”

“What did she want?” James asked worriedly.

“For me to contact Dr. Drewsome. She wants me to ask him if he had any backups, that aren’t on Symtech’s computers.”

Jamie gave a low whistle. “Holy shit,” he whispered. “Is she okay?”

“I don’t know,” Merrie told him seriously. “She’s not home.”

“At work?” he asked hopefully.

“Never came in today.” At his expression, she shook her head. “Zar and Erik went after Dusty. Smythe sent him to Dachau. Zar called me just before you got here.”

*Dusty. Dachau. Bad news.* “Did you tell him about Ren?”

“Who - Dusty?”

“No - Zar.”

“Not yet. I was too busy *not* telling him about Erik, an-and Dr. Drewsome.” She hesitated. “James, it’s a lot to ask, but can you come with me to the cemetery? I-I need to do what Ren wanted, but I don’t -” She looked around her cheery house and shuddered.

“You don’t want him *here*.” James was thinking hard. “I’ll ring Josh on my cellphone, and you keep trying Ren. When Josh gets here, we’ll swing by Ren’s.” He smiled, but there was no amusement in his eyes. “Seems to me it’ll be better if we stick together right now.”

Merrie smiled, relieved. “Tell Josh to hurry, James.” She shivered. “I hate visiting cemeteries at night.”

\*

Twenty minutes later she'd emptied her bank account. While they were fighting to put out the fire in her house, poking and prodding the ruins to find her body, she walked in and bought a cheap cellphone. Deftly, she transferred the numbers from her old one and tossed it in the trash.

She spent another two hours in a hairdresser's, and considered it well worth the effort. The woman who walked out and into a clothing store wasn't the same one who'd walked in.

She pulled out the ripped page from last year's phone book, that she'd found at the beauty salon. Drew Garris had still been a name on the registers then, instead of a name on a gravestone.

Fifteen minutes later, her taxi stopped in front of his house.

*For sale.* It would have been easier with Jamie, but Ren didn't let it sway her. Dr. Drewsome had a bad habit. It had been lodged in his brain, and she'd recalled it from the unwanted forays she'd taken through his mind. He liked to keep a key in the garden. It should still be there, under a garden gnome.

The gnome was an incongruity in itself. Ugly, and so personal. Unlike Dr. Drewsome who'd been good-looking and impersonal. Only his personality had qualified as ugly.

The face on the gnome had been diminished over the past year; worn by the elements as Drew Garris must have been by his sojourn in the ground. That implacable coldness was with her still, and spurred on by her hatred for the man who'd walked these grounds. Even now, she was a little surprised she had it in her to feel such hatred. Maybe that was all that was left once regret had had its way. She'd just walked away from everyone she knew and everyone she valued. Now she was planning on taking down the support system they'd relied on for their entire lives.

*Do I have the right?*

*Yes.* Because, she'd read something else in Smythe's mind: a sense of ownership. Like a patent on a product. Mexico had been just the beginning. The first step in a marketing venture.

*Not if I have anything to say about it.*

Ren inserted the key in the lock, turned it, and pushed open the door.

\*

Josh stood there outside Ren's house. He couldn't take it in; couldn't focus. *Ren.* Where was Ren?

They'd bickered and battled and given each other a hard time, but she was his sister in all ways but blood. Maybe, if she was right about the genetic engineering, they had links in that, too.

The house was gutted, and so was Josh. Smoke drifted in his eyes and a few stray sparks stung his skin. He wanted to force himself to concentrate, to see if she was in the wreckage, but he couldn't. He was too afraid.

He wanted to howl. Ren, tramping across the desert and frying her nose off; Ren, giving her all so Dusty could stay alive.

Ren, in scientist mode, who was nearly as excited about her damned fungus as he was about a pile of *Drepanosaurus* bones.

*I don't want to see her.* If she was lying in the wreckage, he didn't want to be the one to find her...

"Is she in there?" The voice brought him back to reality. His head jerked up, and he realised, in shock, that Charles Smythe was here. Apparently, it had been enough of a tragedy to drag him out of his office. "Is she in there?" he asked again, harshly.

Josh wanted to believe it was concern for Ren that gave Smythe's voice that harsh sound. But didn't Smythe know what it would do to him if he had to find her? To see her body crisp and burnt in the wreckage?

"I-I don't know," Josh gasped. He was white, even to his lips.

“Use it and tell me,” Smythe demanded. “So I can locate her.”

Josh closed his eyes, but he wasn’t searching for Ren. He was searching Smythe’s pockets. Reading the words on his Palm Pilot, that had gone out as an order: “*Find Magnus and restrain.*”

Josh opened his eyes. He wasn’t searching the wreckage for one of his best friends - for anything or anyone. Besides, Merrie would know, and he could take it a lot better if Merrie told him - and reassured him Ren was at peace.

Instead of finding her in pieces. He nearly gagged at the thought.

Smythe saw it and interpreted it as confirmation. “She’s here, then,” he muttered. “*Fuck it!*”

No sorrow - just frustration. Despite his profane reaction, Mr. Charles Smythe really didn’t give a fuck.

*After all these years...*

In that moment, Josh hated him. He looked at him with a gaze that was every bit as smouldering as the building at his back. “Yeah,” he said harshly. “She’s here.”

\*

Josh got out of his car and walked into Merrie’s house without knocking. He went straight to Merrie and grabbed her arms. “I need to know,” he said.

“What?” she asked him worriedly.

Josh released her, rolled his eyes heavenward in silent thanks, and sank into a chair. Jamie was at his side a second later, a can of Coke in his hand. “Have a drink, Josh,” he urged.

Josh nodded, sipped, then sank back and worked on regaining his equilibrium. Eyes closed, he told them, “Ren’s house is gutted. A fire.”

Jamie shot a glance at Merrie. She shook her head.

“Smythe was there. He wanted me to check -” His voice tapered off, and he had to swallow hard. He looked at Merrie. “I mean, I know you do it, Mer, but -”

“She’s got more guts than the rest of us put together,” James said. “I can’t believe Smythe would ask you. Didn’t he know how it would hit you? Hit any of us?”

“He didn’t care. He’d sent out an order to pick her up and restrain her.”

“Ren rang this morning. She’d talked to him,” Merrie said, her voice hushed. “It has to do with Dr. Drewsome’s research. I think she wants to see it.” Her eyes were frightened as she added, “She sounded really scared -”

“Does Dusty know?” Josh asked.

“Dusty’s out of the country. Sick as a dog, but determined. Zar and Erik have gone after him,” Jamie said.

“Where ‘out of the country’?”

“Dachau.”

“*The fuckin’ concentration camp?!*” Josh exclaimed. “It’s gotta be Smythe, playing games again,” he said angrily. “Makes me glad I lied to the bastard.”

“What did you do, Josh?” Jamie asked.

“Told him Ren was in her house.” At Jamie’s look, Josh added flippantly, “He wasn’t being sensitive to my needs.”

Jamie snorted. Merrie smiled.

“What’s he gonna do to you when he finds out?”

Josh shrugged. “Even we finely-tuned specimens can make an occasional mistake. I’ll blame it on emotional trauma. I was pretty traumatised, I’ll tell ya. I’ll kill Ren, as soon as I find her alive.”



\*

"I should have brought a flashlight," Josh complained, looking around the cemetery.

"I should have brought some earplugs," James retorted. "Between you and Merrie, a sane man can't even think."

"Find me a sane man, and I'll ask him," Josh told him. There was still an orangy glow in the sky, but many of the trees were in silhouette. It was the time of dusk where vision was diminished anyway - everything fading to shades of grey. He found himself watching warily for signs of movement, then trying not to watch anything at all for fear he'd see it. Being here with Merrie didn't exactly inspire confidence. "Could have picked a better spot for a party," he remarked, with an attempt at lightness. "Couldn't you have done this some place more 'cheery'?"

"I know this is hard on you, with your 'third eye' and all," James told him mockingly. "How's the view 'down under'? Any classic coffins we should know about?"

"Shut *up*, Wickham! At least I don't knock things over every time I fart -"

"That hasn't happened in years!" James argued.

"Sh-h!" Merrie hushed them. She looked as though she were listening to something under the ground.

"Do you hear something?" Josh asked her fearfully. He was doing his damndest to keep his focus - all of it - above the ground.

She took the flashlight and shone it upwards, under her chin, in the best camper's storytelling style. She waited a moment, then said, amused, "No. I just wanted you to stop arguing. Are you sure we lost all those guards? I don't like uninvited company when I'm at work," she joked.

"I'm not Ren!" James retorted. "How the heck do I know about the guards? Josh?"

"Only car here is ours. Why *are* we here?" Josh asked, bluntly this time. "Why didn't we do this at your house?"

"I'm a little reluctant to contact *him*," she admitted. She added, a little sheepishly, "This kind of setting can get me in the mood."

"In the mood for what?" Josh asked her. "Is this some proclivity I should tell Zar about?" Jamie burst out laughing.

"Pipe down, Jamie! You're loud enough to wake the dead."

Merrie was joking, but James looked thoughtful. "That's something I've always wondered about," he told her. "Does noise matter?"

"Not to me," she replied. "Tell you what - as soon as Dr. Drewsome arrives, you can ask him." She turned to Josh with a chuckle. "If you'd feel more comfy, Josh, we can do this at your house."

"Like hell!"

Jamie smirked. "'Like *hell*', huh? Can't be your place, then. Wouldn't want old Dr. Drewsome to feel too much at home."

\*

Ren started in the bedroom, and worked her way along the walls, knocking and prodding. The best place would be the fireplace, with its brick, but she was saving that till last. Word was, Drewsome had died in the bedroom. She gave a shiver. Better to get that part of it over with before dark.

She knew she was losing her edge. She'd never been able to hold onto anger. The kind of anger she'd experienced this afternoon had been powerful, cold, and implacable. She'd felt rather proud of herself that she could manifest something like that.

*Cold bitch.*

*Yeah!* She grinned.

The best thing about it had been the numbness it generated. Her biggest problem had always been an inability to tune out other people's thoughts in moments of intensity, be it hers or theirs. It was the same with any convictions and decisions. She was crippled by her ability to see both sides - her anger undermined by extenuating circumstances. Today, that hadn't been a problem.

*Of course, you didn't give it much of a test.* The conversations carrying on around her in the beauty parlour hadn't exactly been riveting or intense. Still, she'd been able to let it all wash over her with no distractions.

The closet was mirrored and she caught a glimpse of herself. *Damn, I look good!* she thought, surprised anew. She wished she could show Merrie.

Then, she wished she could show Dusty. Her thoughts leapt from there to wondering how Dusty was. She plunked down on the carpet, momentarily defeated. *I cut all the ties. It won't be safe for any of them to hang out with me now. Not until I resolve this, anyway.*

She wondered whether it was safe to talk with Merrie. She needed to find out whether Drewsome's ghoul had given her any hints. Were their phones bugged? It sounded so paranoid, but once Smythe realised she'd cleaned out her bank, he'd know she was on the run.

*He'll want to know if I'm in contact with them.* It didn't take a whole lot of reasoning to figure out the rest. The threat had been there, in his mind.

She moved downstairs, and found a white-painted, thickly-carpeted closet. As far as habitats went, it wasn't bad. The closeness of it made her feel more secure, and she could have her flashlight on without anyone seeing.

Dr. Drewsome owed her - owed them all. It suited her to play squatter in his luxury house.

Ren pulled out her laptop and plugged in the adaptor, running the cord through to her closet. Taking a lesson from Merrie, she deftly changed the desktop from businesslike to gaudy and cheerful, so the reflection in her closet was a warm yellowy-orange. Then, she leaned back and pulled out a chocolate bar and a bottle of Diet Pepsi.

Some time in the night, there were noises in the house - sudden thunks and footsteps; doors closing; the sound of a nonexistent TV; water running. Ren shivered, closed her eyes tightly, and tried to tune out those brief flickers of awareness, that told her who it was - and gave her some idea why they hadn't successfully sold the house.

Dr. Drewsome's afterlife wasn't all that peaceful - and he was having as hard a time settling down tonight as she was.

\*

"Are you sure we've got the right place?" Josh yelled to Merrie. During the last hour, he'd overcome most of his wariness, and now was just plain bored.

"Of course, I'm sure. What do you expect? Some beacon to rise up out of the ground, pointing the way to his grave?" Merrie snapped at him. Cemeteries were neither peaceful nor restful to her. "Darned if this place isn't crowded tonight!" she said with some asperity.

Jamie looked over at her. "I don't even want to know..."

"It's not like any of us attended his funeral," Josh went on.

"We were too busy having a party," James remarked.

"I don't think this is the appropriate place," Josh hinted to him, then promptly fell over a chunky marker.

James helped him up, but something about the gravestone caught his eye. Something

familiar. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a lighter. In the flare of the flame he read, “‘Andrew Garris, Physiologist, Molecular Biologist, Geneticist.’ Doesn’t like to brag, does he?”

“What is that thing?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out. I’ll bet he designed the stone himself,” James sniggered. “Something for the ages.”

“Small and potent, like his product,” Josh muttered.

“Getting introspective, Josh?” James asked him, more seriously.

Josh sighed. “Well, he can’t exactly expect us to mourn him now, can he?”

Merrie joined them. Jamie could tell she was nervous. “Well, this is it!” she said, with attempted brightness.

“Just hurry it up, Mer. I want to get out of here.” Josh was back to being wary.

Even Jamie was a little surprised when Merrie sat down on the gravestone. She shot him a smile. “It’s just a rock, Jamie.”

“Yeah, Mr. Geology,” Josh hissed.

Merrie stared at the horizon. Her gaze loosened, became unfocussed. Josh felt the gooseflesh begin to dance across his skin, and the hairs on his neck prickled. It was as though an icy wind had swept past them, stealing some of their body temperature away.

To gather substance. From their own dispelled vaporous breaths, a form began to coalesce in translucent swirls and eddies. Josh was okay until the eyes took shape. Then, he took a quick step back, behind Jamie.

Jamie was shuddering, his fists clenched tight. Temper. He’d despised Drewsome. Josh hoped he was mad enough to defend the both of them.

“I always hoped you’d summon me, Meredith,” the hollow voice said.

His words filled Josh with disgust, and dampened a lot of his fear. Who did the guy think he was? It was as though he’d had the whole thing planned, so he wouldn’t have to die.

Wouldn’t have to suffer for his crimes.

“Fuck off, Drewsome,” Josh told him.

Jamie actually jumped. He’d been so immersed in his anger that he hadn’t given any thought to Josh’s. At Josh’s words, a small gravemarker to their right cracked in a quick fracturing of stone, and then Jamie started laughing. He’d been so tense about this damned thing.

Josh was eyeing the fractured stone. “Fart, Wickham?” he asked. “You’re gonna have to pay for that.”

There was anger sizzling in the air now. Drewsome wasn’t happy with their disrespect. He’d taught them to fear him back then - he expected them to fear him more now.

Merrie was anxious to end this. Despite Josh’s and Jamie’s reactions, she still feared Drew Garris. She had a horrible feeling that having given him this much substance, he’d find a way to come back and plague her. She couldn’t help but wonder if this was what he’d had planned all along. “Where’re your back-up files?” she asked, her voice wavering slightly.

He heard the sounds of nervousness and preyed on it, the way he always had. “‘Back-up files’?” He smiled at her.

Merrie shivered. His smile was so dark, despite the fact it was made out of pale wisps of vapour.

“The ones where you made us,” Josh said impatiently. “The ones you used to screw Symbio.”

His smile was for Josh now. Josh added, “I’m glad I didn’t expect wings or a harp. You’re the same bastard you’ve always been.”

James' laughter started as a hiss, but ended as a full-blown belly laugh. "Damn it, Josh!" he said, wiping his eyes. "I'll have to visit cemeteries with you more often!"

"He's getting away!" Merrie warned. Drewsome was fading slightly, but he was also in motion. Now that Merrie had given him this much substance, he intended to use it - to get away from her before she could undo it.

"Naw, he's not," James said, still grinning. He concentrated, and Drewsome appeared to shrink slightly; his near-transparent perimeter coalescing into thick, gobby blobs.

"Looks like mucous," Josh said distastefully. Drew Garris had always hated mucous. It was almost a phobia with him. It was also the reason Josh, Dusty and James used to flick bogies at him, when he wasn't looking.

The ghoulsome Drewsome shivered slightly. "The files," Merrie prompted.

"Way to sound tough, Mer," Josh told her.

James grinned, then concentrated some more. Definitely mucous-like now. Drewsome had shrunk still more, and there were glistening globs running down his translucent front.

"Somebody sneeze?" Josh joked.

"The lab," Drewsome said haltingly.

"You wouldn't have hidden back-ups where they could find them so easily," James scoffed. "Get real." He did a doubletake. "Ooh, that's right - you can't."

"They're at your house, aren't they?" Merrie asked. "Somewhere neat and tidy and fastidious -"

"No, little Merrie," Drewsome whispered, and Merrie leaned back, her eyes frightened in the pallid glow from his figure. It made James mad and he compressed him further, but this time, it didn't have much effect. All Garris needed was Merrie, and he knew it.

"*Don't take it from him, Mer!*" James told her.

"He can't boss you around any more. *Remember who's in charge!*"

The last words did it. Merrie stood up and faced him; unwilling to draw back, even when he attempted to shove his face in hers. If it sickened her that she was breathing some of his vapour, she didn't show it. "The *files*," she repeated.

He was angry, but he'd never been able to accept a failure. "If I tell you, will you release me?" he asked coaxingly.

"Of course," she said quickly.

Josh yelled "*Don't!*" and James said "*Don't be a fool!*"

Apparently, their reactions were enough to convince him that Merrie was, indeed, as malleable as ever. "In my garden," he said, his voice gravelly. "The gazebo." He smiled at her expectantly - that pseudo-smile he'd always given when things had gone his way. Anything would be better than the hellish afterlife he'd been sequestered to - even the frustration of the insubstantial had to beat an eternity of punishing hellfire and regret. "*Release me*," he commanded, in an imperious tone they all recognised.

He must have seen something in her eyes. "*Release me!*" he roared in rage. He towered over her, seething and threatening.

Jamie and Josh drew close to her - flanking her on either side.

"*You promised!*" Drewsome howled, his voice a bellowing echo that seemed to go on forever.

Merrie glared at him. The next second, he'd exploded, as though in a giant sneeze. Bits of mucous everywhere. The glistening blobs were spattered across the gravestones. In seconds, they'd dried up and disappeared.

Merrie booted the grave marker, where she'd been sitting a few moments earlier. "Dr. Drewsome?" she said loudly. Merrie smiled. "I lied."

As they walked back across the marker-stubbed ground, only Merrie could hear the cheers and applause that echoed at her back.

## Chapter Thirteen

Erik looked out the window at the fluffy cloud layer, then back at Valterzar. “First class would have much better.”

“More ostentatious, anyway.” Zar said drily. “Why don’t you head up there? Maybe you can perform some ‘miraculous cure’ and they’ll boost you out of economy.”

Erik grinned. “Never has it been said that Erik Dainler didn’t have pity for paupers -”

“Are *you* Erik Dainler?” the man behind them asked.

“Oh, God,” Valterzar groaned, scooting down in the seat.

“Can I have your autograph?” the stranger grinned.

“How about a ‘healthy’ handshake?” Erik asked him, with a wink.

Valterzar got up and headed for the bathroom. “Excuse me,” he hissed to Erik as he left, “but I have to be *sick*.”

When Zar came back, Erik was pretending to be asleep. “That’s the problem with flying economy,” he complained, out one side of his mouth.

“Tell me about Mallory’s schedule,” Valterzar commanded.

“It was all on the email. Plane into Munich, then twenty minutes on the S-Bahn -” Erik looked at Zar inquiringly.

“Train.”

“- into Dachau. A car will pick him up there, for the meeting.” Erik frowned. “That doesn’t sound very reasonable. My clients always give me a chance to rest up after a flight.”

“Dusty won’t know the difference. This is the first time he’s gone out on a client presentation.” Zar added angrily, “Smythe knows fatigue will make him more susceptible.”

“I did a little research at an cybercafe while I was waiting for you.”

“Shocked you had time - what with *your public* and all. Must say I’m impressed.” It didn’t sound like it.

“More like ‘surprised’.” Erik grinned. “‘Dachau is a Bavarian town with a population of approximately thirty-eight thousand,’” he quoted. “Apparently, it made the jump from cattle market to art colony about a hundred and fifty years ago.”

“Quite a jump. Sounds like inspiration was ‘in the air’.” Valterzar said drily.

“This, from a man who keeps pigs in his house,” Erik tutted.

“I’m sure paintings like ‘Heifer Angst’ and ‘Bossy Does Bavaria’ were really big in those days. Let me see that -” Zar took the printout and scanned it. He quoted, “‘For many years, Dachau was an artists’ colony, with a reputation throughout Germany for its charm and scenic beauty.’”

“Renowned for such great works as the ‘Moona Lisa’ and ‘The Dairy of Nan Franks’.” Erik grinned. “Read on. It says it was Himmler who saw the ‘potential’ in an abandoned munitions factory, and turned it into a concentration camp - the sick bastard.”

“‘Thirty-one thousand deaths in twelve years’.” It was in such contrast to the other printout, which talked about Dachau as a “lovely village” with a “picturesque castle”. “Some people are so blind,” Valterzar muttered.

“Part of the problem with being more ‘insightful’,” Erik told him. “It’s sometimes hard to believe the rest of the world can’t see what’s going on.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

Erik tutted again. “‘Some people are so blind’,” he quoted.

Valterzar’s eyes glinted. “Definitely not a good place for Dusty.”

“On his first trip to Europe, too,” Erik lamented. “Anything older than yesterday is bad news for The Dustin, anyway, but this place has an overdose of history.” He leaned back, donned his dark glasses, and yawned discreetly. “He’s smart, though,” he said confidently, preparing to close his eyes for the duration of the flight. “He’ll watch his step.”

“Which is why we’re following him halfway around the world,” Valterzar retorted drily. “If he stays away from the camp, the museum, parts of the railroad station, the city hall, and any streets where death marches moved, who knows? He might even have a good time.”

\*

“I say we hit his house tonight,” Merrie told them determinedly, as she took the lead across the monument-studded lawn.

“And get arrested for breaking and entering, as soon as we turn on a light.”

“There won’t be any lights,” Josh argued, tripping over a gravestone to sprawl on the grass. “Dammit!”

James gave him a hand up. “Of course there will. We have flashlights, remember.”

He flicked it on and Josh complained, “Get it out of my eyes.”

Jamie grinned. “Funny you, tripping over that monument. I would’ve thought you’d have seen it coming - one way or the *other*.”

“Don’t do it, Jamie!” Josh gave him a shove. “I’m warning you!”

James snickered.

Merrie shook her head at him, but her smile was a flash of white in the dark. “That’s rotten, James. You know Josh has trouble breaking his focus.”

“Fuck you, Wickham.” Josh laid an arm across Merrie’s shoulders. “Speaking of focus, Mer - you should’ve saved yourself for me.” He sighed dramatically. “You’re wasted on Valterzar. Think of it: *you could have had me...*”

She grinned. “And be dumped for the first *Drepanosaurus* that came along?”

“Well, there’s that...” Josh admitted. “Our ideas of a ‘party’ do sort of clash.”

“Don’t be hard on him, Merrie,” James said. “He’s done his best to picture you with scales and fangs.” He shrugged. “Who knows? If he got ‘lucky’, he might even buy you some crocodile shoes - or a snakeskin belt.”

“We can’t do it tonight!” Merrie said suddenly, her expression one of “I-don’t-know-what-I-was-thinking-of”.

“Get ‘lucky’?” James sounded confused. He hated it when Merrie did this. The next thing, she’d be getting impatient because he didn’t know what she was talking about.

“No!” Merrie told him exasperatedly. “Dreowsome.”

“Why the hell not?” James asked.

“Because we should be looking for Ren.” Josh stopped next to the car, his expression serious. “How often are we going to be free agents like this? If we’re out of sight too long, Smythe’s going to think we’ve done a runner.”

“Do you think that’s what Ren’s done?” James asked.

“She won’t have gone too far,” Merrie assured him. “Josh is right, though. We got the information for Ren - now let’s find her. Do you think you could pick anything up off an object, Josh?”

“Maybe. Not how I usually operate, but I’ll see what I can do. We’ll have to go back to her house.”

James considered it. “That may be a problem. If they’ve figured out Ren’s not in there, they’ll have someone watching.” He looked at Josh. “I may have to get a little ‘light-fingered’,” he

said, with a sly grin. "If you two keep an eye on the snoops, I'll manhandle some of Ren's stuff."

Josh was remembering the inferno that had gutted Ren's house. "Don't be surprised," Josh told him soberly, "if all you have left to grab is ash."

\*

Dustin could have stayed on the plane forever. No trauma in-flight; no need to go anywhere or answer to anyone. In those hours he really came to believe things had changed. He'd taken the airport shuttle all the way across town, without so much as a flicker.

In fact, the only "flickers" he was seeing now had nothing to do with his retro. They were annoying dots of light and dark - and they belonged to the pounding in his head.

*A migraine. Nothing I can't handle.*

He'd been airsick, but even that he could ignore, as long as he stayed in the present. That's what he was focussing on: retaining control. *Staying in the here and now. Normalcy. A life.* Somehow, in Mexico, he'd been able to direct where and when. Now he just needed to figure out how he'd done it. Do it once, do it again.

Then, there'd only be flashbacks if he wanted them.

Did he want them? *No.*

*Safe.*

The truth was, he'd been terrified of visiting Europe. There was so much ancient history here, that he didn't see how he could avoid dropping into it, for a visit. The way he saw it, if he were to concentrate on the powerful look of a monument, or the beauty of a statue, he might end up some place a lot different from where he'd started.

Even one lapse would have defeated him - robbed him of any confidence - made it impossible to face his client with any degree of self-assurance.

*So far, so good.* On the way to the train station, he was actually able to look around - to enjoy the sights. It was something he'd never really been able to do. By the time he was on the train, headed for Dachau, he'd already planned half a dozen 3D projects based on some of the incredible architecture - everything from Gothic churches to amazingly ornate buildings.

*This is why travel is good for you. Expands the mind...*

As the clickety-clack of the wheels formed a rhythm beneath him, he let himself relax, much as he had on the plane. What he didn't realise was that his retrocognition responded almost as much to intensity of emotion, as it did to longterm habitation by the participants. And he was only beginning to enter an area with an overwhelming surfeit of emotion. Emotion that was so strong - so intense - that it would have killed Merrie.

Dusty sat there, relaxed, soothed by the background rumbling vibration - and totally unprepared to resist.

\*

Ren's house had been like any of a dozen others on the street: a modest, inconspicuous dwelling with none of Kithren Magnus' uniqueness to distinguish it.

Josh wasn't given to poetry, but there was a certain ambiguity here he was trying to sort out. Ren, who was constantly prey to other people's thoughts and impressions, had avoided leaving any impressions of her own on her dwelling. She'd wanted so much to blend that she'd subjugated her individuality to all the homes surrounding her.

*Of so little value to her that she burnt it down.* Josh was certain of it now, but he didn't know why. It was as though all that sequestered living had denigrated any value Ren might place on her home and her few possessions. If she'd truly allowed her ego rein, then her house would have worn the marks of her ownership, and its disposition - its destruction - would have mattered



to her.

Now, her home stood out, as the most distinctive on the block. On several blocks. A ruin of smoke and char with bones of masonry jutting through the rubble. What had been inconspicuous for so many years now drew everyone's eyes. The heretofore hidden watchers - Ren's vanguard - were suddenly overt; exposed to all the curious stares. The guards, who hoped to catch a glimpse of Ren or the rest of them, had no place to hide, because they couldn't afford the distance.

At least it confirmed Merrie's assumption - that Ren was alive. Symtech wouldn't waste this much people-power on a corpse.

*Tomorrow, they'll be seeking clues. Looking for a way to track her.*

*They'll probably come to me. Give me a second chance to get it right.*

"I'm in trouble," Josh said.

"Pregnant?" Jamie asked. "It doesn't even show." He stared at him pointedly for a moment, then grinned. "Well, maybe a little..."

"Once they know Ren's not here - and I'm pretty sure they've figured it out already - they'll want to know why I lied." His flippant remarks earlier in the evening, about "even finely-tuned specimens can make a mistake", suddenly didn't seem as funny.

"Yep."

"And where she is."

"Yep."

"Shouldn't that worry me?" Josh asked.

"Nope," James replied. This time when he looked at Josh, his eyes were serious. "No one's gonna touch you or Merrie or Ren, Josh. Not if I have anything to say about it."

\*

It was only a twenty-minute train ride from Munich to Dachau. Dusty relaxed into the seat back, and closed his eyes against the light. It took some of the edge off his headache.

*Better shape to meet the client*, he thought. Despite his fatigue, and the ache between his ears, he was actually getting excited. Doug and Gene had always been the ones to present to clients. He'd never been able to take the risk. It was the first time he'd get to see the client's reaction first-hand. He had a stirring of gooseflesh across his skin at the thought of the reaction.

It happened so suddenly, with such horrifying intensity, that he couldn't breathe. Maybe, if his eyes had been opened, he would have seen it coming. Been forewarned of disaster. But he'd been half-doing - when the air around him suddenly changed.

He opened his eyes, but it didn't help, and for a moment was terrified that he was blind. His head was screaming, and he didn't know if he was yelling it out loud.

Only he couldn't yell, because there wasn't any air. His arms, his chest, his ribs were wedged, so he could only pant in shallow breaths. Panting because it was so close, so hot, so compacted. His breath was everyone's and he inhaled every noxious human gas, every exhaled human breath. Fetid breaths, new sweat on old filth, bad teeth, faeces, decay. The sickening gag stink of vomit and running sores, pus-draining abscesses and unwashed feet.

No words - only moans. Somewhere, in those elbow-slinging, jostling confines, a child was wailing; its cries weak and frail.

*Surprised that it has the breath...*

The wails became fainter and fainter, and finally ceased. Dustin heard it with a vicelike tightening in his chest.

They were still on the rails, but he was only half on his feet. Someone was climbing up him now - stomping on him - using his body to lift a head just that much closer to the ceiling - to air.

Then, it wasn't only one, but many. He was so hot, and his headache so abominable, that he didn't care. Beyond thought.

But he wasn't alone. All around him lay cold slabs of humanity, and he was squished against an hours' dead corpse.

Slabs of meat - that felt cold against his overheated flesh. As the others - like him - had died, they'd become a carpet.

*No, not a carpet - a step*, he realised, as some long-nailed toes clawed their way up his back.

*One more step to survival.*

\*

"Well?" Merrie asked him. It was probably the fourth time in as many minutes, but at least the other two times, it had been directed at James. They were crouched in some shrubbery, a full house away from Ren's ruin. The distance had made it difficult for Jamie to coax something up out of the wreckage, and get it to them unseen. He'd finally settled for a wind-disturbance kind of effect, where a charred bit of something or other would be blown onto the singed grass or blackened concrete, then roll haphazardly in erratic bumps and jiggles, toward their hiding place.

"The work of a master," Josh had muttered, impressed.

But there'd been no "reading" on the first piece of rubbish - or the second. "Too impersonal," Josh told them.

After the fourth time, Jamie had whispered derogatorily, "At least *one* of us is a 'master'."

"It has to do with the *strength of personality* in an object," Josh explained. "If it were you, I'd probably have to go through half your house."

Merrie chuckled, and they both shushed her.

James' teeth were clenched. "Try this one," he ordered. At the last, the semi-melted pen clunked onto Josh's head.

"Got it!" Josh exclaimed.

"Knock in some sense and see what you get."

Josh frowned, then squinted, concentrated for a moment, then frowned again. "She's in a closet," he said.

"Is she okay?" Merrie asked hurriedly.

"Yeah," Josh said. "Just asleep. Very weird." He closed his eyes. "56 La Reina Drive. Sounds really familiar."

"Has she been kidnapped?" Jamie asked.

"Sh-h." Josh closed his eyes and mentally toured the grounds. "For Sale," he muttered. When he reached the worn gnome, suddenly he knew. "It's Dunky!" he exclaimed.

James looked at Merrie, who shrugged. "Dunky?" he asked.

Josh's eyes were still closed, but he nodded. "I used to get flashes of him at the lab. Red shirt, green pointy hat, white beard. It's Dunky, all right." He opened his eyes to look at them. "Dr. Drewsome's house," he explained. "Dunky's one of the gnomes in his garden. His house is for sale and it's empty - or it was, until Ren decided to live in the closet."

\*

When Dusty came to, he was lying on the floor of the passenger coach. He'd slid off his seat, and people were babbling at him in languages he couldn't understand; waving newspapers at his face to fan him off. "The heat," he mumbled, by way of explanation. What was harder to explain was the filth and ordure matting his clothing, and the stench of death clinging to his skin.

His nose was bleeding again, too, and his headache, blinding. Someone tried to mop his

nose, but withdrew, startled, as Dusty jumped back in terror. Every eyeblink brought a flashback, and in his confused vision, those helpful hands held batons to prod and poke.

In a moment of awareness, he glimpsed again the shocked confusion of his would-be rescuers. He saw something else, too: in their minds, his appearance and stench had already identified him. Drugs, alcohol, insanity. Some had already decided he must have made it aboard by deceit - theft or slyness. A few were checking unobtrusively for wallets and papers.

Someone would think soon, to call the police. To report a transient who was clearly out of his mind. Refusing offers of help, in unsanitary condition, and possibly carrying some kind of disease.

Dusty hunched in a corner of the seat, and tried to make himself inconspicuous. He pinched his nose, but kept his eyes open. He was shaking, and he couldn't rid himself of the underlying imagery of cattle cars and misery. He had to fight to keep his breathing deep, and his focus on the signs, the view, the modern trappings. He was terrified of slipping back.

*That's all it was: a slip. I let myself relax too much. Got too cocky and sure of myself...*

He knew he should be digging around in his rucksack for a change of clothes, but as they slowed, he couldn't take his eyes from the door. He was watching, waiting; ready to spring out and into the light. Out of the fetid air, and away from the dead.

If he delayed, even a moment, it might trap him. *Don't want to go back, don't want to go back...* He watched, as tensely as any of the others, for that door to open.

When the train stopped at the station, and the doors slid open, Dusty ran. He pushed past the people, in their orderly exit, and dropped out onto the platform. All around him, he could hear grunts, mumbles, and shouts of complaint.

Dusty stumbled away. He looked back only once - and saw the floor of the cattle car, where he'd been lying such a short time before. Emaciated bodies, tangled and torn, littered the straw. They'd been trampled so much, that the guards were having trouble yanking them apart. As he watched, a girl's body was tossed out, into the sunlight.

*What she wouldn't have given for that a few hours ago*, Dustin thought, his chest throat tight with sorrow. *Just a few moments of fresh air...*

His eyes were wet as he took a ragged breath, and hurriedly stumbled away.

\*

Dr. Drewsome's carpet may have been thick, but it didn't qualify as mattress material. Ren sat up and stretched; experiencing a sudden longing to go to work. Somewhere she could submerge all her thoughts in disciplined effort. It was what she'd done for years.

It had given meaning to her life. During those times when she'd isolated proteins and played with molecular weights and ID'd plant viruses, wayward thoughts couldn't interfere with her productivity. She could function dispassionately, without feeling the effects of someone else's influence.

Because even if the thoughts had filtered in, they had no bearing on the technical demands of her job. It was her most peaceful time, she'd long ago realised. Hours where she could let down her guard, and not let the foreign thoughts worry her. Even with her friends, she had to erect barriers. Otherwise, she sometimes violated their privacy - intruded on their space. If she'd gone with her natural proclivities, she would long since have alienated herself from everyone who mattered to her. Fortunately, an innate sense of right and wrong helped her set limits.

But it meant she could never truly relax.

Until yesterday. It was the first time Ren could ever recall being free like that. For hours, she'd actually had no opinions other than her own. No fences. No barricades. Just that cold feeling

of anger that had masqueraded as control.

Or was it a masquerade? If it was a barrier of some kind, it was certainly the most effective one she'd ever had. It was also why she was a little desperate to go to work. After those hours of internal silence, the "noise" factor this morning was nearly overwhelming. She longed for the bliss of independent activity, and sensed it was there, but just beyond her reach.

*I just need to figure out how...*

*Later.* It was time to find Merrie - to sort out her cheery pathos from the rest. Merrie, her dear friend with the decisively cheerful framework of happiness-layered fear.

*Hm-m,* Ren thought. Wherever Merrie might be, it wasn't so far away...

\*

*Stay on your feet. Don't let them see. Don't let them know.* Dustin trudged, one foot in front of the other.

*I can do this.* He'd only been at it for a few hours. These others? They'd been at it for days, maybe weeks.

*Water. I want water.* Never in his life had he been this thirsty, without having access to some kind of drink.

The lessons were clear: keep moving if you want to stay alive. There was a dead man behind them, along the route, who could testify.

At other times, in other places, Dusty had been embarrassed - even mortified - by his prat falls and stumbling mistakes because he was out of sync. Now, he had no time to worry about it. He was trudging down a road and people were undoubtedly staring - or averting their eyes, like those surrounding him now. Anything to avoid becoming a part of this. To acknowledge the horror and have to live - or die - with it.

Only, Dusty *was* a part of it. He didn't fit in, with his different clothes and well-fed frame. He'd always been lanky, but he was positively fat compared with his scarecrow companions. With their spare bodies, just barely fleshed. With their missing teeth and bleeding gums.

Yet, they carried on. The tenacity of the human spirit. He took another step. Then another.

A lesson. *If they can do it I can.*

This was real. No matter what happened to his wayward body in his own time, some part of his spirit was tenaciously lodged here - and it had taken enough of his physical body with it -

He looked at the machine gun nestled in the guard's arms.

- to have him killed.

\*

"It's daylight," Josh said. He sat up in the backseat, then proceeded to wipe the moisture off the glass. "Are we outlaws now?"

"Let me sleep," James demanded. "You couldn't keep your mouth shut all night. Snore, snore, snore. At least keep it shut now -"

"Good thing it kept you awake. Every time you went to sleep the emergency flashers came on..."

"No way."

"When the rearview mirror wasn't gyrating," Merrie confirmed. "I don't even want to know what you were dreaming about."

"I do." Josh grinned. "The mirror would wiggle slowly at first, then faster, faster, faster - then all of a sudden it would pop up, with a big vibration."

James was actually blushing. "You can see why I sleep alone," he muttered.

Merrie grabbed his arm and smiled. "Jamie, if you had someone to enjoy it with - in the

flesh - it probably wouldn't be the focus of your dreams."

"That's right, James. You could be God's gift to women. A Casanova, who could satisfy them in a way no one else could." Josh sighed. "It's obvious I got the wrong 'gift'. If I had your talent, I'd be running around, making myself indispensable."

"Let's go visit Ren," Merrie suggested. "We can check out the gazebo, too."

"I'm tired," James complained. He yawned widely. "Exhausted, actually. All that bouncing stuff across the grass last night."

"No problem, Jimmy Boy," Josh assured him. "As soon as we sneak our way in there, we'll ask Ren if you can borrow her closet. If you're going to be watching my back, I want to be sure you're in top form."

\*

Dusty was slammed back, onto the roadway. He lay there, momentarily stunned, and there was shock in the guard's eyes.

That should have done it. A bad tumble had always done it before - had always broken the lock of his concentration, and tumbled him back to his own time.

So he could face the laughter and humiliation in the present.

*What's wrong?* Dusty knew he'd been hit by something. A *car*? This wasn't just a tumble; he'd been slammed and tossed.

The guard was signalling him now - using his gun to fill in any gaps their conversation might lack. His meaning was clear, and so were his thoughts. He didn't want to acknowledge what he'd seen, because then he'd be afraid. It didn't suit him to be afraid. Whatever had happened, had obviously been the prisoner's fault.

The man's eyes twitched, and Dusty rolled onto his side. He winced, but made light of it for his glaring guard. It wasn't easy. His gut was on fire nearly as much as his head.

There was an awkward moment, when he tried to get up and couldn't. Dustin guessed that in his own time, there were helpful hands trying to hold him down, and he started to panic. "Thank you," he muttered, to anyone within range, "but I need to go!" He shook the last of them off, mopped some of the blood off with his sleeve, and pushed himself to his feet.

The guard nodded at him impatiently, and said something in German. Dusty had no idea what it was, but it must have been something like "move out!". As their tattered group trudged forward, several of the other prisoners surrounded him. The guards said nothing when the men held his arms, and offered him support.

Dustin looked at them and felt shame. Compared to them he was like a pampered poodle. He couldn't believe that the worst-off among them should be offering the most pampered help.

\*

Ren must have dozed after that. She didn't remember falling back to sleep, but tuning in on Merrie had reassured her. She was curled up, slumbering peacefully, when she awoke to nightmare. Feet stomping on her. Climbing on her and knocking her down. Crushing her until she was drowning, in a sea of other bodies.

Bodies for which hope had expired several days since.

She fought it, but she was packed in too tightly. She couldn't see, couldn't breathe...

Not a nightmare - and not her reality - but Dusty's. She knew it as certainly as she knew that ragged breathing was as much his as hers.

*Get him out...* there was a sheen of sweat on her skin and the scent of death in her nostrils. If she couldn't rouse him - get him out of that reality and back to his own - he'd die.

They'd both die - because she wasn't about to leave him. Ren concentrated, willing some

of her strength into his aching head.

*Please, Dusty...*

The next moment the train tempo had changed, and there was a nattering of confused voices. She barely had time for relief when a loud sound jarred her into awareness. She jumped back, slamming her head against the wall as another loud knock sounded on the closet door.

The door opened, spilling light into her dark hiding place.

Josh, Merrie and James were looking at her curiously. “Did we miss something?” Josh asked.

## Chapter Fourteen

They dawdled over donuts and coffee in the breakfast nook. It had a built-in booth, which made it the only place in the house to sit, other than the floor. Ren sipped the hot coffee gratefully, lifting her face to the warm sun that was streaming through the window. She'd just told them about Dusty, and it had left her feeling chilled.

Josh took another bite of beef jerky. "That's why Valterzar and Erik went after him," he said knowledgeably. "They were worried something like this might happen." He waved a piece of jerky in the air. "Anybody want some?"

Ren was distraught. "He's in so much trouble," she said. "He's having a hard time coming out of it."

"That's because it's real," James said solemnly. "I only remember bits and pieces from Mexico, but he's living it. Dusty's there, in Dachau."

Merrie's eyes were sad. "So much death there. Such intensity of feeling. He can't help but tune into it."

"Sort of 'in his face'," Josh commented, chewing loudly. "You watch yourself, Birdbrain," he told Ren, recalling how she'd almost killed herself at the hospital. "Don't want you pulling any stunts. Erik's gonna be where Dusty is - not here."

"Besides," James said, "we've gone to great personal risk to bring you information."

Merrie grinned. "Bullshit. You enjoyed kicking Dr. Drewsome's ass."

"Drewsome was knocking around here last night, Mer," Ren said.

"Probably mad because he'd been trounced," Josh chewed. "What about this information, Ren?"

She shook her head. "I can't, Josh. Not till I know Dusty's safe. I wouldn't be able to think."

"Since when has that ever stopped you?" Josh asked.

"Besides, it's technical. Might take me a while to decipher it."

Jamie's eyes met Josh's. "She never could lie convincingly," he said.

"She wouldn't have to if you two weren't such buffoons," Merrie told them.

"Yes, I would," Ren replied seriously. "It's just that I never figured on having an audience. There are some things you might not want to know."

"Are these 'things' why Smythe scared you?" Jamie asked.

"Yep. I blurted." She sighed. "OD'd on the 'atmosphere' in his office, and started to panic." She smiled. "You wouldn't believe it, but he was actually scared of me when I walked in."

"Things to hide," Josh said.

"Probably. By the time I left, I'd guessed his password to his files, told him as much - and he'd decided to turn me over to someone else."

"Boy," Josh commented, "when you botch up, you don't fool around."

Merrie was looking at her. She knew her well enough to guess that Ren was still hiding something. "The password thing wasn't the worst of it, was it?"

"Are you telepathic now, too?" James asked. "I wouldn't try to be, if I were you. You have enough problems keeping track of your own thoughts."

"You don't want to know, so don't ask. Just let it drop."

"Hm-m. Sounds exciting. Give," Josh said. "Reward for digging you out of your closet."

Ren nodded. Josh would nag her, James would skulk, and Merrie would tease her if she

didn't. "The way we come together on things," Ren whispered, avoiding their eyes. "The way we've always been called a 'Cluster'. There are some types of fungi - actually slime moulds - that can act independently, but at a chemical signal come together, to function as a unit. It started me thinking. I asked Smythe whether the gene therapy we'd been given..." Her voice tapered off.

"Whether it was human?" Merrie asked, her eyes huge.

Josh shrugged. "That's okay for James," he said. "The slime mould part, anyway. What about the rest of us?" he asked.

Ren relaxed a little, and took Merrie's hand, to give it a squeeze. She glanced at Jamie, to see how he was taking it. "You okay, Jamie?" she asked.

"Just thinking," he said. "Remember that time Dusty and I found that fungicide in the lab?"

Ren nodded. "The Benlate."

"All we did was open it up and look at the stuff, but -"

"- you both nearly died!" Josh exclaimed.

"You don't have to sound so excited about it," James told him.

Merrie sighed. "Sounds like Dr. Drewsome was the slimeball."

"Penicillin comes from fungi, and they've been using it for years to help people," Ren offered helpfully.

"Big difference between ingesting a fungus, and being a fungus, Ren," James said.

"Yeah," Josh agreed. "Gives the term 'relative' a whole new meaning."

\*

Zar clicked "End" and looked at Erik. He was frowning. "We've got trouble," he said.

"You're telling me. They don't have any Perrier left." They were making a quick lunch stop before boarding the train.

Zar knew he was joking, but he wasn't in the mood. "Merrie's not answering her cellphone. Neither are the others."

Erik shrugged. "Try Ren's work."

"I did. She didn't show up for work today."

For the first time, Erik looked concerned. "Josh? Jamie?"

"Both absent without leave."

"Go back," Erik said. "I'll catch up with Dusty."

"What if it's like last time? And you can't stop it?"

"Smythe's watchdogs must still be on duty." He looked over at a nearby table and waved. The two men squirmed and tried to ignore him. "See? I told you. They must have someone on Dusty, too."

"Maybe," Zar growled. "It's 'lesson-teaching' time, remember? Maybe Smythe figures he's gotta learn, even if it kills him."

"Smythe doesn't know how close it came last time. Probably figures Mallory's in for some embarrassment, but that's all. Besides, he knows we're on the case."

"Defending him, Dainler?" Zar asked.

"Don't get all shitty with me, just because you're worried about Merrie."

Zar's phone chimed, and he answered it eagerly. "Merrie!" he whispered, relieved. "Hold on -" With a wary eye on the "watchdogs", he left the table to talk outside.

He was gone for what seemed like a long time. Long enough for one of the men to place a call of his own. The two men watched Valterzar dubiously through the glass.

When Valterzar came back in, he looked as dumbfounded as Erik had ever seen him. He was obviously trying to organise his thoughts, but they seemed to be all over the place. He opened



his mouth twice, as though going to say something, then snapped it shut again, and shook his head.

“What?!” Erik finally said.

Valterzar looked at him and sighed loudly. “Merrie called me on Ren’s phone - her new phone, because she tossed her other one away.”

Erik opened his mouth, but Zar held up a hand to stop him. “Ren formed some idea about Drew Garris’ research, so she went to see Smythe,” he whispered. “While she was in his office, she guessed the password to his private files, and accidentally told him so.”

Erik’s eyes widened.

“It gets better.” Valterzar smiled. “Ren read him. He was scared she’d found out something and so he decided to turn her over to someone else. So,” he said, disbelief in his voice, “Ren burned down her house, had a makeover, and did a runner.”

“Oh, *Jesus!*” Erik groaned.

“On the way, she called Merrie and asked her - in a panic - to contact ‘Dr. Drewsome’. Seems his research is the crux to what’s bothering her. Merrie also thinks it might be something to hold over Symbio’s - and, by extension, Symtech’s - head. Meanwhile,” Zar was actually chuckling now, but there was a hysterical note to it that Erik couldn’t miss, “Ren broke into Garris’ house and spent the night in a closet.”

“In a closet,” Erik repeated, a little blankly. “What’s the thing about the research that’s so bad?”

Valterzar’s eyes met his and he sobered. “Fungus. Ren thinks they used non-human DNA for the ‘gene therapy’.”

“*I’m part fu-!*” he started to yell, but Valterzar shushed him.

Erik gulped. “Not exactly what I expected,” he whispered.

“Not what any of us expected,” Zar told him. “Josh and Jamie went with Merrie to the cemetery, and ‘raised’ Drew Garris.”

Erik closed his eyes. “Tell me that’s it -”

A flicker of amusement was back in Valterzar’s eyes. “Then James PK’d some of Ren’s ‘burnt belongings’ -” Merrie’s words, he explained, “- and gave ‘em to Josh, who -”

“- did his clairvoyance thing to track her down.”

“Right. The three of them spent the night in the car, because they’d eluded their watchers pre-cemetery, and now they figure they’re wanted. They turned up at Garris’ house this morning and walked in on Ren, who was having an interlude with Dusty.”

“An ‘interlude’?”

“Tuning into his thoughts. Merrie says it’s bad. He’s being dragged in and can’t get out. Ren’s not about to let him die, so she says -”

“Ren?”

“No - Merrie. She says we have to hurry and save Dusty, so Ren won’t feel she has to. Otherwise, they may be wishing you were there, instead of here.”

“She’s afraid Ren’s going to kill herself trying to save him.”

Zar nodded. His phone blipped again. He listened, then said, “We’re on our way.”

Erik looked at him expectantly.

“Dusty just got hit by a car, Ren thinks. Neither one of them saw it coming. He’s on his feet, but just barely.”

“Ring her back and have Ren make him stay put.”

“She can’t,” Zar told him. “He’s in some kind of prisoner march - maybe even a Death March. If he slows them down, or falls out of line, he’s going to get shot.”

\*

Josh rubbed his hands together. "Buried treasure," he said. "I love this stuff."

"Maybe if you're lucky," James whispered, "his dog will've buried something for you in the yard." He turned to Ren. "Can you sense any unwanted company?" he asked.

"Nope. All clear." Her eyes were red-rimmed from weeping. The sooner they got this done the better. She knew they were trying to divert her focus from Dusty, but that wasn't going to save his life.

"Just keep watch, okay?" James said.

"Insensitive brute," Merrie whispered. She gave Ren's hand a squeeze. "Josh, can you see anything?" Merrie asked.

Josh was standing there with his eyes closed. "Wood, wood, dirt, dead bird, wood, key."

"Where?" James asked tensely.

"Under the middle bench. In the slot between the boards, directly under the seat." Josh shook his head. "You're close, but your fingers won't fit."

"No problem," James retorted. He emerged triumphantly with the key. "Now what?"

Merrie looked pensive. "We try to figure out how to trick Gruesome Drewsome into showing us the lock."

\*

"Twenty minutes on the train," Erik said. "Only twenty minutes." He was edgy. It was as though his whole world had fallen apart in the space of minutes. At least, the people in it - the ones who mattered most to him - were still intact.

But for how long? He couldn't sit still. He wandered back and forth between the rail cars, driving his watchdogs crazy. Nor were they the only guards. The ones Erik had waved to remained in the car.

*Watching me, Zar realised.*

It was time for some honest reflection.

He had an out, yet when trouble had hit he'd reacted every bit as worriedly as Erik was acting now. He'd wanted to blame it on the affection - no, the love - he felt for Merrie, but there was more to it than that. What? A connection? Some link?

Merrie hadn't even hesitated to tell him about the fungal DNA. Why? Because he was her "Zar"? Or because she'd thought all of them should know? "Them" being the operative word.

*But I lived with my parents! A normal life!*

But then he remembered the time, when some kid, the school bully, had threatened him. Usually, Lawrence could handle it with his words -

- *always a good talker*, he thought derisively -

- but this time, the bully wouldn't listen. It still wouldn't have mattered too much, except bully boy, Dirk Scully by name, had rounded up some of his buddies. They'd caught Lawrence on the way home from junior high, and started in on him, seemingly determined to beat the shit out of him.

Something had happened inside, and Lawrence had felt that burning - the same strong reaction he'd had when the rapist had threatened Merrie, and when Dusty had lain there, bleeding. He'd known he could stop these idiots with little more than a thought.

But he'd never had the chance. Because two men had suddenly yanked the kids off him, and tossed them back, onto the ground.

After that, Lawrence had seen the men again - and again. Not always the same two, either. The pairings would change, and the methods would change, but they were always there. Two men,

and later, sometimes, women as well. Two guards, plus Lawrence Valterzar, against the world. He'd accepted it, as much as the others had.

Because they'd always been there.

No more denials. Time to face it, accept it, then decide what to do with it. Decide why Smythe had ousted him from a position of control to alienate him from the Cluster.

Maybe because he knew that, once met, Valterzar would never truly be "alienated". But Smythe would no longer be in control.

*The moment I argued, and withheld information, I threatened Smythe's position.*

Smythe wanted to be sure he reserved control for himself.

\*

They were sitting around on Dr. Drewsome's thickly carpeted floor, eating some Chinese food Josh had sneaked out for. "This is where he died, isn't it?" Merrie said, gesturing around the bedroom with her chopsticks. "It'll have to be a seance." She sighed. "I hate those things."

"I should have known," Josh grumbled. "Count me out."

"Ren?" Merrie looked at her expectantly.

Ren grimaced. "I guess, since it's my fault." She thought fast. "What if I'm in the middle of it, and Dusty needs me?"

"What I want to know is how you're going to control Drewsome this time," James said. "I sure wish Zar was here."

"So do I," Merrie said wistfully. "I miss him."

James snorted. "I just want him to be able to stop things, if they get out of hand."

"I can handle Drew Garris," Merrie told him.

"I wish Erik was here."

"I don't think he'll get that nasty, Josh," Merrie said reassuringly.

"It's not that. We could always use Erik as a shield. Family feeling, and all that."

Ren dropped her chopsticks back in the box. "What're you talking about?"

"Photos. We were looking at some old pictures of Garris, from when we were kids. They look almost exactly like Erik."

Ren looked slightly stunned. "I guess that explains a few things."

"Like what?"

"Like why Erik's mom hated Garris so much. Remember how she hardly ever came around? Except that time when Erik was sick? I got this strong feeling, like she absolutely despised Garris. Emotions like that really stand out. I could never understand why she was so angry. Does Erik know?"

"Not unless Zar's told him," Merrie said. "She must have had some idea what Garris was into. I can't believe she'd let him do it to her son."

"Maybe he did it without her permission," Ren suggested. "She hated Garris, but she adored Erik. I think it killed her to have to leave him with his father." She looked at Merrie.

"Didn't Garris have a kid already? With someone else?"

Merrie frowned. "I don't remember hearing anything."

"Must have been on one of your traipses through the poor man's brain. And people think it's bad to pick *locks*," Josh added sarcastically, looking pointedly at James.

"But that would give Erik family!" Ren argued.

"Raised by Garris?" James said derisively. "He's better without." He frowned, looking pensive. "When did Erik's mom die?"

"When Erik was eleven or twelve," Josh said. "I can still remember the way he cried, the

first birthday he had without her.”

“How did she die? Was she sick?”

Ren was looking at him strangely. “An accident, maybe? What are you thinking, James?”

“You tell me.” It wasn’t very often any of them encouraged Ren to probe their thoughts, but this was one time James didn’t feel comfortable voicing them aloud.

“You think Garris had something to do with it.” She sounded shocked.

“Erik told me he was leaving the school - that his mom was taking him back, to live with her.” James sighed. “I remember how excited he was. I mean, he was friends with us, but -”

“But like the rest of us, he wanted to be ‘normal’. I remember that, too,” Josh said. “So you think Garris killed her.”

“Or had her killed. I just wonder how much of it’s in Drewsome’s private notes.”

\*

The S-Bahn was slowing for Dachau station when Erik saw Zar put away his phone once more. He sat down next to him. “Merrie again?” he hissed.

“No - Smythe. He apologised for Jekkes’ mistake, in sending out that letter. It was supposed to go to someone else.”

Erik snorted. “Way to cover. Does he really expect you to buy that?”

“Doubled my pay.”

Erik looked a little stunned. He might use his abilities for money, but he’d somehow never expected Valterzar to. “What did you tell him?”

“That nothing’s changed.”

“*What does that mean?*” In spite of his efforts, he knew he sounded slightly outraged. He tried to temper it with, “I think you’ve been hanging around with Merrie too long.”

Zar had an amused glint in his eye. “It means nothing. But maybe it’ll buy me enough backup to secure Dusty.”

“What it means is we could have flown first class after all,” Erik added, but there was still doubt in his eyes.

Zar saw it and grinned at him. “Think I’m going to throw in my cards with Smythe again? Stake my reputation on a losing team? If Ren says there’s a problem, I believe her.” He added, in a voice so low that Erik could barely hear him, “We’re dealing with a giant here, Erik - capable of crushing us with an order. I want us all out of the way before Symtech takes a fall.”

\*

Dusty was having trouble taking it in. They’d come to some kind of gate house, a two-storey whitewashed building with a bright red roof. Cheerful, almost. They walked under an archway and through a heavy iron gate. The gate itself had the words “*Arbeit Macht Frei*” inscribed at the top.

There was a massive open area, and long rows of barracks. Walls, gun towers, wire fences, moats. In Dusty’s mind, everything had turned a shade of grey. Shock was hitting him hard. He’d dropped from a well-fed twenty-first century existence into a world of striped prison garb, hopeless faces, and exhausted, emaciated, stumbling bodies.

And he didn’t look likely to be leaving it any time soon...

With a nod, and a quick word of thanks, Dusty shrugged off his helpers’ hands, disgusted with his own weakness. So many of the people around him were debilitated, undernourished, and with nutritional maladies brought on by deficiencies. Their clothing was filthy, and ragged; stinking of human flesh and faeces. Their hair was scruffy and lice-ridden, their teeth yellow and rotting. Yet, they were helping him.

One of the men fell, and the guard booted him, to urge him back onto his feet. Dustin had never felt a true animal urge before, to tear out a throat, but he did then. He helped the man to his feet, much as the man had helped him an hour before.

Someone must have been watching - noticing how his fitness, despite some kind of injury, was in such contrast to the rest of the shipment. He would have been a perfect candidate for the labour details.

But he was also a candidate for something else. He'd barely glimpsed the barracks - the tiered, rough-hewn bunks - when a guard came for him. He said something in German Dusty couldn't understand, then motioned him outside. The other prisoners - the ones who'd marched with him - looked at him with a resignation that knotted his already aching middle.

He marched, the guard prodding his back, across the open area, to a building on the other side. Some kind of hospital.

Some tingling of prescience made him baulk - or maybe it was some half-remembered mention of foul experiments, using camp inmates. The guard shoved him into the room.

There was an old man who was obviously in charge. The guard said something to him obsequiously, which Dusty assumed was "Here he is." The only word he could really pick out at this point was "Schilling", which he assumed was the man's name.

Dusty didn't have a chance to think much more. The guard forced him into a chair, then stood stiffly before the door. Dusty was suddenly terrified. What the hell was the old man going to do?

Nothing. He was yelling to someone in the next room; giving orders. His assistant came in hurriedly, excitement in his eyes. It made Dusty cringe.

Until the young man looked up, and Dusty breathed a sigh of relief. Through the agony in his head, and the greyness of his vision, he thought for a moment it was Erik. He thought it all the time the man filled the syringe, and until he came close enough to inject it. Dusty, confused, saw then the assistant was probably ten years Erik's junior, with blond hair, rather than brown.

After that he became focussed on the syringe, and realised he'd caused them too much trouble.

*Lethal injection.* They were going to stop his heart, then use his body in some weird experiment...

He never really got much further than the "stop my heart" part. He jumped out of the chair, totally ignoring the machine gun-mad guard. The bullet would have to go through the Erik lookalike before it hit him. That made that risk a whole lot lower than his present one...

His assailant was angry - Dusty could see it in his eyes. He was even angrier when Dusty twisted the needle, and jabbed him in the forearm.

The guard was preparing to pound Dusty over the head with his gun butt when the other man stopped him. He yanked the syringe out of his arm with a disdainful gesture, his expression icy. Dusty froze, a sense of *deja vu* hitting him. It was so familiar...

*I should've pushed the plunger...*

The syringe was still loaded. *Bad luck, Dusty.* The medical man was directing the guard to pin him against the wall. Guard did, then held him there, like a fly on a stickpin, with the barrel of his gun shoved into Dusty's aching gut.

Dusty thought he was going to die then, the pain was so bad, but Mr. Medico had the right of it: with that kind of pain Dusty couldn't move. Hell, he could barely breathe. Another second of this...

And, then, it was over. Whatever had been in the syringe was now in his bloodstream. *How*

*could I have ever thought he looked like Erik?* Dusty thought, staring anew at those cold eyes.

The man smiled at him, and it was one of those times when a smile is so much worse than a frown. The gun was pulled out of Dustin's stomach, and he slid down, to sit against the wall.

Mr. Medico was now chiding the guard, and he held out his hand for the weapon. Then he looked at Dusty, made sure he was watching, and smiled again.

The "doctor" turned the gun on the guard, and shot off the toes on his right foot. Then he turned to Dusty.

No bullets this time. There was, after all, the experiment to consider. He came at Dusty with the gun, but he swung it like a club.

\*

Valterzar led the way down the brick steps of the railway station. It astounded him, how warm and friendly everything looked. He'd almost expected there to be some kind of pall over the community - some sombre underlying symbol of the thousands who'd lost their lives here.

*I've hung out too long with psychics*, he chided himself. Nevertheless, he could feel something - an unresolved tension in the air.

Erik was a wreck, and Zar wondered if he was as sensitive to the scarring of human nature as he was to physical disease and injury. Possibly. Zar knew the menace he was sensing made his own insides burn with a need to end it, but there was no ending a past grievance, that had already been addressed. The suffering would remain, and there was little he could do to stop it. The grief process must continue, with pain as a remembered lesson.

This kind of pain would kill his Merrie, even as it was now, he was certain, killing Dusty. Charles Smythe was a fool.

There were taxis waiting outside the train station, and Zar hopped in. "75 Alter-Römerstrasse," he told the driver, reading off Erik's notes.

"The Concentration Camp," the driver verified sadly, in heavily-accented English.

It was so false to Erik's ears that he snorted rudely. He wondered how much the driver modified his tone for locals.

Zar glared at him. He wanted the driver to get there in a hurry - not take the most circuitous way to the biggest fare. "*Gesundheit!*" he said pointedly to Erik.

The literature had advised that a "proper tour" of the museum and grounds would require an entire day. Zar knew they didn't have that kind of time. He'd pulled out his phone when it began to chime. Ren didn't even say hello. Instead, she blurted out a panicked, "He's in some kind of hospital - there, at the camp. They injected him with something, Zar!" Her voice trailed off and he knew she was desperately trying to hold back tears.

"Put Josh on!" Zar ordered.

"I'm here!"

"Can you focus on my phone?"

Josh was silent for a moment, then said, "Uh-uh. Too much interference," he tried to explain. "I need something of yours to hold onto. Then I can see you."

"Do this: put one hand on Merrie, and one on Ren."

Josh was momentarily silent.

"Josh!" Zar urged. "Something of *mine*, and something of *Dusty's*!"

"I get it!" Josh exclaimed. Zar could tell Josh was grinning. Erik, overhearing the conversation, rolled his eyes.

"Dusty's in a bad way," Josh said solemnly. "Head straight across the compound. First door on your left. Keep going, in through a smaller door. He's curled up in a corner."

Zar and Erik took off at a run.

\*

“*Fuckin’ hell!*” Erik gasped. Dusty was writhing, burning up with fever. He’d been vomiting, and there was blood down one side of his head, leaking out his nose, and glazing his eyes. “*Shit, shit, shit!*”

Zar gripped Erik’s wrist. “*Hold it!*” he ordered. “Calm down -”

He did a quick examination. “Wish Ren knew what they gave him. Anything come up in your research?”

“Quit trying to distract me!” Erik yelled. “If I heal him like this, what’ll he have? Brain damage?” He turned away, unable to watch, as Dusty went into a seizure.

“*Erik!*” Zar gripped the front of his shirt. “*Look at me!*” Erik focussed, but his hands were shaking. “I’m going to stop this, but I’ll need you to maintain him.”

“Like before -”

“Exactly. Then, we’ll get him to a hospital.” Zar put a hand on Dustin’s shoulder. He was so hot he must be 105, 106 degrees.

“Buy us the time to do the research,” Erik said hopefully.

Zar nodded. “That’s the idea. You ready?”

Erik sighed. “As ready as I’m gonna get.”

“Then let’s do this.”

\*

They were on the way with Dusty in the ambulance when Erik suddenly said, “Call Smythe! Make *him* do the research. He can tell us what experiments they were running.”

Zar gave him a slight smile. “He owes Dusty -”

“And us. Make him work for that big paycheque.” Erik was feeling a lot better now that Dusty seemed stabilised.

Valterzar did as Erik had suggested. He didn’t know what made him follow through with a call to Josh. “Can you get me a rundown of what experiments they ran in the Camp, circa 1940’s?”

“Have it for you in fifteen,” Josh told him.

Erik looked puzzled. “Why’d you do that? Afraid Smythe won’t work fast enough?”

Zar shook his head. “I don’t know. Let’s just say I trust Josh a whole lot more than Charlie Smythe.”

\*

Smythe was on the phone to Valterzar by the time they’d wheeled Dusty into the ER. “They were testing rare strains of influenza,” he said, but Zar picked up the nervousness in his voice. “Have Erik give him a treatment. If he’s still ill, the literature says tetracycline might help.”

Zar had barely clicked “End” before Josh rang him up.

“Malaria,” he said tensely. “Some doctor named Schilling was testing different strains of malaria, either by direct injection or allowing the ‘subjects’ to be bitten. The only other experiments I can find are cold and pressure tests. This is the only one that fits. Hold on -”

James’ voice came on. “Don’t know how much you know about malaria -?”

“Not enough,” Zar admitted.

“It’s often misdiagnosed, so you’ll have to run blood tests. It’s a -” Zar guessed he was trying to read the name, “- *Plasmodium*, and you can see it under the microscope.”

“Does it say anything about types and treatment?”

“Should take eight to twelve days to incubate.” James sounded puzzled. “Onset was a lot faster for Dusty.”

Zar sighed. "Treatment, James."

"Chloroquine, for three days. If it's falciparum malaria it's serious, as in medical emergency. Quinine and tetracycline for seven days, but if it's really bad, they say IV, RBC transfusion -?"

"Red blood cells," Zar explained.

"- maybe even dialysis. He might have to go on a respirator."

Josh must have grabbed the phone from Jamie, because Zar could hear James' protest in the background. Josh added, "Some strains are resistant to the drugs. That shouldn't be an issue with Erik around, but give us a call if you run into any problems." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Any 'thoughts' on how to relieve somebody's distress? I mean, that *is* supposed to be your area of expertise." The way he said it made it sound as though he'd asked, and Valterzar had turned him down.

Valterzar grinned. In other words, Ren was crying and it was driving Josh crazy. "Let me talk to her." When Ren came on the phone he told her, "He won't get any worse, Ren. Erik and I are going to be with him constantly."

"I know, Zar," she said. "It's just the relief."

"I understand," he said, a smile in his voice. "There's something you can find out for me, Ren. Smythe's decided he made a mistake -"

"One of many," she commented.

"- but he just lied to me about Dusty. Unless Josh and James uncovered some obscure research material, the malaria experiments should be a matter of record."

"Maybe he thinks Dusty succumbed so quickly because of his fungal DNA."

"I remember reading once that malaria's often misdiagnosed as influenza. Smythe said they were working on flu viruses, but he recommended an antibiotic that's used in conjunction with quinine to help treat malaria. You're probably right about the DNA, but I'd sure like to know why he lied."

"We'll check on it tonight - with Dr. Garris."

*A seance.* Valterzar grinned. "Please spare me the details. I really don't want to know."

\*

When Dusty opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was the sadist. The one who'd shot him full of shit, then tried to bash his head in with a machine gun. The only reason the bastard would be standing here was to gloat - or to finish the job he'd started. *No way*, Dusty decided in a flash of fury. He'd be damned if he'd let him get away with it.

The man reached for him, and Dusty took action. He ignored the IV in his hand and drew back his arm. With a resounding smack, he socked the fucker right in the nose.



## Chapter Fifteen

Valterzar couldn't believe it. One moment, Erik was standing there, going into his healing mode, and the next, Dusty had knocked him flat out on the floor. Zar stood there a second, stunned, then lunged for Dusty's arms to pin him down. A glance at Erik showed their healer squirming on the floor, and groaning loudly while trying to pinch closed his streaming nose.

Zar couldn't help it. As he tried to keep Dusty from diving out of the bed, to go after Erik again, he started chuckling. He didn't mean to, but Dusty was just so damned determined, and Erik, seeing where Dusty was heading, was yelping now and crawling for the door. Zar gave a gigantic snort, then plunked down in a chair and laughed till his eyes were streaming. Dusty, snarling at Erik now as he dove off the bed, landed in a tangle of sheets and blankets. He and Erik rolled around on the floor, with Erik doing that yelping thing still and Dusty emitting doing something that sounded remarkably like a growl. It lasted until Dusty shoved his face right in Erik's - then froze, shocked. "Oh," Dusty said lamely, "it's you!"

Zar was laughing so hard - great snorting blasts out his mouth and nose - that he couldn't even move.

\*

"Is he okay?" Dusty asked, concerned about Valterzar's lapse. He knew he should be asking Erik that, but he was too embarrassed. He couldn't believe he'd ploughed into him that way.

Erik's temper was still huffy, so he said a little stiffly, "Some kind of hysteria. Probably the shock of seeing me attacked."

At that, Valterzar bent over double, then stumbled into the attached bathroom. He had to get away from these clowns before they killed him.

They could hear him in there, as he gradually got the snorts and wheezes and hisses of his amusement under control.

"You'd better get back in bed," Erik told Dusty. "I still have some work to do -"

A moment later, Valterzar re-entered, eyes wet, and with only an occasional shudder of swiftly-choked laughter. He saw Erik about to put his hand on Dusty's chest, and said loudly, "Uh-uh!"

Erik, startled, turned his way, his expression sour. "Can't we just get this over with?!"

Valterzar, serious now, shook his head. "Not like that."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because I hit you, Erik," Dusty explained, "and you'd only be human if you wanted to hit me back."

At his words Erik froze. "Only 'human', huh?" He looked over and caught Valterzar's eye, and his lips began to twitch. The next moment, he was laughing, too.

It set Valterzar off again, and he disappeared back in the bathroom, to mop his streaming eyes.

Dusty listened to the snorts issuing from the bathroom, and the howls of hilarity now coming from Erik, in-between frequent groans and pinching of his nose. Finally, he shrugged, rolled over on his side, and went to sleep.

*Safe.* These two might be acting like a horse's hind end, but it was awfully good to know they were here.

\*

Josh did not look happy. They were back in Dr. Drewsome's bedroom, where Merrie had so helpfully reminded them the old fart had died. It was dusk, and not even Merrie looked very happy about summoning Garris again. It was one thing sitting around in here during the daylight, eating Chinese food, and another running a damned seance. "Why do we have to do it here?" Josh asked. "I'm for waiting till morning."

"Why, Josh? Why is it so much more frightening at night?"

"Because that's when the bogey men come out to play?" James joked.

Merrie, however, was serious. "There's a theory that white light can destroy ectoplasm," she said. "Make it withdraw into the medium."

"Dangerous?" Ren asked nervously.

Merrie nodded, then gave a shiver. "It burns. One medium died when some reporters turned on a flashlight." She looked around the dingy room. "I hate nights."

Josh looked at her in astonishment. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but wasn't that you in the graveyard? The one who was joking around and carrying on as though dead guys were nothing?"

"Nothing to sneeze at," James remarked.

"I didn't have to call him in. I just opened myself to any 'vibes' he might be sending my way," Merrie explained, in a hushed voice. "It was more like a walk, among friends."

"I hope you're referring to James and me," Josh told her.

Merrie smiled. "Going there put me 'in the mood', but it also let me pick up on any stray emanations."

"Oh, them vibes..." James hummed. "I could swear the sadist thanked you for summoning him."

"No matter what he said, it-it's different," Merrie told him. "We went there because Drewsome's been dead only a year. I figured he might still be hanging close to things he knows."

"Like his house, and his body."

Merrie frowned. "For some reason, though, I feel his presence a lot more strongly here." She shivered. "Strange."

"I'll say," Josh muttered.

"No. I mean, visiting a cemetery's a way of stirring things up, but I would have thought..." She shrugged. "Never mind."

"Does that mean we can go now?" James asked.

Merrie grinned. "Of course not. You're always so impatient, Jamie!"

Jamie raised his eyes to the heavens, in a bid for the patience she seemed to think he lacked.

Ren remembered the noises from the night before and gooseflesh rose on her arms.

"Drewsome was here, last night," she whispered. "I could read him enough to recognise him."

James looked at her curiously. "Think you could tell us if he's lying?"

"Maybe."

"There's a world of difference between tuning into him, and actively summoning him," Merrie told them. "I hate this bit."

"Why?" James asked, a little worriedly. "Why should it be any different than before?"

"Because I'm as out of control as everyone else in this 'Cluster'," Merrie admitted testily. Her eyes were scared.

Josh's eyes widened. "You're afraid you're going to bring him in -"

Merrie nodded. "- and not be able to send him back."

\*

Dusty felt terrible when he saw Erik's face. His nose was swollen and red, and both his

eyes were turning black. "Shame you can't heal yourself," he blurted, then realised it wasn't the best way to apologise. "Thought you were someone else," he explained.

"I hope so. Hate to think you'd aimed for me deliberately." Erik grinned.

"Don't think there haven't been times..." Dustin told him. He looked around the hospital room. "Amazing I didn't spot the difference."

"Who'd you think he was?"

Dusty twisted to look at Zar.

"The bastard who injected me. He gave me a shot, then took out his frustrations on my head."

"Fists?" Erik asked, touching his own nose gingerly.

"Machine gun."

"Ouch."

"He looked a lot like you," Dusty said, looking at Erik. "From a distance, anyway. Sorry Rik."

"As long as no reporters see me."

"Reporters," Dusty scoffed. "They wouldn't even recognise you." It made him think about the scarecrows he'd walked with, on the road to the Camp. How many of their families would have recognised them? He sighed, seeing once again the hopelessness and exhaustion in those faces.

*You can't change history.*

*Yes, you can.* Some of it, anyway. He was feeling, once again, the guilt of belonging to the privileged minority - recalling how his lack of belonging to that ragged group had stemmed more from his pampered origins, than from a difference in chronology. Yet most of the men he'd marched with hadn't blamed him. They'd been through too much suffering for that. They'd helped him, instead. Dusty's eyes were moist with remembered shame.

"What's wrong?" It was Valterzar.

Dusty shook his head. He didn't want to share this - with anyone.

Valterzar was disturbed by the haunted look in his eyes. "Are you in pain?"

*Not the kind you can fix. Not the kind anyone can fix.*

Dusty shook his head. "I'm fine." But he wasn't, and he knew he wouldn't be until he could take some action. How could he live with this kind of futility? It wasn't history for him - it was real. And it was like he'd told Erik: the guy had hit him, and it was only human to want to hit him back.

It wasn't enough, and if he was honest, it wasn't the reason why.

The man was a *practised* sadist. *I wasn't his first victim.* That's what was getting to him now - the thing that was bothering him the most. What if his next victim was one of those who'd staggered with him into Camp? Or one of those exhausted faces who'd lost hope?

"Do you know what he gave me?" Dusty was solemn, his eyes still distant.

"Malaria," Erik said. "A real nasty kind. We've given you the works, though," he boasted. "Had the neurosurgeon in to fix your head, and an internist to mend your middle. I took care of the rest."

"Thanks. I really appreciate it. Guess I'm not as much in control as I thought."

Zar took a deep breath. That's what was bothering him. He'd come here thinking he'd taken that one extra step to independence, and he'd ended up in hell. "That's why you were sent here," Zar told him.

Dusty was startled. His eyes met Valterzar's. "What?" he asked incredulously.

"Smythe arranged it when you 'resigned'. Something to prove to you that you couldn't live

without Symtech.”

“Apparently, he was right.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know, Dusty. Erik and I’ll explain it all on the way back.”

“*You’ll* explain it. I’m flying first class, no matter what you say.”

Zar’s lips creased in a smile. “We’ll leave tomorrow.”

Dusty looked past him, out the window. The orange tint of late day was in the sky.

*Not much time.*

He didn’t have the power or control to do anything about Heinrich Himmler or Adolf Hitler, but he might be able to stop the sadist from infecting anyone else.

*How? The same way you took out the man at the plane?*

*Shit! What am I becoming?*

“Dusty, you okay?” Erik asked him worriedly. Had he blown it again?

“Fine. It’s just that -” he hesitated. What if they wanted to stop him? Could he live with himself, knowing he had the chance to change something and hadn’t?

It was a chance he had to take. They’d dropped everything to track him down and save his butt. They needed to know that said “butt” might be going back on the line.

Besides, Dusty thought with something resembling relief, Zar might be able to help him work this through. To figure out whether he had the reason, or the right, to kill a dead man.

Dusty sighed. *Here goes...*

“If we’re leaving tomorrow, there’s some business I’ve got to take care of tonight.”

Valterzar lifted an eyebrow, but Erik’s groaned “Shit!” said it all.

\*

“What about a candle? I’ve seen it on TV. They always use candles in seances.”

James shook his head, and said slowly, “That’s so they can blow them out, Joshua. So the audience can tell when the ghostie’s there.” He sighed dramatically. “Sometimes it seems I have to tell you everything.”

Downstairs, directly beneath them, there was a gigantic thud and bump that rattled the floorboards.

“Mis-er-y,” James sang in a whisper.

“He’s in some kind of hell,” Ren said quietly, sensing Garris’ disjointed thoughts.

“Of his own making,” reminded Merrie.

“Hope he doesn’t expect visitors there,” Josh said. He sat, waiting for Merrie to do something. The noises, the dark, and the damned nonchalance of the others was getting on his nerves. He, who used to be so easygoing, to take everything in his stride, was turning into a nervous wreck.

James started to hum again. Josh guessed it was his way of handling his nervousness - better than breaking windows - but hell, he couldn’t take it any more. He bellowed, “*Show yourself, Garris!*”

At his words, the door to the bedroom slammed back, ramming the wall. A chill wind blasted the room, and somewhere downstairs, a window broke in a shattering of glass.

“Is that him?” Josh asked, wondering what he’d done.

“The door and the glass were me,” James said, embarrassment and anger in his voice.

“Dammit, Josh!”

“*Wait!*” Merrie was saying.

The wind swept past once more, seeming to gather in the centre of their circle.

“The wind?” Josh whispered.

A voice he recognised hissed in his ear, “*That, my Dear Boy, was me.*”

\*

Dusty was nervous. When Erik and Valterzar left to have dinner, he changed into a shirt and pants, then paced the hospital room restlessly. They’d already decided Smythe would know nothing about tonight’s effort. That meant no guards. The only way to lose them later would be to make them complacent - make them think that everything was under control, and everyone accounted for.

Something was really bothering Dusty, though, and Zar guessed he wanted to talk. He left Erik to dessert, after warning him to make sure his energy levels were replenished, then went back to Dusty’s room.

Dusty froze when he entered, then relaxed and resumed pacing when he saw who it was. Valterzar didn’t say anything; just sat down in a chair and waited.

“When does ‘self-defence’ turn into ‘murder’?” Dusty finally threw out.

“Past or present?” Zar asked him, with a glint of amusement.

“It all depends on who’s involved,” Dusty responded, his lips creasing in a smile. “You know I killed the pilot, from the aeroplane.”

“Not murder,” Valterzar told him, without hesitation. “You did it to protect Ren and Josh. And the rest of us, come to think of it.” He smiled. “You won’t find any of us arguing ethics over that one.”

“The Camp - it-it’s horrible,” Dusty whispered, his smile fading. “Some of them were - are -”

“Are,” Valterzar said, understanding Dustin’s confusion.

“- *are* barely alive. I’ve never seen anything like it. Most of them are starving, exhausted - without hope.”

“No idea whether they’ll be alive tomorrow.”

Dusty nodded. “I’d kill Hitler - or-or Himmler, if I could.”

“Understandable.”

“But I don’t have that kind of control. Sometimes, it’s all I can do to get in and out. With someone like Hitler, and all those guards -”

“You’d be dead before you could get close.” Zar studied him. “So what do you want to do?”

“Get the doctor.”

“Schilling, or the one you punched?”

Dusty smiled at that. “The one I punched. Whatever Schilling was doing, I didn’t see him in action.”

“I think you have to ask yourself if it’s personal, Dusty.”

Dusty sat down on the edge of the bed. “It’s personal,” he admitted, “but not because of me.” His voice was choked as he described the march, the man who’d stumbled by the wayside and died as a result, the men who’d helped him. “It could be one of them next.”

“But you don’t know that.”

Dusty’s eyes were tortured. “But I can’t leave it, either. I can’t just walk away assuming he won’t do it to anyone else.” He looked at Zar. “If I could stop him -”

“Kill him?”

“Whatever it takes. I had a few hours of sickness, Zar - how long for other people?”

“Hours to days.”

Dusty shook his head in distress and resumed pacing. “Days of that! If I could save just one

person from that, it'd be worth it."

Zar sat quietly as he thought it over. In a war situation, actions were often excusable that weren't conceivable in peacetime. Dusty was caught in a terrible dichotomy between now and then; between self-defence and murder. It was apparent he was still feeling guilt over the pilot, and that had actually come down to self-defence, at the end. What had been eating at Dusty was the moral issue, because he'd decided to kill the pilot after seeing the outcome of the man's actions. The "killing" was to have taken place before the man had even finished aiming his gun.

How much worse would he feel in this instance, where he had no proof of the man's guilt, other than the attack on himself? Whether or not it was justified wasn't the issue here - it was whether or not Dusty *felt* it was justified, so he could live with any self-recrimination and doubt later.

Maybe they could go it one better. All it would take was a little research, into the man's activities. "What was his name?"

Dusty tried to recall what the white-haired man had yelled, but he'd been too dazed. He shook his head. "I don't know," he admitted.

"Then that's what we've got to find out first," Zar said.

\*

If she'd been afraid of Drew Garris when he was alive, Ren was three times as afraid now. Besides her own fear, she was intensely aware of each of the others'.

And Dr. Drewsome was doing his best to make it worse.

He was flitting from one to the other, hissing in their ears and prodding and poking with non-existent fingers. He kept flinging her hair in her eyes, then laughing when she flinched and peeled it back. She had a terrible feeling that in this state, he could read her mind.

It was then she realised how deliberate his actions were, and why they now seemed to be centring on her. He was trying to stop her from reading him.

It gave her confidence, and she said coldly, "Now I understand why Sylvie Dainler hated you."

He coalesced. There was no other way to describe it. He came into being, out of swirls of misty light, to hover in her face. He slapped her, with hands that shouldn't have been there. Ren, shocked, cowered. "*Merrie!*" she cried.

"I'm *trying*, Ren!" Merrie yelled.

*Trying to give the game away*, Jamie thought. Garris would realise he had the upper hand. Jamie did what he could to halt him, but all he got was a slimy Garris, who laughed in his face, then spat a wad of ectoplasmic mucous at Josh.

"I think we've got a problem," Josh said, covering his face with one arm.

"Tell me where the files are!" Merrie demanded.

"Now you can see why I encouraged your gift, Meredith," Garris told her. "So you could bring me back..."

"Away from the consequences of your actions?" Merrie said. She was standing now, defying him. "Not a chance, *Fool!*"

Ren sensed it coming, but she didn't have time to warn her. With a gigantic blast, much like the one that had echoed from the floor below, the room exploded. Merrie was flung back, against the window. The glass splintered around her, and screaming, she started to drift through.

Jamie was fighting it now - straining to keep her inside while Josh dove for her legs. "*Help me!*" Jamie yelled.

Ren didn't stop to think. She reached a hand into the writhing mass of seething ectoplasm -

and let it come. The misty light faded, and the room was once again plunged into darkness.

There was a sudden cessation of activity. James wasn't prepared for it. As the counterpressure on Merrie ceased, she went sailing forward, just as Josh grabbed her legs. She did a forward flip over Josh's head, to land face up on the floor. All the wind was knocked out of her, and she could only lie there as Jamie came stumbling over, and tripped over her leg, to end up sprawling himself.

"Ren! Where's Ren?" Josh asked.

There were footsteps on the stairs now. Someone whistled all the way down, and on out the front door. The slam echoed in their ears.

"That must be Ren!" James said, stunned.

Merrie sighed. She sounded near tears. "Unfortunately, she's taken Dr. Drewsome with her."

\*

Erik attempted to stroll into Dusty's room, but his walk held the jerky movements of someone trying to control his panic. "D'you have your phone off?!" he asked Valterzar, clearly upset.

"Yes. Dusty and I were talking -" Zar began.

"'cause I figured," Erik went on, as if Zar hadn't spoken, "if you weren't answering, that one or both of you was in trouble. Never know when trouble's going to strike this group, do we?" he said. There was a note of hysteria in his voice.

*Uh-oh*, Zar thought.

"What's *happened*?" Dusty asked worriedly.

"Did you know they were having a seance?" Erik asked Zar accusingly.

He nodded. "Ren said something about that, yes."

"Well, she won't be talking about it now," Erik retorted, his voice high.

Dusty grabbed his arm. "What's *wrong*?"

"The seance. It backfired. They managed to summon up Drew Garris, all right, but then things got a little 'out of hand'. Drewsome took over Ren's body, and they don't know where the hell she is."

\*

Valterzar was the one pacing now. Dusty was grabbing his stuff together, preparing to exit. Erik was sitting in a chair, aimlessly babbling. It was all along the lines of "we should have known", "what are we going to do now?", and "what if they catch her?". Since Valterzar couldn't answer any of his questions at the moment, he just left him to it.

Zar was having problems directing his own thoughts past Merrie. Erik had said she'd nearly been tossed out a second-storey window. If they found Ren - and Merrie wouldn't give up until they'd managed it - Merrie would try to fix it, by herself. She could get herself killed.

He knew Dustin was in a similar state. He'd been absolutely silent since Erik's announcement. Silent and tense. Erik wasn't much better, but at least Zar could determine his state of mind. For all of them, the plane trip back was going to seem interminably long.

"If we head for the airport, at least one of us might be able to get back early." They were the first words Dusty had spoken. His eyes met Valterzar's.

"One" meant just that: no entourage. There'd be some kind of fight at the airport if any of them left tonight.

"No," Valterzar said.

"What?!" Erik gasped, unable to believe what he was hearing.

“We’re scheduled for the morning flight. If anyone gets on tonight, there’ll be trouble.”

“From *you*?” Erik asked, a little belligerently.

“No, Erik,” Dusty told him quietly. “The watchdogs.” He sank down on the edge of the bed and put his head in his hands.

“We’re going back to the Camp,” Valterzar decided. “We still need to find out why Smythe lied, about the malaria.” At this point, he couldn’t care less, but they needed something to do. Otherwise, they’d be at each others’ throats. “Ren thought it might have to do with the DNA, but I’m not so sure.”

“What DNA?” Dusty asked dully.

“Ren thinks we have some foreign DNA in our systems - maybe even fungal. Unfortunately, she admitted her suspicions to Smythe, before she could run any tests in her lab. She was hoping to separate the proteins, maybe define some of the molecular weights. Something that would help her figure it out. Garris’ research would have told her a lot more.”

“I could charter a plane!” Erik said excitedly. “Big enough for ‘everyone’. You know Smythe’s gonna be gunning for them.”

Dusty looked at Valterzar for enlightenment.

“Smythe’s lost track of the rest of the cluster. He probably suspects they’re in touch with us, but he doesn’t know for sure.”

“So if we start acting panicky, he’ll probably take us into custody,” Dusty said.

Zar nodded. “So he doesn’t ‘lose’ us, too. He may even figure holding us would bring the others in.”

“So no flight, Erik,” Dusty said. “I’m sorry - *you don’t know how sorry*.” He leaned back on the bed, his hands behind his head. “If it helps, Rik, Ren must know about the Camp, if she was transmitting all that information to you. I have a feeling that no matter what else has happened, she’ll expect -” his lips quirked in a grim smile, “- maybe even demand - that I see this through.”



## Chapter Sixteen

"First things first," Josh said. "I don't care *what* James says."

"Shut up, Josh. This isn't the time." They were in the car, but everyone wanted to head a different direction. James asked Merrie, "Being dead doesn't make him 'omniscient', does it? I mean, will he know about Ren's house? That it's burned down?"

"No. Not unless he can read Ren's mind."

"Aren't there any rules regarding this shit?" Josh asked in frustration. "If he can read Ren's mind, we're all in trouble, because she can read everyone else's. She'll be able to sense us coming a mile off. How are we going to save her then?"

"I don't know. We'll have to do some research on possession," Merrie said.

"But not till after we have those cuts looked at," Josh said firmly. "I don't know how much blood you lost up there in the dark."

"I'll drop me at a cybercafe," James said. "You take the car. I'll do some research, while you take Merrie into the ER. Make sure to use a fake name."

"Nothing like stating the obvious," Josh said. "Speaking of which, why don't you just use Ren's computer? We've got a pretty sweet deal going at Drewsome's house. Ren may even convince the old goat to bring her back there."

"I want to make sure the neighbours didn't hear anything first. Breaking glass and screams do tend to draw attention."

"I suppose..." Josh said slowly.

"We already did some research with Ren's computer and my cellphone, and I don't know whether it can be traced. What if they somehow figure out where we were working from? Can they do things like that?"

"I don't know," said Merrie, "but from what Ren told me about this 'agency', I wouldn't be surprised."

"How're you holding up, Mer?" Jamie asked. She was cradling her arm, which was wrapped with Josh's hankie. It wasn't her only cut, but it was the worst.

"Sore - and tired," she admitted with a yawn.

"Blood loss," Josh said knowledgeably.

"Shut up, Josh," Jamie said again. "She doesn't need to hear that right now."

"I'm the one taking her to the ER. I want her to know who's in charge."

"Thank you, Josh," said Merrie, smiling sweetly, but pointedly, in his direction. "I was wondering when you'd notice."

Josh shook his head. "Makes me damn glad I chose the dinosaurs," he said.

\*

It was an altogether different matter going to Dachau at night. There'd been the security people to deal with first, but that had been more a matter of doing exactly what was expected (Valterzar and Erik to a hotel, Dusty spending a last night in the hospital), then avoidance. No problem.

Two hours later, Zar and Erik were back in the hospital parking lot. Neither of them was willing to meet Dusty anywhere else. If he was going anywhere near Dachau, it was in company.

They took the train toward Petershausen, and disembarked at Dachau station, twenty minutes later. There'd been one bad time, aboard the train, when Dusty's breathing had become erratic and his gestures panicked, but Valterzar had been watching him. He'd been quick to grasp

Dusty's shoulder, and a moment later Dusty, somewhat paler but obviously alert, nodded to him.

He didn't know how relieved Valterzar was that he could avert another incident. Erik knew, though. His eyes met Zar's and he formed a silent "Phew!".

That instant on the train had given Zar something to think about. He'd experienced a little of Dusty's trauma while trying to combat it: been momentarily crammed in a mass of hypoxic humanity, heard the moans of the dying, caught a scent of deteriorating flesh. It had horrified him, and he hoped he could keep his distance, in order to help Dusty maintain his.

And the flicker of doubt nearly made Zar call a halt.

But he couldn't. The same flash of history that had scared him with its intensity, had given him a better understanding for why Dusty felt he needed to do this. No one had a right to make other human beings suffer like that. No one.

They took a bus along the Sudetenland Strasse, disembarking several blocks from the Camp. It was so different this time that Dusty had trouble taking it in. He didn't even know whether this was the road he'd travelled, but he had no trouble identifying the iron gate under the archway.

Portal to hell...

"*'Arbeit Macht Frei'*," he muttered.

"*'Work Makes Free'*," Erik translated. Zar looked at him in surprise.

All Dusty said was, "Only if freedom means death."

The gate was locked, but there were no guards with machine guns watching the walls now; no electricity strong enough to kill flowing through the fences. Valterzar was concerned at one point they may have tripped a security system, so he touched one of the wires and willed it to "stop", just in case.

Amazing how easy it was to use his "gift", he thought, now that he'd admitted he had one.

Dusty was in a daze. Despite the contact with Valterzar, the impressions were too intense - and his compulsion to save some of his fellow inmates too strong. "I'm losing him," Zar whispered to Erik. "Stay close." He realised it was swiftly coming down to his stopping power versus Dustin's willpower. Zar wasn't all that sure he could win this one.

*We shouldn't have come -*

"Where did you find me?" Dusty was asking. He was staring at the building when it broke through again - in the form of a scream. It was a man's cry of agony, a high-pitched warble of pitched pain.

"In there -" Erik looked scared. Zar's words had done nothing to reassure him. If Dusty went down on this he didn't know what they'd do. It wasn't like before, when they could get an ambulance in. "*Yes, we broke into your Memorial Site, to visit some of the former inmates. Seems like we've had a bit of an accident...*" Any concerns Dusty and Zar had had about being locked up might well be verified after this. "I don't think -" he began.

He never got the chance to finish. Dusty couldn't take it any more. He broke from Valterzar's grasp and out of the night -  
- into the harsh light of day.

\*

Dusty's eyes narrowed. He dove in through the doorway, and saw the room he'd been in only moments before - no, the day before. The screams he'd heard? It was the guard: the one whose toes were now a smattering of flesh and bone littering the inside of his boot.

The "doctor" heard his step, and twisted to look at him, the sneer still on his face. In that moment, as they locked eyes, the man recognised him. His eyes flicked to the floor, where Dusty

should have been lying in a puddle of vomit and blood. The blond bastard with the chilling eyes raised his gun, and Dusty glimpsed reddish glints along the muzzle.

*My blood...*

A sharp pain gouged through his head and he gasped, “Zar!”

But wherever Zar was, he couldn’t help him. Dusty looked up at the doctor through squinted eyes, and in that moment, the shock nearly killed him. The wavery man in his eyesight wasn’t Erik - not Erik at all -

But, nevertheless, Dusty knew him.

“Goeritz!” came sharply from the next room. Goeritz’ eyes flicked impatiently, then he smiled. It fuelled Dusty’s temper, and he remembered why he’d come. When Dusty took a determined step in his direction, the man didn’t hesitate - he levelled the gun, and shot Dusty right in the chest.

“Erik!” Dusty whispered, and he knew Zar and Erik were there, but he couldn’t see him. His eyes were still focussed on Goeritz, who was swiftly taking samples of his blood.

*Before the pump runs dry...*

The last thing Dusty remembered was a scalpel, slicing into his arm.

\*

“Why are we doing this?” Erik was saying, in high-pitched complaint. The note of near-hysteria was back in his voice. “Sado-masochism? Is this some test, to see whether I pass?” He interrupted himself to ask, “Did you get the bullet?”

“Here it is. A rifle or -”

“Machine gun,” Dusty whispered. “Goeritz -” he started to say, but his throat was so dry. “A drink,” he pleaded.

“Blood loss. I swear to God this is the last time I’m going to do this!” Erik said angrily. He was really upset. “What the hell does Garris have to do with this, anyway? He’s back where he shouldn’t be, running around in Ren’s body, while we’re here committing suicide.”

“Goeritz?” Valterzar asked Dusty. “That’s his name?” He frowned. “And he looked like Erik?”

“At first. And then...” His voice tapered off as his eyes flicked from Valterzar to Erik, and settled there. Gooseflesh danced across his skin. “I know why Smythe lied.” He swallowed hard, his eyes worried as he stared at Erik.

Erik, sensing something, stopped complaining and asked, “What’s up?”

*No comparison. The eyes are so different.* Dusty knew what he was about say would crush Erik. *I should have talked to Valterzar alone first.*

“Goeritz’ is ‘Garris’.”

“Dr. Drewsome?” Erik said incredulously. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Dusty admitted. His mouth opened, but he couldn’t say any more. No matter what it cost, he couldn’t do that to Erik.

Erik was thinking about Ren, and the way Garris was tormenting her. “Then you were right,” he admitted seriously. “You’ve got to take the bastard out.”

“No.” Dusty shook his head.

“But what about Ren?” Erik said angrily. “Everyone wants to take down Symtech. Without Garris, we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“We might not even be alive,” Zar reminded him.

Dusty looked at him sharply. Zar may have been referring to the “treatment” they’d each received, but he wondered if Zar knew more about Erik’s origins than he was saying.

If Zar was covering, so could he. "Here's the clincher," Dusty told them. "If I hadn't turned up like this, then we wouldn't be in this mess, either."

Zar stared at him curiously.

"Call it a vicious cycle, or a twist of fate, but the first thing Goeritz did after he shot me, was to take some samples of my blood and skin."

"In other words -" Erik began, still looking slightly confused.

"If Dusty hadn't come here tonight," Zar told him, "Goeritz may never have experimented with 'gene therapy' at all."

\*

Erik was silent as he and Zar helped Dusty to his feet. Then he told Dusty, "I still say you should take the bastard out. The so-called treatment he gave us may not have been necessary. We're better off taking our chances." His eyes met Dustin's. "I mean, think about it. If he could shoot you like that, then he must have tortured the inmates, too. What he did to us wrecked our families. If you eliminate him, it might do some damage, but it could also put a lot of things right."

"If you wanted to put things right for us," Dusty told him, "you could always shove me back on the train and shoot me. No contact with Goeritz, no therapy."

Erik grinned. "Wouldn't think of it - but don't tempt me. This is one of those things that must fit some kind of 'Eternal Plan', but actually comes across as an 'Infernal Joke'."

"That's why I wouldn't consider taking out Goeritz, either." Dusty looked at Valterzar, who nodded. Erik had to know some time. "Because no matter what the risk is to the rest of us, I know what it would do to a friend of mine."

"Ren?" Erik asked.

"No." Dusty sighed, then gripped Erik's shoulder. "You." Dusty saw Erik blanch, and he had a feeling he'd figured it out. He whispered, "Remember when I punched you in the nose?"

"How could I forget?" Erik said, but it sounded flat.

"It was because I thought you were Goeritz."

"Garris," Erik whispered, his eyes dark with horror. "Son of Frankenstein." He turned away with a hurried "Excuse me," and promptly lost his dinner all over the former Infirmary floor.

\*

"Who else knows?" Erik asked, but he didn't give them a chance to answer. "I can't believe my mother would sleep with a bastard like that! He must have been an *old* bastard by that time, too."

"Had a face that would give a roach nightmares, too," Dusty commented, with a twitch of his lips. "No accounting for tastes."

"Probably a handsome devil in his time," Erik tried to play on it, but he was still too upset. "How could she leave me with him, knowing what he'd done?" He knew he was a grown man, and didn't need either parent, but it still made him feel like an orphan. It was bad enough to have had his mom die at an early age, but to know that she'd lied to him for years beforehand was almost more than he could take.

"Maybe she didn't know, any more than the rest of them."

"She must have known what he was into. His 'specialty'. Christ, do I feel useless." He looked first at Dusty, and then at Zar. "Guilty by blood. As though I'm somehow responsible for this."

Dusty put an arm across his shoulders. "If anyone should feel guilty now, it's me." He looked back at the Infirmary. "I'm still halfway thinking I should go back, to just before he shot me. Maybe I can clear out, before he takes the samples."

“You couldn’t even clear out *after* you’d been shot,” Zar said drily. “I only agreed to come here because I thought I could control things. It’s pretty obvious I blew my end of it nearly as much as you blew yours. I think we’ve messed up enough this trip, don’t you?”

Erik surprised them both by chuckling. “I can just see their faces as they try to explain how things went wrong at their end -”

“Yeah,” Dusty admitted sheepishly. “They’ve got nothing on us.”

\*

Josh was holding the same piece of melted plastic pen he’d used to locate Ren the first time. “Nothing,” he admitted, worried. “I already tried that lipstick, too.” He looked at lavender-pink tones dubiously. “You sure she uses that?” he asked Merrie. “I think I would’ve remembered.” His tone suggested he would have remembered anyone looking that weird.

“It’s part of her new look, and she used it yesterday,” Merrie told him impatiently. “Nice, fresh clues even you should be able to follow,” she added, annoyed by his expression. “She’s *not* dead, Josh.”

“Stop reading my mind,” he grumbled. “That’s Ren’s job. I prefer to yell at her.”

They were back at Garris’ house now, and Jamie plugged in a lamp.

“Don’t you think that’s a bad idea?” Merrie asked.

“Who’s going to see it? It was noise I was worried about. All the neighbours built post-Drewsome, and they aimed their houses the other way.”

“Who could blame ’em?” Josh said sourly.

“Besides, it can’t be any worse than some of the other ideas we’ve come up with lately.” James lifted the lamp closer to Merrie and looked at the bandages on her arms. “How many stitches?”

“Twenty-five,” Josh announced. “Spread around, though. I warned the guy to make them small and delicate, ’cause I didn’t want one of my girls looking bad.”

“You let him think you were her pimp?” James thought it was hilarious.

“Couldn’t help myself. It was that frothy pink underwear she was wearing -”

“Josh!” She sounded slightly shocked.

“I don’t know what you have on! I don’t do that any more - or, if I do, I’m smart enough not to tell you.” He rolled the melted pen around in his fingers then said, “Maybe I can’t read it because Garris is interfering.”

James looked enthusiastic. “I think we’re about to have a breakthrough. Try this, Josh -” The key sailed across the room and landed in Josh’s palm.

Josh concentrated for a moment. “Almost.” This time, he put the key and the lipstick together.

“Well?” James and Merrie asked together.

Josh smiled. “We have a match,” he said.

\*

Even now, hours after the fact, she was caught by the odd disparity between the way she usually looked out her eyes, and the sensation she was experiencing now, of looking out from some point far behind. It narrowed her vision, and reminded her who was in charge. For the moment at least, she knew it wasn’t her.

At first, she’d been terrified over what she’d done, until her practical side had reasserted itself. You could only spend so many hours in angst without wearing yourself out. That was one thing she couldn’t afford. She needed her energy to maintain the barriers. She and Drewsome might be sharing eyesight and hearing, but she’d be damned before she’d share any of her

thoughts. The rotten bastard had jumped at the opportunity she'd offered, which should have warned her, but she'd failed to think it through. At the time it had been all action and reaction, with her fear for Merrie prevailing over her common sense. Gruesome Drewsome had been running amok and things had been totally out of control.

Not much better now. Drewsome was in control, but it was her body that was doing the running.

She wondered if Drewsome would have the sense to stay away from Symtech. It would have been more like him to force a confrontation, to see whether he could get some power back. With this much proximity, it would have been easy to determine his intentions, but Ren couldn't afford the risk. Reading him would give him the chance to read her.

She told herself when the time was right she would let her guard down long enough to take control. It sounded good, but she sure as heck wasn't going to try it until she had some help close at hand. Someone who cared enough to stop her from doing herself damage. If last night was any example, it was going to be a struggle.

For the moment, though, she had no say in anything. He was taking her body for a walk and he hadn't even brushed her hair or teeth. She was in the wrinkled clothing she'd slept in, and scuzzy socks. She would have been willing to bet there was make-up under her eyes from the way people were staring. It was the only thing that made her glad she didn't have any peripheral vision.

*Oh, God!* He was taking her through a supermarket, and he'd just farted loudly. No shame. Ren was mortified. No wonder people were staring.

*I never could eat dried fruit.* The stupid man had stuffed himself-herself full of it last night. At the time she'd almost felt a vague sense of pity. After all, you couldn't get much of that kind of thing if you were dead.

He farted again.

Ren wished she *were* dead.

She must have accidentally let down some of the barriers then, because a voice echoed inside her head, "*It can be arranged...*"

He probably meant to scare her, but Ren was too mad. "*Shut up!*" she tossed back with daggers of feeling. She sensed, rather than heard, his "*ow!*", and it gave her no end of pleasure.

Merrie had made a mistake. A soul was a powerful but lightweight commodity, in physics terms. Merrie had given old Drewsome a little more "weight" than was customary. He outweighed Ren within her own body, damn him. It wasn't that he was any more powerful than she; he was just a heavyweight. If she could maintain the barriers until Dusty, Zar, and Erik got back, all seven of them could get together, to figure out how to oust him. Merrie, Josh, and Jamie would be working on it already, and would no doubt be taking action soon. Then, Drewsome would be back where he belonged.

It was just a matter of time.

\*

It had been daylight for nearly two hours. They were trailing Ren at a distance, but it was time for action.

"So, what do we need to buy? In order to do this exorcism or whatever you call it?" Josh asked. "Holy water, a Bible - what? I need a grocery list."

"That's a little difficult," James stalled. He pulled over and parked.

"You did the research," Josh complained. "How long do you think I can hold onto this?" He was still clinging to the lipstick and key, and was trying to keep track of Ren's movements for them.

“Jamie doesn’t know what kind of ghost it was,” Merrie explained. “I mean, we know *who* it was, but he isn’t a demon.”

Josh snorted.

“The possession thing happened - *obviously*,” Merrie commented, “but it seems a little strange.”

“Don’t talk ‘strange’ to me, Mer - *please*. It worries me,” James said. He cleared his throat.

*Five minutes on the Internet and here comes the university lecture*, Josh thought. Almost automatically, he glanced around for Ren. She would have caught that, then tried to pretend she hadn’t, but she would have been smiling, nevertheless. His clairvoyance had always made him more susceptible to her telepathy, and he’d learned to play upon it. He and Ren were always at each others’ throats, in the way of siblings. No blood tie, but some links that were in many ways closer.

Like the ability to catch a joke that no one else would hear. Josh squeezed the tube of lipstick a little harder.

*I miss her.*

He tuned in to what James was saying.

“It does, however, bring up some possibilities. If this were a simple case of demon versus human, we’d perform a straightforward exorcism, using the -” he glanced down at his printout, “- twenty-seven-part plan practised by the Roman Catholics, the four-step plan of a ‘classic’ exorcism, or one of the Protestant or Shaman rituals. There’s also a group overseas that runs out on paranormal cases -”

“It’s a wonder they haven’t run into us,” Josh muttered.

“- and do exorcisms with a combination of staunchness, some hypnosis or magic if needed, a little bit of ritual, a lot of talking, and some joint telepathy to drive the bugger out. The article made it sound as though joint telepathy was really the crux of the thing. That might be our best approach, since Ren’s telepathy is probably what allowed him entry.”

“That might work - all of us focussing on him. If not, Zar might know some hypnosis,” Merrie said.

“I think *you* should zero in on the ‘lots of talking’ bit. We know how you love to talk,” Josh said.

“If we leave Drewsome alone with Merrie long enough,” James agreed, “he’ll willingly revisit his grave.” He flashed her a smile. “Seriously, if we’re doing staunch, it’s gotta be Zar - or Dusty. Dusty’s been so staunch lately he’s lucky he’s alive. If Ren’s in trouble, just get out of his way. Can’t stand between the Kitten and her Cream.”

“That’s disgusting, James,” Merrie told him.

“I didn’t mean it that way. Shows where *your* mind is.” James grinned. He glanced at his notes again. “Now, it could be Ren pulled a Shaman trick, and doesn’t even know it.”

“I don’t think she was playing any ‘trick’,” Merrie argued.

“No,” James said impatiently. “It’s more like leaving yourself open to have a spirit work through you. Saints do that kind of thing all the time.”

Josh scoffed, “We know you’re not speaking from experience...”

James ignored him. “The thing is, the time of exorcism is a really dangerous one for a medium. That’s you, Mer. You’d stand in real danger of -”

“- having Dr. Drewsome jump you, and bounce your bones,” Josh interrupted. “*What?*” he said to James, with mock innocence. “Just putting it in terms she can understand.”

“It means you can’t be there, Merrie. He might move into *your* body instead.” James

sighed. “Damned dead guy gets more action than I do.”

\*

It had been nearly fourteen hours, and Ren knew that if it kept up much longer, she’d go out of her mind.

Because He’d be in it.

All of her life she’d been stuck with other people’s thoughts. They’d intruded on her own so much that she’d always made blunders, either by excessive familiarity to strangers she’d sensed she already knew, accidental blurting of words or phrases, or anticipating what someone was going to say before they’d said it. She remembered, as a kid, laughing at jokes before they were uttered. Not exactly the thing to guarantee close friendships.

And then she’d met her Dusty and the others, her closest friends, and it hadn’t mattered any more. They were every bit as strange as she was, and she’d sensed each of their heartaches as soon as they’d met. She’d belonged.

Now, she didn’t even feel as though she belonged to her own body.

She was fighting to keep the barriers up, so Garris couldn’t intrude on her thoughts. The only thing forcing Garris and her telepathy apart was her own willpower. But, willpower alone had never done it for her. The only time she’d truly been able to block anything could be counted on one finger: a couple of days ago, when she’d gotten mad. Now, anger might help, but it was, at best, a temporary solution. And the energy expenditure to block Garris was robbing her of any reserve, in order to block out anyone else. Her brain was beginning to feel like a circuit board in danger of being dangerously overloaded with current. If she burned out, Garris would waltz right in.

The only thing that gave her optimism was her recognition of Drewsome’s uncertainty, which meant he had some doubts about retaining control. He was rushing now, as though he knew how much time he’d wasted in tasting, and smelling, and eating again; as though he needed to act upon some plan before it was too late.

They were going somewhere uptown, and she had no idea where. She questioned whether Garris knew himself, or if he was merely on the run. If so, he was running into an area filled with office buildings, small warehouses, and mini business complexes. Stupid, really. So few people on foot. And no people at all dressed in yesterday’s clothes with unbrushed hair.

She also wondered whether he recognised as clearly from the physical cues (as she did from the metaphysical ones), that he-she-they were being followed.

\*

“If you think Ren did a ‘Shaman’-type trick, then we should use Shaman rites to undo it,” Josh stated.

“I agree,” Merrie said. “We’ll need pork, or maybe an entire pig, and some wine and fruit. Since I can’t be there, I’ll supply cymbal and drum music in the background, and the two of you can chant and trance-dance. Shouldn’t take more than a few days.”

Josh stared at her. He’d forgotten Merrie’s degrees in philosophy and comparative religions. “Sarcasm does not become you. However, I know where we can find a pig...”

“You’d better learn to like Angel, Josh,” Merrie warned. “She’s Zar’s.” She grinned. “That makes her my child by relationship.”

“By gilt. Get it?” Josh asked.

They both looked at him blankly.

“A gilt’s a young virgin sow,” he explained.

“I don’t even wanta know how you know that, Josh. Obviously, you’re more fond of pigs



than any of us thought,” James said. “If you’re so smart, Mer, why’d you let me waffle on like that? And why didn’t *you* do the research?”

“I was too busy bleeding for the latter,” Merrie reminded him. “My theses dealt more with protection and prevention, Jamie. Exorcism’s not one of the ‘safe’ topics.” She shook her head. “I can’t go there.”

“Because you’d have to learn both sides - the ‘ins’ and the ‘outs’?”

She nodded, and gave a small shiver. “The ‘ins’ I know far too much about already.”

Josh was frowning. “But what do you do with all the dead guys you bring in? Can’t we just handle this the same way, only better?”

“I don’t do it on purpose, Josh,” she said, almost defensively. “It happens, and sometimes even *I* have trouble telling the difference.”

*She’s doing it again.* “Difference between what?” James asked, confused.

“Between the living and the dead,” she said, in a tone that suggested it should have been obvious. “Most of the time they fade out eventually, or wander away, and it may not even be my fault they’re there, if you know what I mean.”

James wasn’t sure he did, but he nodded.

Merrie continued. “They may just be stopping by for a visit. I don’t get to be selective, either. It’s not like I get to pick and choose who comes.”

Josh shuddered, but didn’t say anything.

“Then there are the times when I give them more ‘substance’, like this one.” She sighed. “Probably because I *did* pick him, I may have overdone it.”

“Ya think?” James muttered. He caught Josh’s eye.

“Last time I had a problem, Zar helped. I wish he were here.” Her eyes were troubled.

*She’s really afraid we can’t handle this,* James realised. The thought frightened him - a lot.

But, Josh was watching her face. “What’d you do before Zar, Mer?” He remembered times, years before, when she’d be crying, for no apparent reason. It didn’t go with her ebullient personality, but he’d put it down to moods. Now, he wondered.

“Lived with it,” she admitted. Her eyes were haunted, and there was no trace of the effervescent scatterbrain in them now. “It’s not that bad or that different from the others - except when they’re sadists. Sometimes, if I’m lucky, my other ‘visitors’ will help chase them away. But when they can’t...” She shrugged, swallowed hard, then whispered, “The last one, that Zar vanquished?” There was a catch in her voice, and she wiped her eyes. “H-He was a rapist.”

## Chapter Seventeen

Garris walked up a driveway, and halted before a big, chain-link gate. The gate, like the rest of the fenced area, was covered with whiteclad galvanised sheets, and topped with barbed wire. There were piles of old leaves, papers, plastic bags, and dirt caught under the edge of the gate, and built up against the wheels.

*It hasn't been opened for a while, Ren realised. Maybe a year.*

Whatever this place was, it certainly gave Dr. Drewsome a thrill. She could hear him panting slightly, and the fingers that punched the keypad lock were shaking.

*5631. Ren memorised the number.*

The gate screeched, and Garris had to struggle to roll it back past the dirt and the trash. He forced it back only enough to slip through; tugging it closed behind him. Then he turned, and moved decisively toward the guard shack. Ren's eyes followed Garris' movement of her fingers along the wooden frame, just over the guard shack door.

*Searching for a key...*

Inside the guard's room, Garris wiped dust distastefully off the keyboard and monitor, then proceeded to boot up the machine.

*Imagine, a man who farts in public, Ren thought in disgust, yet is fastidious about dust and boogers.*

It surprised her a little that the power was still on. His familiarity with the place suggested a long association with the contents, but it was also obvious the gate had been locked nearly as long as Garris had been dead.

Garris was pulling up some kind of access code now. Ren suddenly realised it was a "key" of another kind - like someone beeping his car's security system. Garris had just unlocked the security grid in one of the buildings.

Ren saw her lips smiling in the reflection from the monitor. Garris appeared so pleased at the way things were going, that it gave her a terrible feeling of disquiet. It didn't get any better when he walked across the concrete to a door leading into a big, two-storey building. Here, he pulled a door key out from behind a drain pipe and fitted it into the lock.

Ren had a sudden urge to stop him. For all her previous interest in his research, there was something here that terrified her.

*I don't want to know!*

It must have transmitted itself through Garris' defences, because the hand with the key suddenly jerked and dodged the keyhole. Garris narrowed his eyes in anger, then used his other hand to force the key into place.

The door opened with a groan, and an efflux of musty air.

\*

"I could kill the guy who did that to her," Josh whispered to James later. His face was set and angry.

The car was getting hot, and it was a long time since breakfast. *Hell*, he thought, glancing at his watch, *it was even a long time since lunch.*

James nodded. "If he wasn't already dead. Same here. He would have been in ectoplasmic pieces if I'd been there."

He glanced over the seat at Merrie, to make sure she was still asleep. The painkillers had kicked in with a vengeance, for which James was glad. He had a feeling Merrie would have a hard

time staying out of the action when it came.

“Are we still close?” he asked Josh. It had been stop-start, stop-start for hours. They didn’t want to overrun their quarry, nor did they want Garris to suspect how close they were.

*Of course, if he’s using Ren’s telepathy, he’ll know anyway.*

“We’ve *been* close for hours, James,” Josh said grumpily. “I’ll probably have permanent key dents on my palm.”

“To make a lavender-rose tattoo. Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

Josh had wanted to pick up Ren this morning, but James had vetoed the idea. As tempting as it was to tear in there like a hit squad, bag Ren-Drewsome up and haul them away, it wouldn’t have been very discreet. And after their discussion with Merrie, James *really* wanted to wait for Valterzar. If their exorcism got out of hand, Zar might be able to stop it before anybody got hurt.

What bothered James most was Drewsome’s apparent lack of concern. If anyone knew their capabilities - and flaws - it was Drew Garris. Oh, he’d picked up speed, all right, but he wasn’t trying to hide. That meant he didn’t think he needed too. *Cocky bastard.*

Josh was thinking along those same lines. “I wonder where he’s going,” he mused. “He’s not exactly being evasive, is he?” He considered it for a moment. “It must mean Ren’s been able to block him, like we thought. Ol’ Drewsome doesn’t even know we’re here,” he said confidently. “When do yo-” He stopped mid-word.

Jamie glanced at him. “Do I sense an ‘uh-oh’ coming on?”

“Pull over.”

James didn’t question it. He pulled over and parked.

“That car,” Josh hissed, “and that one.” One was a dark blue sedan, and the other an ugly green station wagon.

“Very attractive, I’m sure. Is there a point to this?”

“They have guns - two types. I think one’s a dart pistol.”

James was frowning. “Thieves? A gang?”

“No.” Josh had his eyes closed. When they popped open again, he looked slightly shocked. “Two people in the blue car have Symtech business cards. The other one belongs to Investigative Security and Operations - the ISO. Then there’s a guy with ACS.”

James had whitened. “The Anomalous Cognition Sector.”

“Yeah. Same with the green car. Different ratio, same type of ID.” His eyes were frightened. “Ren’s been spotted.”

“Or we have.” James checked the rearview mirror.

“If we haven’t, it’s only a matter of time. I think one of the ACS guys may be a telepath.”

James didn’t ask him how he knew. He just nodded. “We need more freedom.”

Josh looked at him, then slowly smiled. “They’re about to have engine trouble.”

“Oh, yeah,” James said. “Maybe even an engine fire, if I can swing it.” He was getting enthusiastic. “A couple of engine fires.”

“Damned if you’re not dangerous when we let you out of your box,” Josh remarked.

“Jimmy Boy,” he added thoughtfully, “do you think, in all the confusion, a couple of ’em could accidentally lose their IDs?”

James’ eyes glinted. “Stranger things have happened,” he said.

\*

Garris flicked the light switches with a practised hand - even though it wasn’t his own. The first impression Ren had was of glare - the bright reflection off glass and metal. The entry was delineated from the other rooms by a wall of glass block. They passed through a decorative door,

then a heavy fire door, and finally into the rooms beyond.

More lights. More glass and metal. And the kind of lab that she could only dream of having.

When Ren had talked “backup research” she’d been thinking a few hard copies, slotted into someone’s file cabinet; maybe the odd CD or ten. Nothing like this. Garris had been running backup research all right, but it was on a scale Ren had never suspected. She doubted whether Symtech had, either.

Everything was still on, and humming - from refrigerators to ultra high-speed refrigerated centrifuges. From what Ren could glimpse, his lab had everything: RAPD, chromatography, confocal microscope, ELISA...everything. Most scientists didn’t have their own scanning electron microscope.

Garris did.

He was passing the incubators and refrigerators now - about to check his collection. She heard herself sigh as he glanced at the incubators. Whatever had been growing in there was long gone. She could see the tension in her own hands as he pulled open the fridges. She tried to catch the names on Petri dishes, slants, and stoppered test tubes, on trays of Eppendorf tubes and jars.

*Lycogala epidendrum, Dictyidium cancellatum, Physarum polycephalum, Diachea leucopodia.* Slime moulds.

*No!* It had only been a bit of lateral thinking. Some similarity based on what? Some thought patterns, that she wasn’t supposed to understand? Something she was expected to discount, deny or ignore?

Her brain was still tallying the other names: *Escherichia coli*, a common bacteria found in human digestive systems, but which could sometimes cause illness and death; *Brucella* sp., the infective agent for Brucellosis; *Batrochochytrium dendrobatidis*, the fungal cause of Chytridiomycosis - a skin disease that was killing amphibians around the world; *Pleospora papaveracea*, a biowarfare answer to opium addiction; *Fusarium oxysporum*, the fungus being used to take out coca and cannabis crops - and some South Americans with it; and *Crinipellis perniciosus*, a blight destroying the world’s cacao plants. There was also a liquid nitrogen cold storage area, with a tidy list of labels: variants of *Plasmodium vivax* and *falciparum*. Malaria. It was like visiting a mixed-up communicable disease lab, except you couldn’t figure out who, or what, the victim was supposed to be.

Why hadn’t the lab been dismantled, the cultures disposed of, the place sold? They’d attempted to sell his house - why not this lab? The refrigeration costs alone would have amounted to a tidy sum, over the last year. Ren knew how substandard her lab looked compared to this one; how equipment-poor. It was criminal to have all this stuff sitting around unused. What had been state-of-the-art could rapidly become passe.

How had Garris known it would all still be here, waiting for him?

Maybe he’d set up a trust, or some kind of business, to maintain it. It looked as though a lot of his contracts must have been government research, which should have dealt with this stuff immediately after Garris’ death. Leaving these kinds of cultures, and whatever documentation there was to back up his research, was both incriminating and stupid. Did Dr. Drews think he was above recrimination?

*Maybe. Death put you out of the reach of most inquiries. Unless you had friends like Merrie...*

It was that last thought which frightened Ren the most - more than the cultures sitting within their refrigerated test tubes, more than the fact that her body was still acting independent of

her mind. It was the horrible suspicion that this was all planned somehow. That Drew Garris, who had tested the limits of the “Cluster’s” abilities many times in his Symtech lab, had other plans for those abilities in this one.

Garris wasn’t finished with his tour - yet. They went into another room, where Ren’s eyes did a hasty search for labels on a shocking array of refrigerators and cryogenic containers. There was a reminder next to the thermostat: “*Maintain tissues at -4 C*”.

*Plant tissue? Animal tissue?*

Her question was answered in the next moment, as Garris opened up the largest freezer. A billowing of frosty air swirled into the room as Ren peered down at the bagged specimens. She read the label in disbelief: “*Ovaries - S. Dainler*”.

*Oh, shit!* Ren panicked. She didn’t want to look, but she didn’t have a choice. Her vision, like everything else, it seemed, was still under his control. She was forced to watch, as he went from freezers to liquid nitrogen tanks.

There were ovaries, from each of their mothers. Women who, at one time or another, had been convinced they needed an ovariectomy. Not only ovaries - eggs, and samples of sperm in cryogenic suspension.

But that wasn’t all. There were fertilised eggs, too - embryos. Ren remembered reading that even though human egg suspension was relatively recent (the last quarter century or so), livestock egg and embryo preservation had been going on for years beforehand.

They were going toward the last of the containment vessels now, and these were much larger. Of a frightening size - almost like coffins.

Garris was nervous again. The fingers fumbled at the heavy latches; the digits that wiped the cloud from the gauge were fumbling, uncertain.

If the small vessels had spun vapour into the air, it was as nothing compared to this. A swirl of fog, like bellowed smoke belched forth, into the room’s recycled air.

It was a moment before Ren’s vision cleared, and she could see what lay there. Now, in sudden clarity, some vibes she’d picked up, about Drew Garris’ death, came back to haunt her. The unspoken version had said he’d committed suicide, but that didn’t seem likely now. Not likely at all.

Most suicides had a hard time stabbing themselves multiple times in the back, then flopping sideways, still bleeding, into a cryogenic coffin. Ren’s brain felt nearly as frozen as Drew Garris’ corpse.

Her eyes lifted to the other “coffins” - the eight coffin-sized cryogenic storage units. Systematically, Garris checked every one. Empty.

Who were they for? Ren was suddenly terrified, and she wondered whether she’d let down the barriers enough to read Drewsome’s mind.

He was supposed to come to his freezing intact - to be resurrected in a time when age didn’t matter. When his mind or his essence could be given some kind of renewal.

But he’d planned on being “buried” with his creations: his children by contrivance, if not by blood. Only one of them was truly able to lay claim to kinship - poor Erik, who would rather have been anything but.

If Garris had had his way, none of them would have survived this long. They would have disappeared when he had - only someone had disappeared Drewsome prematurely.

Ren was terrified. This operation was being maintained by someone, and the “coffins” were still waiting.

So was the corpse of Drew Garris. Waiting - for company.

Ren didn't know what bothered her the most: the man's violent death, the fact that her coffin stood there in frozen glory, or the fact that there were eight.

There were seven of them in the Cluster: retrocognition, PK, bio-PK, clairvoyance, mediumship, telepathy, and Valterzar, the "control".

The only thing lacking was precognition. They'd joked about it sometimes: "if I'd known that was gonna happen, I wouldn't have opened my eyes..."

Precognition would have put an end to a lot of experimentation. Would have ended some of their more hazardous escapades before they'd ever begun. Because if there was one thing they'd always done, it was stick up for each other. So, someone had kept Precognition, much as they had the Control, away from the Cluster.

\*

"The last time I saw you this excited was when you painted Derovan's car." Derovan had been Smythe's predecessor.

James looked at Josh and grinned. "I don't know what you're talking about. That car was outside the compound."

"Yeah," Josh agreed. "Must have been some rotten vandal."

"Ready?" James asked. He didn't get opportunities like this very often. He was always watching himself, holding "It" in check. The problem was, his psychokinesis was as much a part of his emotional responses as laughter or tears. He'd never told any of them, but sometimes, when the frustration would build to the point where he needed release, he'd go out to the desert and toss rocks. He'd fling 'em as far as he could - often two or three at a time. He wondered if that was why his out-of-control episodes tended to take the form of rockfalls. Pent-up frustration seeking release.

He shot it like one of those rocks now. He was a little shocked himself when the engine on the dark blue sedan exploded in a blast of flame. The people in the car bailed out, and Jamie squinted, then held up a hand. In a moment, keys, business cards, identification, handkerchiefs, and money were sailing through the air.

Only, things didn't stop there. James, himself, was aghast when the ACS man's jacket was ripped off his back. His pants went next, but they caught, snagged inside-out on his shoes. It didn't stop the pants from travelling, though. In horror, James watched the ACS man get dragged across the street - his bare rear end bumping and scraping on the ground.

At the same time, Jamie's own vehicle had become an object magnet. It was being pelted by all the purloined pocketry, socks, shoes, ties, combs, and any other rubbish that happened to be lying around on the road.

"*The station wagon!*" Josh yelled, trying to divert James' attention. It seemed the more the bare-butted man howled, the more attention Jamie sent that way.

*We're in the shit now*, Josh thought.

Merrie awoke in the middle of it all, when Josh's yell broke in on her sleep. She thought at first it was a nightmare, and it took her a moment to realise it was just Jamie.

James, for his part, didn't know what to do. The more tense he became, the worse things got. He tried to focus on the other car - the hood sprung itself, then so did the doors. But before he could stop it, the scene was turning into Mexico all over again. The station wagon was dismantling itself before his eyes: paint peeling, seats popping out and tumbling onto the ground, the glass exploding window by window.

Merrie was yelping now and ducking as the disassembled parts joined all the other bits that were being flung their way. Both cars' occupants were almost totally nude now - as stripped as the

cars they'd left.

In the midst of it all, the phone rang in the front seat. Josh grabbed it.

"Zar!" he howled. "*We've got exploding cars and naked people!*"

The three of them ducked as a driveline shot through the front window.

"*And broken glass!*"

In response to Zar's question, Josh shot up his head and sought an address. "*22 Monk Street!*" He dove onto the floor, and told Jamie, "Zar says to pop some of Merrie's painkillers!"

Merrie heard it, and shook out three. As Josh ducked a low-flying hubcap that came through the broken windscreen, she shoved the pills into James' mouth.

James, for his part, was so desperate he didn't ask questions. He chewed like a madman while Merrie shouted encouraging words to him, rather like a mixed-up cheerleader. Josh, meanwhile, reached between the seats, and grabbed the pill bottle Merrie had dropped. Hands shaking, he shook out two, then, on second thought, when a particularly loud bucket seat hit the top, one more. Jamie tried to argue when Josh stuffed them in his mouth with an ordered "*Open up!*", but just then, a car door slammed the side of their car, and James gulped the bitter stuff down.

It was a full seven minutes before the deluge slowed, and another three before it stopped altogether. By this time, James was laughing every time something else panged against the metal. "'s great!" he said happily.

"Doesn't take much to get him 'happy', does it?" Josh remarked. "James, don't do that!"

Jamie was starting up the car - revving the engine with giddy enthusiasm.

"*No!*" Josh and Merrie yelled together.

If they'd said "*Go!*" it couldn't have been more effective. James jammed on the accelerator, as the wheels spun with a squealing of rubber. He wove back and forth, up and down off the curb, for nearly two blocks, before driving directly into a wall.

"Is this it?" he asked Josh giddily. Then, still smiling foolishly, he flopped facedown onto the steering wheel.

\*

*It's all going according to plan...*

It suddenly clicked into place. She'd already guessed that this glass and metal enclosure, in its cold concrete edifice, was their mausoleum. Now, she'd figured out the rest of it: this was a trap, and Garris had lured them in, by using her as bait.

He'd been buried here, but he was taking no chances. They'd drawn him away from whatever hell had housed his spirit in the afterlife; recycled his existence into a duality that would once again deposit him close to his own mangled corpse. Did he really believe this "second chance" would save him? That a momentary respite would save him from his fitting end? From damnation?

The answer came to Ren in a chill that made her feel as though her thoughts were already cryogenically immobilised.

*Not a mausoleum. A cave, for hibernation.* Death wouldn't suit Garris at all. He wanted to remain encased in her body, until his own could be resurrected. *So he could find his way back...*

Whatever his original plan - whether to hold them hostage, subject to his own reanimation, or maintain their corpses in cryogenic bondage - it had been altered by his own unexpected demise. So he'd found a way to beat even that. After his brief sojourn in the afterlife, he was probably quite desperate to beat it.

But he must have made his decision about this storage facility years before. Perhaps, when he'd discovered how overblown their reactions were, and how Symtech regarded their care as an

obligatory duty for a failed experiment. Garris had never been able to accept failure, and would have seen it as Symtech's blindness, rather than his own. He would have wanted to preserve his experiment, until a time when it could be appreciated - or improved upon. Hence, the eggs and sperm, the embryos and ovaries. At the current rate of technological advancement, and the characterisation of the human genome, it wouldn't have been long. Garris would have been able to select those traits he considered most successful in his originals, and moved on to greater things.

And, with the way he'd already manipulated their gene pools, he would have considered his own demise the greatest failure of all. So he was using his ace in the death game - Merrie - to overcome this final failure.

Once, he may have planned to bring them here, to place them in stasis, but someone had interfered, and killed him first. *Who?*

Did it matter? Dusty had killed someone, in order to save them. She was able to accept that. Why was this any different?

*Because Dusty admitted it. Felt remorse about it.*

Whoever had killed Garris had hacked and slashed at him. Repeatedly. Jabbed and gashed and stabbed him in the back. Then tossed him into a coffin, and let him leak the remainder of his life away.

*A break-in? Someone wanting to steal his equipment, or his research?*

*They would have stabbed him once, or twice. Not over and over again.*

Was it one of the Cluster? Could one of them do such a thing, and then go on as normal? She supposed Zar could tell her about conditions like that, where multiple personalities took over. At one time she may have scoffed, but given her present circumstances, multiple personalities seemed a whole lot more rational than they had before.

It hurt too much to think it could be one of them. She loved them - they were family.

Could it be one of their family members? Someone who'd discovered how she'd been betrayed by Symtech? By dear Dr. Garris?

The one she kept avoiding, but that bothered her the most, was Coffin Number Eight. The one she was assuming was an eighth member of the Cluster. The one who'd remained unidentified all these years.

Someone who might recognise Drew Garris' plans better than most, and strive to put a stop to them. After all, Dusty had interfered with a past event - why wouldn't Precognition be able to alter a future one?

Precognition might have as much, or more, reason to hate Drew Garris. To hate him for the past, the present - and the future.

Ren shivered, and her body gave a reluctant twitch. She wished she could control her eyes. She was feeling an almost desperate urge right now to watch her back.

\*

Marc Jekkes was frowning as he entered Smythe's office. "Wingot, Wickham, and Feiderman have been located. Magnus is still missing."

"So they're nearly all accounted for." Smythe sounded relieved. There was more at stake here than Jekkes knew. The "agency" Symbio - and by extension, Symtech - had formed an alliance with was the ISO - Investigative Security and Operations. They, in turn, were now roughly affiliated with the Anomalous Cognition Sector (ACS).

ACS was another government agency, that had been exploring psi theory and the use of psychic phenomena in intelligence work for nearly twenty years. Some of their research was a matter of public record, and deliberately dull reading. They'd had some small successes in



clairvoyant and telepathic surveillance techniques, and formed some interesting mathematical proofs of psi-machine interactions, but nothing remotely like the display Symtech's proteges had put on in the desert. ACS was now pressuring the ISO to assume "guardianship" of the Cluster Project. Smythe hadn't told Jekkes yet, but as a sign of good faith, and without the blessing of the Board, he'd given the ISO the names and addresses of two other Clusters. Neither showed much promise, but then, none of the other Clusters had the "talent" exhibited by Valterzar's group.

Smythe considered his action good business. The only way he'd retain any kind of control, and his department retain adequate funding, was if the Project remained on Symtech's books. By sharing information, he'd managed to forge a tighter alliance with the ISO and, by extension, the ACS.

Coercion would have only gone so far, before Valterzar and his people revolted. Part of the problem lay in their naivete regarding their arrangement with Symtech. All but Valterzar had been "nurtured" by Symtech, both at school, and later, with protection, from a young age. They had seen Symtech in the role of avuncular guardian until recently. It was part of their lives; had always been part of their lives. Only in the last few months had any doubts arisen about the legitimacy of Symtech's claim on their time, on their movements. Because now, suddenly, Symtech was beginning to demand some favours back.

The Cluster would have had to perform like a bunch of trained seals in order to prove their value to the Board, and this would have posed some unacceptable risks. Not only was there a degree of hazard in linking Symtech into activity of questionable legality, but Smythe was finally beginning to see what all the other Board members save for Hanover were pointing out: the lack of control, the overblown reactions, the extent of psychic activity could easily overwhelm any safeguards. Public reaction would not be positive. There was too much impropriety in reading someone's thoughts, or viewing someone's possessions through locked doors. Too much fear in raising people from the dead or raining rocks down on their heads. Too much guilt in having someone see your past, or possess insight into, and control over, the activities of the others. Only Erik possessed an "acceptable" talent, and even that had its down side. A healer who could "unheal" or magnify an injury was questionable material to rely on. One error brought to the public eye and the *prima donna* would be in as bad a fix as any of the others.

It was actually Ren who had made him realise the inevitability of relinquishing at least partial control. When she'd confronted him in his office, and picked his password out of the air, he'd felt threatened. She hadn't intended it that way, and in the end, he'd been the one who had frightened her into hiding, but he'd finally seen past his long familiarity with the Cluster into viewing them as others might.

But he still wasn't willing to relinquish total control. There would have to be a certain give-and-take of information, and he'd known at once that Ren Magnus would be a perfect tool for the ISO in terms of information-gathering. Her quick perception and subsequent confusion had shown how vulnerable she remained, despite her scientific training and logical mind. Smythe knew he was just fortunate that the ISO had come into the foreground by the time Ren had disappeared completely from sight. They'd been part of the surveillance teams when the other three - Josh, James, and Meredith - had vanished, too. It suddenly made Charles Smythe more valuable. After all, he'd been in charge of these people for ten years, and the only time they'd dropped out of sight before had been for a brief time in Mexico, when they were right under the noses of the ISO.

Never on their home turf.

Drew Garris had monitored the development of this Cluster personally. The psi activity

was so superior to any of the other Clusters, that Smythe had often wondered if there wasn't something more to this "experimental model" than Garris had let on. Something in the genetic mix, perhaps, that extended this group far beyond what had become a Cluster "norm". The norm for the other groups was such that Smythe felt no qualms about sharing information. If anything, the psychics in the other group would probably be glad to have some validation. Their "gifts" were inadequate enough to require it.

Valterzar's group, on the other hand, sometimes needed validation that they were still human.

## Chapter Eighteen

It seemed to take forever for Zar, Dusty, and Erik to get there.

Josh hadn't said anything to Merrie, but he was getting a little worried about James. Hell, he wasn't even doing any of that annoying dreaming. Josh began to wonder whether he'd clunked himself a shade too hard on the steering wheel when they'd clobbered the wall.

"*You found us!*" Merrie said enthusiastically, a few minutes later.

Josh gave a big "Whew!" of relief, then shimmied out the passenger window.

Valterzar was gazing, somewhat pointedly, at the trail of wreckage behind them on the street. "Let's just say, it wasn't hard," he said drily. He gave Merrie a big smile, then reached through the window and took James' pulse. It was really sluggish. "How many did you give him?" he asked worriedly.

"Three," both Josh and Merrie replied.

Josh looked at Merrie, his shock reflected in her eyes. "Caught up in the excitement of the moment," he admitted, a little embarrassedly. "It looks like it was three *each*."

Erik snorted in disbelief, and Dusty turned away to hide his smile.

Zar shook his head, but his eyes were amused. "I suggested a way to cure him - not kill him. Erik, it's either you or a stomach pump."

Erik nudged Josh aside. "I'm everybody's tool," he sighed dramatically, but he was grinning. "Nice to be classed with such an attractive piece of equipment."

"Next time, we'll know better -" Josh began.

"Yeah," Dusty interrupted. "We'll wait until someone needs an enema."

\*

Marc Jekkes hadn't come into Charles Smythe's office to make his day. He'd come in to explain that they'd traded missing persons: three for three. "Wingot, Wickham and Feiderman may be accounted for, but now Valterzar, Mallory, and Dainler are missing."

"We'll find them," Smythe said. He was feeling more confident now that the original lost trio had been located.

*All of them sighted except Ren Magnus. But, keep tabs on the Cluster and they'll locate her, soon enough.*

The phone rang and Jekkes picked it up. "This is Jekkes." He listened for a moment, then said, "I'll put him on." He pushed the Hold button, and told Smythe, "They've lost them all. Wickham attacked their surveillance teams - stripped them." His lips twitched.

Smythe saw it. "The cars?"

"Cars and people. Left them for -" Jekkes burst out laughing.

"For *dead*?" Smythe asked, appalled.

"No - for nude. Dragged one of the ACS men butt first across the paving."

"Oh, shit!"

"Oh, yeah. One of the ISO people kept tabs on Wickham's group until James drove his car into a wall. Then, figuring they were momentarily grounded, she took off, to 'better her disguise'. During the time she was gone, they disappeared."

Smythe looked thoughtful. "Valterzar's party had already landed?"

Jekkes nodded.

"Valterzar picked them up. His loyalty to them may be greater than to us right now, but he's still not about to let them toss away everything on a whim. If they're out of sight, it's because

they want to track Ren Magnus undisturbed.” His eyes met Jekkes’. “Any ideas, Marc? On where Magnus may be heading?”

Marc shook his head, his expression serious. “None. The ACS people were following her when Wickham interfered. They actually had no idea Wickham or his group were there.”

“So it wasn’t self-defence?”

“It may have been - from Wickham’s perspective. He may have thought they were after him.”

“Or Ren. They do tend to protect their own.”

“Can we trust Valterzar to bring them in?” Jekkes asked.

“Ren and Dustin may insist on autonomy. It’s what he’s been bucking for. Now, he’ll want it for her, too.”

“Pretty soon they’ll all want it.” Jekkes’ voice was flat.

“That’s the problem, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” Jekkes stared out the window, obviously lost in thought. “It looks like things are finally coming to a head.” He looked at Smythe. “What you tend to forget is that they’re people, Charles. Valterzar was right. They’re entitled to certain personal liberties.”

“Left to handle their own messes?”

“If necessary. Might not be such mess if they helped each other. Look at Mexico.”

Smythe looked at him strangely. “What about it? It was a screw-up by anyone’s standards.”

“Not mine.” Jekkes’ eyes were amused. “I guess we all have different definitions of success.” His smile faded as he turned and left the room.

\*

It was a little crowded in the car, but nobody complained. Dusty was so tense he was grinding his teeth; James was still yawning repeatedly, with little squeaks and crackles that made Josh want to grind his teeth, too; Merrie was enjoying being squished against Zar, who was whispering stuff to her that Erik, on the other side of her, was trying to ignore. Erik, for his part, alternated between relief that everyone seemed okay with his heritage, and concern that he wasn’t picking up the negative vibes from them because he wasn’t sensitive enough.

“Josh?” Zar asked quietly.

Josh was still clinging to the lipstick-coated key. “She’s inside now, so I’m just getting some kind of cold room.”

“Cold room?”

“Yeah. It has these capsules or pods. I think they must be cryogenic containers.”

“To preserve specimens?”

“More like bodies.”

“How chilling,” Merrie remarked.

“Shut up, Mer. It’s not funny.” Josh went back to focussing on the room. “There’re a bunch of freezers, too. Ren looks really stunned.”

“What’s she doing?” Dusty asked.

“Looking into one of the capsule things. There’s all this vapour swirling in the air.”

“Any other people around?” Zar asked him.

“Not that I can see -” Josh froze, mouth open.

“What is it?!” Dusty gripped his arm.

“A-A body!” Josh squeaked.

“A *what*?” Dusty asked harshly.

Even James was awake now, and he found Josh’s shocked silence irritating. “Other times

you can't shut up! *What is it?*"

"A f-frozen body. In the capsule. It-t's bloody, a-and dead." Josh sounded stunned.

"Just don't ask me for help with that one," Erik muttered.

Zar's lips twitched. "Are we close, Josh?"

"*There!*" Josh pointed, and Zar did a quick, squealing-tyred turn.

James flopped over onto Josh's lap. "Sorry, Darling," he said.

Dusty was out of the car first. He went to the lock, and closed his eyes. He tried to focus, to visualise Ren punching in the numbers, but he was too panicked.

Then, James was at his side - a little wobbly, but there. "I've got it, Dusty." He held up a hand to the lock, and it clicked. "Had to force it a little."

"At least you didn't make the gate go sailing off its hinges," Josh said. "Let's be thankful for small favours." He pointed to the biggest building. "She's in there."

"If I were you, Dusty, I'd hold off on the hello kiss with Dr. Drewsome," Josh said lightly, to remind him what they were up against.

"Yeah," said James. "These May-December relationships never really work out." He took the key out of his pocket and handed it to Zar, who inserted it in the lock.

"Ready?" Zar asked. "Josh, if Merrie gets anywhere near that gate, I want you to physically restrain her, if necessary."

Josh sighed dramatically, but his lips quirked in a smile. "Restrain her first, if I have to."

"Erik?" Erik was looking pretty pasty, and Valterzar recalled it was his first encounter with Garris since he'd discovered who he was. "You up for this?"

"Have to be," Erik replied.

James put a hand on his shoulder. "At least your father was good-looking. Josh's looks a lot like the dinosaurs he digs up, and Dusty's? Let's just say fungus is an improvement." He whispered, "No matter what they say, all things are *not* relative."

Erik flashed him a humourless smile. "Let's hope so. I'd rather be related to fungus." He nodded to Zar, then followed them slowly into the building.

\*

They were coming, and Ren fought to control her panic. If Garris were to guess, from a nervous twitch, or uncontrolled movements of feet that were itching to run, he might take action.

What? Some type of chemical inducement? To rob them of willpower? Of the ability to argue? So each of them would trot over blithely to a metal coffin and climb right in?

Unlikely. They were more than ordinarily astute, and even Garris, with his enormous ego, must realise how little they actually trusted him. More than likely, when he'd first planned this, it had been in the guise of something as routine as a medical check, or the premise of running some other cognition tests. Unless he'd personally planned on lugging limp bodies around the premises, he'd have some means of threat or coercion at hand.

Or help.

Ren suddenly knew she was right. It was what he'd arranged, nearly a year ago. Only his "help" had foreseen the element of risk, and eliminated it.

Now, Garris must have decided he could do it on his own, using her muscles. Because he intended to carry out his plan. He went to a drawer and pulled out a gun, then made sure it was loaded. No interference this time. Dr. Drewsome was not in a forgiving mood. If "Help" showed his face this time, he'd get a bullet for his efforts.

But did Garris really think he could coerce them with a gun? Josh would spot it from the next room, and Jamie could banish it with a thought.

It wasn't until Garris entered a small storage closet that Ren realised the gun was mostly for show. Her mistake had been in considering only the humane options: chemical inducement, idle threats. Even the gun seemed more bluff than serious force.

It turned out Dr. Drewsome had something entirely different in mind.

The storage closet contained a canister, and he was checking the tubing now - making certain that during his sojourn in his makeshift grave, no one had disturbed it. Ren strained her vision to read the label: hydrogen cyanide.

*Oh, my God!*

The tubing vented gas through a wall, into another room. Josh would never see it, and Jamie would never be able to act on it quickly enough, to forestall the damage. Garris was going to gas them, leaving them no choice: freeze or die.

*No!* The time for passivity was over. She couldn't afford to wait for help, because it would never come. It would die on the way to release her.

Ren began to fight his control, no longer concerned whether she kept the barricades up. He had to know she was going to stop him, any way she could.

He was forced to walk in fidgety, jerking twitches and spasms, but he didn't let it deter him. His awkward, jiggly gait took him into the next room, where he checked on the two discreet vents that were set high in the wall.

There was a smaller room attached to this one, which appeared to be an office. The glass partition was part of the trap - the suggestion of peril, performed in full view, to draw in the remainder of her Cluster. It was once he'd moved inside it that she realised it had a dual purpose. After all, this was Drew Garris.

He wanted to watch.

He had a gas mask stored in the desk drawer, which he took out and tried on, just to be certain it worked. The last test he did was to push a button, and stare as the metal door to the exterior room slid closed in milliseconds.

Effectively making it a gas chamber. "At approximately one hundred eighty milligrams per cubic metre," she heard her own voice intone, "there will be eighteen minutes from exposure to death." Long enough to reach the cryogenic chambers before losing consciousness. Because, without Erik, there wouldn't be any hope for a cure.

Erik had never been able to heal himself. And after exposure to the gas he'd be much too ill to heal anyone else...

Ren dropped the last of the barriers, and let Drew Garris have it. He'd never had to endure the almost intolerable sensory barrage of other people's thoughts - their voices, penetrating his skull, interrupting his concentration - yelling, screaming, laughing, crying. Babies' wails, that were almost impossible for the human brain to tune out; the harsh bellows of complaint and swearing voices that had sometimes made Ren jump, even in an empty room.

Garris may have thought he was disciplined, but his self-control had nothing on hers - nor had his endurance. He couldn't think, couldn't move. He'd never been assaulted like this, and he didn't know how to block any of it out!

Ren, on the other hand, was very much in control. Enough so that when she concentrated, her own eyes narrowed with the effort. And the hand, that reached to support the drooping gun, wavered only a little. There was another way to handle this - one which Dr. Drewsome had never anticipated, but that would eliminate his influence once and for all. Ren gripped the gun, and turned it toward herself.

\*

Ren was in trouble, and it was enough for him. He tore through the rooms in a desperate search.

*We should have left James with Merrie, he thought. Josh could have shown us the way.*

He didn't know whether Ren would be sensitive enough at this point, with Garris in control, to know he was close, but if she did, she might give it away. No good at subterfuge, was his Kitten. It would be much better if they could take Garris by surprise.

He turned impatiently at the sound of Josh's voice. "A gun!" Josh panted. "She's got a gun!" Dusty didn't wait for any more.

"Glad he doesn't let a little thing like that deter him," James grumbled, as he and Zar raced along in Dusty's wake.

"Better get back to Mer," Erik reminded Josh. He'd already started after Dusty and the others when he heard Josh yelp.

"*Dammit!*" Josh was obviously distressed.

Erik ran back. "*What?!*" He glanced around but couldn't see anything.

"*Merrie!*" Josh grimaced. "*They've got her!* Probably used their damned psychic!"

"Maybe she's safer that way," Erik told him quickly. "We can get her back later -" It was Ren he wanted to get to right now.

"Ren's only danger is to herself!" Josh dismissed it. "These are those ACS people. If they get Mer inside some place, we'll never get her out!"

Erik wanted to argue, but he knew Josh was right. He ran with Josh to the door and halted, just inside. "Josh, what's the date?" His voice sounded oddly strained.

"Who the hell cares?"

"We do." There was a note beneath the light switch, with big bold letters and smudged fingerprints, all in the same ink.

"*Dear Erik,*

*If you and Josh are reading this, then it is September the twenty-first, and it is very nearly too late. This building will self-destruct in eighteen minutes. Retrieve Merrie from the ACS, but leave the means up to her.*

*Then find the rest of the Cluster and get them out, but leave the fallen behind. It is for the best.*

*Tell Ren the information she needs is all here, in these files, and on the disks. I'm sorry I can't bequeath her the lab, but I just can't take the chance that Symtech would claim it for their own.*

*Thank you for saving Dusty, and thank you all for Mexico. After that, I knew it could work, and that I could finally have some peace.*

*The letter on the top of the folder is for Zar. He's had more experience with autonomy than any of you - even you, Erik. Don't hesitate to go to him or one of the others for help. The Cluster was designed to interact. Believe me when I say, being on the outside is enough to drive a man mad.'*"

"Do you think it's serious?" Josh asked, stunned. He looked at the stack of folders and CDs beneath the note.

There was no signature. Erik was staring now, at the ink. After the "mad", there was a slightly bigger blotch, and the scattered fingerprints were a dead giveaway. "Dead" being the operative word.

He recognised the writing material, if not the writer. He'd healed too many people, and seen too much of it. He had no doubt that Zar would have the same reaction.

"Oh, I'm inclined to take it seriously, all right," Erik replied. "It's written in blood."

Josh gasped.

"More than likely by whoever put that body in the box."

Josh gulped, then looked at his watch. "Then, Erik?"

"Yeah?"

"Sixteen minutes."

They pushed open the door, and raced across the enclosure, towards the gate.

\*

Valterzar shot a glance at Dusty. If Ren had a gun, there was no hazard - but since it was Garris who appeared to be in charge, of both Ren and the gun, there was a very real hazard indeed. "Dusty -" he began.

It was too late. Dusty had seen her, through a glass partition. He'd have her back - somehow. He'd force Garris out - make Erik heal the bastard out - go back before it happened. *Whatever it takes.*

She was in some struggle, to wrest control from her inner demon. Dusty saw her turn the gun inward, toward herself. "*Ren!*" he yelled.

She glanced at him then, and he saw the torment in her eyes.

*Good!* He'd distracted her. *This was no imposter staring back at him -*

But as her eyes fixed on him, in a kind of mute appeal, her left hand went walking across the desktop, finding its way by feel. Ren wasn't sure what made her turn - maybe it was Zar's and James' arrival in the gas chamber that broke through her focus. She twisted, and slammed down the butt of the gun on her own hand, with a groan of agony.

*"Bitch!"*

He'd kill her now, if he could. She was wrecking it all...

He screamed shrill invective to the air that echoed through the room and reverberated in her head.

*He's distracting me.*

The crushed hand was still fighting - moving to the switch.

*No! You can't...*

James was grasping for the gun now. Ren could feel his invisible touch grappling with her right hand.

*No - it's the other hand!* Ren forced herself back, away from the switch - fighting with Jamie for the gun, and with Garris for control.

Dusty wasn't willing to wait. He charged, shoulder first, against the locked door. It was metal, though, and wouldn't give. Zar was at his back, but his attention was distracted by the look of this room. *Metal walls. Sealed metal doors.*

*Isolation chamber, to trap prisoners.*

His eyes spotted the vents on the wall. *Not isolation chamber.*

*A gas chamber.* He didn't know how he'd made the connection, but this was Goeritz, who'd worked in Dachau. At Dachau, they'd sent their victims out for disposal, rather like another person might send his laundry. But the gas chambers had been built at the camp; installed for future use...

*Like here...like now...*

Zar grabbed Dusty's arm, and gave James a shove. "Get out!" The words were barely out



before the metal door slid into place.

The gun went off in the other room. Ren clenched her side and sat back abruptly on the edge of the desk. Blood was gushing from her, but it wasn't her eyes looking at Dusty now.

It was a look Dusty remembered well. Hate, bitterness, loathing. Garris had hated him for what he was, and then hated him because what he was would never be enough. Garris was a man who'd liked control and order in his life. He'd detested the lack of control in his creations.

And in that moment, he knew Garris recognised him. It was as though it wasn't until now that he'd realised the source of his inspiration stood before him, in the flesh. It was Dusty, looking as he did now, whom he'd stolen blood from so many years before. "*Arbeit Macht Frei*," the lips quoted, but there was blood leaking between them now. Garris nodded his head in mock salute, then pointed the gun at Dusty's head.

Zar yanked him down. "*Use it!*" he said harshly, "Before Garris blows it off!"

"We've got to get Erik!" Dusty told him. "She's going to die!"

Zar gripped his arm. "We're *all* going to die! Get on the floor and cover your face!"

He was listening for a hiss - some signal that deadly gas was issuing from the vents. The experiment was over, and Garris was taking them with him. If he'd wanted to put them to sleep, there were a lot of easier ways. "Break down the door, James!" Zar told him. "Or jam those ven -"

He never got to finish. He'd caught a glimpse of Garris' face, and it was suddenly Ren's once more. She was looking in horror at the corner of her own tiny room, where a wisp of vapour was spilling. As Zar watched, Ren splayed her bloody fingers on the glass in panic. They could see her lips screaming at them to get her out.

*Where's the gun? Where did it go?* Zar thought. Her hands were empty.

It was too much for Dusty. He slammed against the glass, again and again.

*Pointless and reckless*, Zar thought, his eyes misting. But he also knew he would have done the same if it had been Merrie.

At first James thought he'd made a mistake. With Ren bleeding like that, and gas pouring into her room, it was all he could do to concentrate. When the door hissed open at their backs, while he was trying so hard to focus on the office door, he was sure it was just one more overblown reaction.

Until the figure came tearing in, through the gap. James jumped backwards, and ended up falling over, onto his butt. Zar, taken by surprise, got a swift kick toward the wall. It was Dusty, though, who got the greatest surprise of all.

He was looking through the glass into Ren's eyes, when they suddenly changed. One hand whipped behind her back and snatched the gun off the desk. Dusty had barely acknowledged the change when he was ploughed into, and knocked to one side. The gun went off, once, twice, three times - its resonance growing louder with each hole in the glass.

The figure in front was shaking, but still standing. And at the last shot, the man didn't hesitate. He punched his fists through the bullet holes in the glass, and latched onto Ren's shirt. Then, in one swift movement, he yanked her forwards, through the weakened window.

The next moment, in a shattering of glass, he was flat on the floor, with Ren lying splayed across him.

\*

"Where?" Erik mouthed it.

Josh closed his eyes, then pointed toward a section of fence. The damned ACS people had pulled her back away from the gate. He whispered, "What do you think he meant, 'leave the means up to her'?"

Erik shrugged. "Probably wants her to use her little talent to scare the shit out of them."

"How do you propose we give her the hint?" Josh asked, frustrated.

"Think. You visited a graveyard with her. Any way to remind her?"

"*Yeah!*" Josh said excitedly. His eyes lit up. "Sneeze!"

Erik looked at him as though he was as mad as the letter writer. "Sneeze?"

"*Yeah!*" Josh gave a loudly fake sneeze, that bought instant silence on the other side of the fence. "Told you," he hissed. There was a rattle, as someone tried to scale the fence from the other side. Josh took a step back, but began to sneeze more desperately.

Erik shook his head, then joined in. He gave some loudly fake sneezes, too.

Merrie gave a squeal of something that sounded almost like delight.

"Took her long enough," complained Josh.

The next moment, the squeals were anything but delighted - and they weren't from Merrie. All around there were shouts and shots, car door slamming and running feet. Someone bellowed "*Retreat!*" and several cars roared away with skidding tyres.

Josh and Erik looked at each other, then sprinted for the gate. They opened it just widely enough for Merrie to stroll in.

"They won't have gone far," Erik warned.

"How come they didn't take you with them?" Josh asked, wanting to know what she'd done.

"Don't sound so disappointed!" Merrie retorted. She looked around impatiently. "Haven't you rescued Ren *yet?*!"

"We've been dallying. Ten minutes, Josh." Erik put an arm around Merrie's shoulders and gave her a quick squeeze. "They should have known better than to grapple with you."

Josh glanced at her dubiously, then shook his head. "It's that innocent face. Gets 'em every time." He sighed, then added incredulously, "Nearly made me trade in my *Drepanosaurus*. Now, how 'mad' is that?" He grabbed Merrie's hand, and led the way in through the door.

\*

Gas was still pouring into the small office, and now, with the broken glass, into their chamber as well.

"*Get them out of here!*" Zar ordered. "*The gas!*"

Dusty started to lift Ren out of the stranger's arms, when the man's eyes opened. He tightened his grip. "Get Merrie!" he whispered. He coughed, and his face scrunched almost convulsively. "Didn't think it'd hurt this much..."

"*Wait, Dusty!*" Zar said. "Let's do as he asks." He could see the anger and pain in Dusty's eyes. "I know him," Zar said.

*And trust him - now.*

Dusty knew he had no choice but to trust him, too. But, *dammit!* This was Ren's life. He nodded, and got on one side while James got on the other.

"Try to stop the bleeding, James." Zar took off, to find Merrie.

"Don't forget to find Erik, while you're going," James yelled. He didn't like the way Ren or the other man were looking.

They'd no sooner hauled Ren and the man out into the hall, when running feet sounded in the distance.

"There's a bomb!" Josh's voice preceded them. "Eight minutes!"

"Oh, *grand!*" James muttered.

Dusty took Ren's hand and gripped it, almost fiercely. *Stay with me, Kitten.* "Thank you,"

he told the stranger. It came out more stiffly than he'd intended.

"Who are you?" James asked bluntly. "And why are you knocking me on my butt sometimes, and saving it at others?" James closed his eyes again and concentrated on stopping the blood from leaving their bodies.

"Marc Jekkes -" the man whispered. He had bubbles of blood on his lips now.

James opened his eyes, saw the bubbles, and concentrated harder.

"From Smythe's office?" Dusty asked warily. He'd spoken to him on the phone a few times.

"The same." Jekkes gave a wisp of a smile. "Also known as 'number eight'."

Dusty returned his look thoughtfully. Perhaps he was more perceptive, because he also had a talent that tampered with time. Suddenly, a lot of things made sense to him that hadn't before.

"Of course. You're Precognition," he said.

\*

Erik was on Zar's heels. "How's Ren?"

Zar waved him past. "See for yourself."

Erik went on his knees next to Dusty. "Oh, shit," he said. He couldn't tell where one person's blood left off, and the other's began. "What are *you* doing here?" he asked Jekkes. He'd seen him frequently in Smythe's office.

"Always a pleasure," Jekkes said sarcastically, then coughed again and groaned in agony. "Y're nothing like Garris."

Erik froze. "What did you say?"

"Y'r nothing like him. He raised me." Jekkes rested a hand on Erik's arm, and looked at him intently. "Y're better without."

"How did you -?" Erik looked at him through moist eyes. "Who -?"

Jekkes grinned. It looked ghastly, with the blood running in the junctions of teeth and gums, but Erik didn't notice. "Precognition. Li'l brother."

"Oh, *fuckin' hell!*" All this time he'd had a brother, and he hadn't even realised.

"*No - don't!* Would have hated me. Better off. Hate me enough for us both..."

Erik reached out a hand, to touch Jekkes' chest.

Jekkes recoiled. "Y' can't. *Let me go,*" he said. He lifted his eyes to Zar. "Ren'll tell you," he gasped. "I'm not *safe*."

It killed Josh to see how all this was affecting Erik. The poor guy was practically sobbing in his soup. "None of us are 'safe'."

Marc didn't argue - he just shook his head. "Get Merrie."

Merrie's eyes were dark with sympathy. She dropped on her knees beside him. "I'm so sorry," she said, as tears ran out of her eyes.

He smiled. "I knew... 'bout this. Give him to me."

"Who?" Merrie looked puzzled.

His smile widened, as though he'd always known her. "Garris. Channel him - from Ren. Hold h'r hand." He coughed, and nearly choked. "Hurry! Th' bomb..."

"*Zar!*" Josh said warningly.

Zar knew what he was worried about. It was the same reason he'd insisted Merrie stay out of reach.

*But if it happens, we'll do for her what we were planning to do for Ren.*

It wasn't terribly reassuring. They hadn't been all that sure they could effect a cure. Zar had to admit it: when it came to Merrie, he had far more concern for her safety than he did for his own.

"I don't want to lose you," he whispered in her ear. But, at the same time, he could see Dusty's expression. The man was halfway convinced he'd already lost Ren - if not by death, then by Drew Garris' design.

Zar's eyes met Merrie's, and she nodded. "I have to," she said.

She wanted to trust Jekkes. Jekkes, who wasn't, by his own admission, "safe". Zar wondered whether he was making a mistake. "Do it," he murmured.

"Four minutes," James said quietly.

Marc spoke to Erik. "When Merrie -" He curled up against the pain, but when Erik reached for him again, he shook his head. "Af-After she touches us, strength'n Ren - so she can chase him." He flinched. He looked at Merrie and saw the doubt in her eyes. Once again, he smiled. "You c'n do this, Merrie," he whispered. "I've seen you."

"Three minutes," James warned.

"Marc -" Erik began, in a last effort to convince him. "We could go now. All of us -" It came out like a plea.

"No." It was firm, and it came from Valterzar. He squatted down next to Marc. "Prophecy's the preserve of saints," he said quietly. It was as close as he could get at this point to a thank-you.

Marc grinned again - that gruesome, death's-head smile that held no real joy. "That's wrong," he gasped, but there was understanding in his eyes. "Jus' gives the devils time to plan."

"Do it, Erik," Zar ordered. It was what Erik needed, and Zar knew it was his purpose in this - to give Erik an opportunity to act, without having to live with the guilt.

"Le' me take the Dev'l wi' me..." Marc chuckled, then his face contorted. "No-ow..."

Zar remained at Merrie's side, next to her and Ren. *God*, he prayed, *let this work...*

He guessed he wasn't the only one praying at the moment.

Erik was weeping silently as he laid his fingers against the hole in Ren's side. He closed his eyes, and tried to tune it all out. In the end, though, there was just pain and trying to end it - his own, Ren's, his brother's.

"Three minutes," Jamie whispered.

The place came alive. Refrigerators and freezers unclasped and slammed open, spilling their contents out onto the floor. The cryogenic containers popped their lids, exploding out their reproductive payload like the semen that was part of their contents. A particularly nasty autoclave seemed to focus in on Josh, and he ducked below the bench. "*Do something, James!*"

James did, and things got worse. Stools began to fly around the lab, breaking glass showered down on them like rain. In the background, there was a creak and then a hiss, and fog swirled in around them.

"Uh-oh," James said.

The stiff, frozen body of Drew Goeritz drifted their way, his eyes white and fixed, and the blood still flash-frozen to his form. Even Zar nearly lost it at that one, until a chuckle from Jekkes told him their plan was working. In the next moment, the corpse toppled over in a meat-brick type thunk against the ground. Zar couldn't imagine the head surviving a fall like that with all the facial features intact.

Marc Jekkes began to curse in furious gasps and moans that brought Merrie out of her absorption. As he called her a cunt and a whore, Zar reached over and grasped his throat. Merrie flung herself against him. "*Don't, Zar!*"

"But I could *stop* him," Zar told her coldly. Garris had done it to them all. Again and again and again. The anger inside Zar was coiling, almost as though Garris' presence was a trigger. "I

could stop his *heart* - or stop his *breath*..." His face was livid with hate.

Dusty didn't hesitate. He reached across Ren, and punched Zar in the nose. "Get some control!" he snarled.

Zar shook his head like a dog coming out of water. He caught Dusty's eye, a trace of shame in his own. "Thanks," he muttered.

When Erik opened his eyes again, Ren was looking at him. "I'm so sorry, Erik," she whispered.

Erik took her in his arms, burying his face in her hair. "So am I," he whispered.

"Time to go," James warned. He looked at Zar who nodded, still with that trace of embarrassment in his expression. "Don't sweat it, Zar," he said. "But try to have more control next time."

The rumble started when they were barely outside the door, and spread with the speed of an express train. "*Run!*" Zar yelled. He gave Josh a shove forward, grabbed Merrie's hand and took off, toward the gate.

Dusty swung Ren over his shoulder and booted Erik in the butt. "*Get him moving, Jamie!*" Unwillingly, Erik began to do a kind of floaty-half-run, while Ren yelled at Dusty to put her down.

In the end, Dusty and Ren ended up being tossed over the gate, and Erik and James were rammed right into it. The first thing Erik could hear, when his hearing came back, was Jamie saying over and over, "Sorry, Erik. You okay?"

Valterzar limped over, and checked Erik for broken bones. "You gonna live?" he asked, amused. "If you're not, just tell me -"

"Yeah - Merrie's already warmed up," Josh said.

"If it helps, Erik," James told him, "right now, you look more like Zar than you ever did to the rest of your goddamn family." It took Erik only a moment of focussing on Zar's swollen nose and darkening eyes to understand.

"Good thing," Erik mumbled. "For a few minutes there, I thought maybe I'd lost it all."

Dusty told him seriously, "Not a chance. I could still go back," he whispered, "and see what I could do -"

Erik shook his head, and told him, just as seriously, "Not this time, Dusty. Marc could have played it other ways. This was the way he wanted it." Erik looked at the group of them: Zar with his blackening eyes, Ren in ripped and bloody clothes, Merrie rumped and stitched, Josh with his hair singed and standing on end, and Jamie still wearing the remnants of Garriss' lab bench. "Besides," he admitted, and a slow smile broke out across his face, "you guys are about all the 'family' I can take."

The sound of fire engines wailed in the distance. Zar and James helped Erik to his feet, but it was Dusty who insisted on hauling him out the gate. "I owe him one," he said with a grin.

"One?" Josh scoffed. "Try a dozen." He gave Erik an irreverent grin, then rolled his eyes as Ren and Merrie each gave Erik a kiss on the cheek.

Erik sagged a little, and Zar came up on his other side.

"You want I should help you the way I did before?" James offered.

"No, thanks," Erik said quickly, with a trace of alarm. "Some other time."

Zar's lips twitched.

The seven of them limped back through the gate, and out to the waiting car.

Behind them, the fire crackled and roared, interspersed with hissing, sizzling, thuds, booms, spatters, and clangs. At one point, a sound like a firecracker's whine rose shrilly, before being cut off abruptly, in another plastic-smoke-belching blast.

Not one of them looked back.

## Epilogue

Charles Smythe looked at the letter, then, pessimistically, switched on his computer. It was dead. A blank screen. All the computers at Symtech had been similarly affected. The official explanation was a surge had come through, but Smythe knew better. The letter in his hand had been explicit enough.

It was from Marc Jekkes. It seemed he was Drew Garris' son. None of their background checks had picked it up - probably because Garris had arranged it that way.

It made Smythe wonder what else had been arranged by Garris. Jekkes, by his own admission, had been a member of Valterzar's Cluster. Smythe wondered how many others had infiltrated Symtech, with Garris' recommendation.

Gooseflesh danced across his skin as Smythe considered Jekkes' power, and how likely it was that he and his department had been manipulated. He held Jekkes' letter at a distance, as though afraid to bring it too close.

*"...the Cluster Project is dead, and so am I. Symtech will be dead shortly, too. So, my Friend, will you - unless you vacate these premises by 3:38 pm."*

Smythe looked at his watch, then packed his briefcase swiftly with essentials from his desk. On his way down the hall, he pulled the fire alarm.

His car was nearly out of the lot when he saw it in the rearview mirror. The building seemed to shiver, then exploded in a mass of flame. Bits of metal, wood, and glass rained down on his car. Once again, the gooseflesh travelled across his skin. *There, but for the grace of God...*

*No. God had nothing to do with this.*

*Nothing at all...*

He exited the lot, without a backwards glance.

## Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Barbara Small, Mary E. Gray (a.k.a. Meg McKenna, author of *Seaswept*, a WIP), Theresa King (Theresa's work has been published in an anthology, *Out of the Shadows*, at [www.shadowpoetry.com](http://www.shadowpoetry.com)), and Jocelyn Guerette (romance novelist) for their helpful feedback.



## Other books by N. D. Hansen-Hill:

Like *Vision*, *Grave Images*, *Light Play* and *Static* are SF/paranormal suspense novels (series). They're available at Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Books-a-Million, and Borders on-line, or by special order through your local bookstore!

### The Grave Images Series

#### 1. *Grave Images* isbn 07433 00610 (book one)

Nothing in Jarron Marshall's past could have prepared him for the terror of his present.

For visions, living eyes were never meant to see.

For voices, better left unheard.

As he becomes trapped in a power play between science and technology, Jarron finds it's not the only battle he's caught in - and that power plays aren't limited to the living.

#### 2. *Graven Image* isbn 07433 0361X (book two)

Jarron would be the first to admit his perspective is twisted, and his outlook skewed. He's suffered some brain damage, but it hasn't affected his intellect, or his motor skills. Instead, it has opened the doors to a world he's never known - a world he doesn't want to know. One where the dead walk with the living, and the difficulty lies in keeping them apart.

He's doing his best to deal with it. To keep his questionable abilities sequestered, and his ghostly visitors from getting out of hand. It's all just a matter of control.

Control he still doesn't have.

#### 3. *Grave Imagery* (to be released shortly) (book three)

### The Light Play Trilogy

#### 1. *Light Play* isbn 07433 00637 (book one)

Rick learns that survival isn't enough when a virus is bio-engineered - when it's the accidental by-product of experiments blending plant and animal genes. Survival is only the beginning. He has yet to salvage a life from the terrifying side-effects of the infection. Then he must decide how far he's willing to go to stop the spread of the disease, and whether he's still human enough to make sacrifices for his race.

#### 2. *Light Plays* isbn 07433 00645 (book two)

Rick Lockmann's problems are far from over. He is no longer fully human. Not only are his physical needs different, but he has to come to terms with his mutant status - and the knowledge that he harbours the world's most valuable DNA within his cells. DNA that some people will do anything to possess.

#### 3. *Lightning Play* 07433 00653 (book three)

In *Lightning Play*, Rick realises that, whatever his genetic potential for feeding the world, it won't matter if there's no one left to feed. The virus (WTV) is aggressive, and may well be unstoppable. Rick knows he needs to act soon to avoid becoming - quite literally - the last man on Earth.

### The Trees Series

#### 1. *Trees* isbn 07433 00866 (book one)

*Trees* is a story of accidental mutation, ancient traditions, and love that endures on the brink of disaster. It is designed to celebrate the unexpected, in a world where everything that can go awry, will. Confusion and frustration reign as good and evil, science and myth, battle to triumph.

In *Trees*, heroes are found in the most unexpected places.

#### 2. *Crystals* isbn 07433 00564 (book two)

In *Trees*, the battle was between science and myth. Now, in *Crystals*, the conflict goes on, with rules drawn from another dimension. This time, the outcome is a matter of life or death, and victory may hinge on something as insignificant as the shimmering facet of a crystal.

The story continues.

#### 3. *Mud* isbn 07433 00696 (book five)

*Mud*, Book III of the Trees Series: Peter's friends are violently ejected from his world, only to find themselves in a land of pink-tinged fog and flaming trees, triple moonscapes and eye-burningly bright skies - a land as unbelievably deadly as it is beautiful.

Read other SF and paranormal suspense novels by N. D. Hansen-Hill:

The Light Play Trilogy (*Light Play*, *Light Plays*, *Lightning Play*) and The Grave Images Series (*Grave Images*, *Graven Image*, *Grave Imagery*).

What begins as an unnatural mistake, soon becomes a race for survival: a race against injury, starvation, and death. The story continues.

4. *Shades* isbn 07433 00769 (book four)

Peter Trevick and his friends have only recently returned from a world dominated by pink fog, flaming trees, voracious mud, and hellish cherubs. A land where threats lie hidden in the murk, and danger beckons with a child's visage. Now, they are at home, where everything should be as it seems.

Little does Peter suspect that - if it comes to "hellish" - his adventures are far from over. They are, unfortunately, just beginning...

5. *Fire* isbn 07433 00599 (book five)

In *Fire*, book five of the Trees series, Peter has more than his future preying on his mind. There is something outside the door, that would like to prey on his body, too.

Peter is about to learn that fire burns insatiably - but the result is not always flame...

6. *Light* isbn 07433 03601 (book six)

In *Light*, book VI of the Trees series, hope lies nearly crushed in the darkness - trapped beneath rock debris, and sliced by cadaverous claws. There are creatures of the dark, who might not be nearly as threatening - given a little light...

### The Static Series

1. *Static* (current WIP - now in editing stage)

If you enjoyed *Vision*, please tell someone else. Pass it on, give it away, forward it to a friend. And, please, the next time you visit Amazon or Barnes & Noble, check out N. D.'s other books.

Visit N. D.'s website at: [www.angelfire.com/art/ndhhbooks/](http://www.angelfire.com/art/ndhhbooks/) for more information, and samples of *Light Play*, *Grave Images*, and *Static*.

Merry Christmas, Happy New Year, and Happy 2002!

Cheers!

ND