

Alathor Online

By

Kelly D. Tolman

Chapter One:

GOG_AC89 paused. There, in the shadow, in the corner, a bit of light glanced off of something. As suspected BossGal2013 had left yet another unpleasant surprise – a nearly invisible patch of dragonsteeth exactly where most thieves would attempt to intrude. Even a casual brush with the poisoned thorns would have left him agony for hours and hopelessly vulnerable. All around him the fabled garden of the queen of clan H@VUCK lay half revealed under dappled moonlight. To his left a patch of belladonna – useful for a variety of nefarious purposes, especially against lycanthropes – was nearly concealed by a liberal dusting of some slightly yellow powder, probably some flammable sulfur mixture. To his right the ground appeared barren but for a few green shoots resembling chives. Farther into the shadows he knew he would find every rare or useful ingredient known in Alathor, and as far as he knew he was the first ever to make it here. Clan H@VUCK was notorious for its potion making skills and equally notorious for its usurious prices, and the clan guarded its secrets and ingredients with deadly skill.

Before him the back door to BossGal2013's house waited invitingly. GOG_AC89 mumbled softly words of power – words that would activate the magical contact lenses he always wore. The magical essence filtered out of his body as his natural sight blurred slightly to allow his magical sight to take over. After a few seconds everything became clear again, only now he could see much more – elements reserved only for his supernatural vision. Auras of various colors – like shadows overlaying otherwise mundane objects, the imprints left by powerful magical effects – covered many of the plants and things in the garden. Nearly everything had been enchanted to one degree or another. Magical wards guarded every planting

bed, and even the ground he now hovered over. He knew he had about fifteen minutes before he would need to renew his own buffs, but hopefully he could be in and out long before then.

The clan house was a normal home located in a relatively uninspiring suburb – a perfectly bland looking cookie-cutter style three bedroom, just like every other house on the block. A moment of quick study failed to reveal the exact nature of the enchantments on the door. He doubted it would detonate – she wouldn't want her house destroyed, but it would certainly raise an alarm and attempt to kill him.

If clan H4rdR0ck hadn't been so weakened he could sell them the secret of how he got in, grab as much loot as he could carry and be gone, but H4rdR0ck himself hadn't been seen in two days. If he made his attempt now, or even if he left any evidence of this intrusion and he gave even one day, BossGal2013 would simply relocate and he would have to spend another month finding her – not to mention fighting off all of clan H@VUCK. Better to think this through carefully and completely before acting. GOG_AC89 breathed out slowly, focused on his own bedroom and snapped his fingers. Instantly he was home.

Knock. Shit – real world calling. Knock.

Adam Cornelius Jones groaned inwardly and hit pause on his controller. There was the knock again. Who in the hell would be knocking at his door at 1:00 in the frickin' morning. “Ardy, if that's you, I'm gonna kick your ass!” AC called to the door. Again the knock.

He dropped the controller on the couch and flipped the TV off with the remote. Probably some John looking for the hooker in the apartment across the parking lot. Why the hell couldn't drunks read the difference between 4 and 14? Again the knock.

The second television set was running the news – a repeat of a story that had been running off and on all day about a murder at some college in Michigan or Wisconsin. AC almost

always ran two screens when he was working – it helped him stay awake during the long nights of often repetitive tasks. The news story was about the second (or was it the third) college kid killed in two weeks – both ripped to shreds in their apartments. Again the knock.

AC hit the button and shut off the second screen. Again the knock.

“Gimme a minute!”

AC reached the door and glanced around once more, kicking himself mentally for once again not picking up any of his stuff. Piles of DVDs, books and empty soda cans littered the place. His mom would freak if she saw the way he lived. Again the knock.

On the other side of the door stood a slender, pale man with gray, almost white, hair. He was wearing a black pin-striped suit with a dark trenchcoat and had on sunglasses. AC was about to ask what the man wanted when he noticed the pinky ring – silver with the insignia of a three horned demon clawing its way out of a pentagram. The demon’s eyes were made of cut rubies that looked real to AC’s untrained eye. He stifled a swear word and waited.

“May I come in?” The man’s voice was quiet, soothing – everything about the question oozed trust and confidence. AC had never heard such a pleasant voice. AC felt his mouth opening to respond before a sudden panic jolted through his entire body. He glanced back at the flat screen and sure enough there was only one reflection.

“Um,” AC stammered, “uh, it’s not a good time now. How about you try again the morning.”

“It will only be for a moment,” replied the man casually. “I need to borrow your phone if I can.”

AC slammed the door.

What the hell was happening. The only place he had seen that ring – and he was pretty sure he was the only player ever to find it – was in the secret vampire dwelling in Alathor. Nobody went there – nobody! Not BossGal, not H4rdR0ck – not even VanDouchen who specialized in vampire defense and bragged about all the vamps he had fragged. AC had leveled VanDouchen’s fortress two weeks ago – obliterating the clan – and cleaned out everything. The most renowned vamp slayer in Alathor didn’t have a single relic from Vampville (his pet name for their stronghold). Nobody else in the top 500 would even get past the front door. Hell, nobody else in the game had even heard of the place or believed it existed. Everyone else thought they were just small groups of rovers moving from town to town collecting a few victims now and again before moving on – except of course for the well known European vampire families.

Again the knock.

Shit! A vampire at his front door – and not just some low-level skankpire either – a full on blood-sucking vamp-lord of unholy undeadness. Shit! Think!

Quickly AC rifled through his fridge. Last week he made spaghetti for Cindy’s friend. What was her name? Sarah, Sally. Garlic – shriveled to almost nothing, but there it was. Sarai! She was okay to look at, but annoying as hell. You say one thing about anything and she had to write a chapter on how rotten it was. Too bad Cindy was stuck with that tool Chuck – she was hot as hell and nice too.

AC knew he was supposed to use the flowers of the garlic plant, but had also experimented enough to know that cloves would work too, in a pinch – maybe not super effective against a vamp lord SOB, but where in the hell was he going to find garlic flowers in the middle of the night? Even if he did, how was he supposed to walk out there past that freak and

down to the grocery store? He took a knife and smashed a clove open on the counter. He peeled away the thin skin and repeated the process, opening five cloves as quickly as he could.

He took one clove and wiped it up the crack of his door from the knob to the top. The knocking stopped. It's working. Quickly he worked his way all around the door and then began on the windows. He caught sight of the vampire outside the windows in the front room. Then suddenly the vampire swirled into a dust cloud and disappeared. AC barely caught a glimpse of a bat as it flew down 2100 East towards downtown.

"Shit! He's gone for help." AC began talking out loud to himself. A bad, but understandable habit he had developed from the long hours alone in front of the TV screen. "Okay, let's put him at tier three – maybe tier two. That means he has help. In the city that means bats, rats and of course pups. Shit! A pup! I've got no gun – let alone any silver bullets. Shit! Wolfsbane? Yeah right – you can't just buy poisonous shit like that. Okay, I've got maybe five minutes before he's back with a pup (AC's pet name for werewolves) – or worse."

AC dashed to his bedroom. His backpack – full of books – was sitting on the bed. He zipped it open and dumped out the texts – math, math, and more math. "Just two quarters to go, if I live out the night." He crammed a pair jeans, some socks, clean undies, and two shirts into the bag. The top left drawer of his dresser was full of odds and ends he hardly ever used, but he jerked it open. His dad's old pocket knife, a phillips screwdriver, some tape, a pair of work gloves and some AA batteries. On top of the dresser, on a little silver chain was his mother's crucifix. He hated the stupid thing, but he quickly put it around his neck and tucked it under his t-shirt. In the kitchen he threw in three cans of Mountain Dew, a can of cashews and the rest of the garlic. He grabbed his old high school track sweatshirt and his wallet as he headed for the

front door. One step and he paused. He shut off the Xbox and took off the hard drive. On his way out he stuffed a controller and the hard drive into his pack.

Hopefully this vamp, whoever he was, was cocky enough (as most powerful vampires were) to have come alone. He took the stairs down from his apartment and opened the door of his car – a little red Subaru hold over from the 1980s. He slipped the key into the ignition and turned – nothing. It might look like a piece of junk, but AC kept it running. He tried the key again and once more the engine didn't turn. Not even the clicking of a dead battery. What the hell?

Duh! Even some tier six skankpire would have enough sense to rip out the battery or fuel line or something. Well, at least he wasn't imagining everything. Someone was definitely after him. He popped the hood and got out of the car. Sure enough the battery was missing. He walked out of the apartment complex parking lot towards the corner of 2100 East and 3300 South. Salt Lake City's street system had taken him forever to figure out, but now it was simple enough to navigate. He began jogging down the hill toward Harmon's grocery.

Cindy lived over near the community college – what was it 17th south and 7th east? Shit! That was a lot of ground to cover and he was out of shape. He slowed to a fast walk and took an alley off of 33rd South. Better stay off the main roads.

Okay – the pup might take longer than five minutes. Maybe the vamp would take him literally and come back in the morning? Maybe he was just losing his mind. Alathor is just a game. AC tried to breathe at a normal pace. He felt himself sweating even though it was October. If there was a pup – a werewolf – he was dead for sure. “Pups don't like cities,” he told himself. “Fantastics are reclusive. I'm okay.”

Maybe pups didn't like cities, but vamps weren't the only fantastics that didn't mind living among humans – hey, who doesn't want to live where there's free food everywhere? Most undead could be found in cities, but most undead worked from instinct or had to be directed. Vampires were pretty much the only free thinkers, and AC was certain that Vampville was nowhere near Salt Lake. So whoever this guy was he wasn't a local. He shouldn't know the streets (of course vamps lived forever so they know a lot of random things). He would need local help – something that didn't have to be invited in and couldn't be repelled by a trinket.

AC reached 2100 south and leaned against a tree to rest and think. He didn't have a watch, but he had been walking long enough now for any pup to have caught him. Ten more blocks or so and he would be at Cindy's.

A police car rolled past and turned at the next intersection. Down the hill he could see the stop lights and street lights under a cloudy and dark sky. He couldn't remember if the moon was full or not. It wouldn't matter. If the pup was strong enough it could change under any moon – but he hadn't been ripped to shreds yet, so no werewolf was coming.

AC cut across a lawn and into another alley. After another ten minutes he was on Cindy's street. What was her roommate's name again? Becky? Beth? He knocked on her door and waited. Cindy was the first and only person he had been able to get to know at all since he came to Salt Lake. Not that people weren't friendly at the U, but AC was about the shyest, least outgoing person on the planet. At the gaming group one evening at the U he saved her character's life with a lucky roll and that had somehow opened the conversation and they were able to move from "gaming acquaintances" to "gaming buddies" to "friends outside of gaming." Now they were best friends – but definitely only friends. AC knocked again.

She should still be up. It couldn't be much past 2:00 and she and Chuck hadn't left his place until after midnight. Crap! He looked in the driveway and realized her car was gone. Suddenly the porch light flipped on and the door opened.

"Uh, sorry, Cammie, I didn't realize her car was gone," he said to the angry face that scowled out at him.

"At least you remembered my name, retard. She's with Chuck." Cammie was short, as in barely taller than a midget, and a little lumpy, and had that color of hair AC could never describe – not brown and not blonde.

"Yeah, I know."

"So you wake me up anyway?" She really looked pissed. "I know you're supposed to be some kind of genius and everything, but all I see is an idiot."

"Hey, look, I'm sorry." AC hoped he didn't sound too whiny, but he knew he did. He was such a dork. "Look, I'm in some trouble – real trouble. Can I just come in and wait or something. I mean, I need a place to sleep."

"Um, let me think ." The sarcasm in her voice hit like a brick. "No. Look, it's the middle of the frickin' night and I'm not letting some weirdo – least of all some freak who sits alone in his apartment 24/7 into my house. Go home – please."

"I can't"

"Look, I'm going to call the cops." Cammie held up her cell phone, and scowled.

Suddenly AC smiled. "Okay."

"I'm not joking. Leave."

"Me either. Seriously. Call 'em. Look – I gotta get off the street and I can't go home."

“Fine.” Cammie relented. She let the phone dangle and opened the door. “Downstairs. And no noise. And you better be gone when I wake up.”

“Okay.”

AC walked as quietly as he could past her and into the house. The stairs to the basement were through the kitchen. He had visited plenty of times to watch movies and stuff. They had an old couch in the basement and an old tube TV. Cammie had finished her degree already and was working someplace downtown. She wasn't the partying type (not that any of AC's circle were), and she assumed that anyone who spent as much time as AC did playing games was some sort of inbred loser destined to live on welfare for the rest of eternity.

“Thanks, Cammie,” he whispered. “I'm really sorry I woke you.”

Cammie just glared back. She was obviously tired and angry.

AC stretched out on the couch but couldn't sleep. The couch was scratchy and the basement cold. Even the adrenaline had worn off and he felt exhausted. He couldn't relax. His brain wouldn't shut off. The night's events kept replaying themselves in his mind over and over. Upstairs he could hear Cammie in the kitchen – making coffee or something. Cindy probably wasn't coming home tonight anyway. No wonder Cammie was so pissed. This was probably the only night she had this week of peace and quiet and he had woken her up.

He was more than half tempted to flip on the TV but he didn't want to make a sound and get Cammie all angry again. He felt like such a jerk. But where else could he hide? This was impossible – or else he was just nuts. It was just a stupid game. Okay, not just a stupid game. It was his life right now – at least it was his income. Ever since the Koreans had hit on the idea of sponsoring gamers to play – to become the best in the world in order to market their gaming gear and hype their games a few American companies began to try it. AC climbed the world wide

ladder at record speed and had gotten sponsored about a year ago and now the game was a job. He got a regular (small) check and a percentage of any sales he could generate. All he had to do was drop the company name now and again in the chat rooms online and sales would spike. AC loved his work and he took it seriously.

“I’ve explored more than anyone else – and all without a clan.”

“Who are you talking to?” Cammie was standing on the stairs – holding two coffee cups. AC looked up, startled. “Sorry. Nobody. I guess I talk to myself when I need to think.”

“Look, I’m sorry about being so rude. You woke me up and I haven’t had a good week.”

“I’m sorry. I just really didn’t know where to go.”

“You want to tell me about it?” Cindy had always said how nice Cammie was, and for once AC was seeing this side of her.

“You wouldn’t believe me, if I did.”

“Look, and I don’t mean this to be rude, but you are about the weirdest person I know – so yeah, I probably would believe it.”

AC had to laugh. He could kind of see it from her point of view.

“I know you think I just play that stupid game to play it – but there is a lot more to it than that?”

“Uh, like what.”

“Look, what do they pay you at that place – where is it you work again?”

“It’s a bank. And what I make is none of your business.” Cammie was feeling defensive again.

“About 40k, right?” It was just a guess, but AC’s guesses were usually pretty good.

“Close enough.”

“Well, I have this sponsor and I get paid a little more than you, just for playing that stupid game – so I take it pretty seriously.”

“What? You get 40 thousand a year just for playing some stupid game?”

“Yeah, more or less.” He wasn’t about to tell her exactly how much. She would freak.

“I went to college for four years and busted my butt for a degree and you sit around and make more than me on some stupid game.” Her exasperation filled the room like a bad odor.

“I’m going to college too, you know.”

“Uh sure. Majoring in what? Basketweaving?”

“Double major – mathematics and chemistry. I already finished my chemistry courses. And I work. I spend way more than forty hours a week working – whether you call it a job or not. And I have to keep a pretty high GPA to keep my scholarship.”

Cammie seemed a bit taken aback. She handed him a cup. “It’s some cocoa. I just wanted to apologize.”

“You didn’t have to. I just need to figure this thing out.”

“Figure what out?”

“Do you know anything about Alathor?”

“The game?”

“Yeah.”

“Isn’t it some fantasy game? You blow stuff up and all that.”

“Yeah, kind of – except the blowing stuff up part. The idea is to stay alive. Most games the idea is to go out and kill stuff, but in Alathor you just have to stay alive. Players aren’t allowed to kill each other – at least not directly. In fact it’s usually pretty dumb to try to because

you need their help. Everything in the world is against you – vampires, werewolves, goblins.

All that fantasy stuff. They try to kill you and you try to survive.”

“And you’re pretty good?”

“No. I’m the best.”

“And oh, so very humble.” Once again her sarcasm hit with punching force.

“No. I’m just the best. Number three in the world.”

“Number three isn’t number one.”

“I’m the only one in the top twenty that’s a solo account. Everyone else is run by a company or at least a group.”

“But aren’t you sponsored. Isn’t that the same thing?”

“No. They are literally run by a company. A group of people whose sole purpose is to take turns playing on that one account. I’m the only one who has done it alone.”

“What does that have to do with coming over here in the middle of the night?”

“I’m not sure. But I think the game is real.”

“What? Okay. That’s nuts. Even for you.”

The knock at the door slapped their ears. AC’s heart paused. Cammie rolled her eyes.

Again the knock.

“Now what?” Cammie was clearly upset again.

“Don’t open it!”

“What? Who is it?” She was incredulous.

“I don’t know – but don’t open it,” AC pleaded, but he knew he wouldn’t be believed.

Again the knock.

“They aren’t going to go away on their own. I’ll just tell them off.” Cammie got up and began heading up the stairs.

“Wait!” AC started after her. “I’ll answer it.”

“It’s my house! Now knock it off.”

AC was two steps behind her when she jerked the door open.

Cammie’s usual scowl melted away under the influence of the gentlest voice she had ever heard. “May we come in?” The tall, slender man with the pale complexion and immaculate suit smiled a friendly, warm smile that eased her fears and filled her with comfort. He still wore his trench coat over the suit.

“Of course,” she said, without even pausing to think.

AC didn’t need to see the ring on his pinky to recognize the vampire. He didn’t really need to see the tattoo on the little guy’s right forearm either – two intertwined serpents each swallowing one end of a two-bladed sword. The bow-legged walk and bad breath would have been enough. The greenish complexion – covered in layers of makeup – and warts said goblin. The tattoo said mercenary. The goblin wore a black leather jacket over a black t-shirt and jeans. His yellow eyes looked drunk or lazy, but AC knew that was just their way.

“Shit!” AC let the epithet escape and dug the cross from under his shirt. He retreated to the kitchen. She was already letting them in.

“You were right,” croaked the little green man as he smiled a broad, toothy smile. The teeth were a disorganized mix of broken and sharp canines that looked painful. “He’s here. How do you want it? Clean or dirty?”

“Shut up,” replied the vampire. He scowled at the goblin who became instantly silent.

“What’s this about?” Cammie asked. She shook her head and shivered a little as if trying to wake herself up or shake off a bad thought.

AC looked frantically around the kitchen for anything that could help. The problem with most homes was that they were very poorly organized for a fantastic assault like this. No garlic flowers. No fairy dust. No wolfsbane. No little book of riddles. Riddles!

“Cammie,” he said.

“What?” She asked. She was annoyed again.

“Cammie, go downstairs,” said AC.

“What? Why? What are you talking about? Who are these people?”

“They are here to kill me.” He said the fact easily. The words, somehow, had no more impact on him than they had all those times he had said it into the mic or just to himself when he was playing. “They are here to kill me, and you are in the way.”

“We aren’t here to kill you,” said the vampire casually. Once again AC could feel the soothing power of his voice. He avoided looking at the vampire’s face. “We just want to extend you an invitation.”

Cammie stood entranced. The vampire stared at her and AC knew that she was now completely under his power.

“Cammie, get downstairs.”

She didn’t respond.

“Now, you know better than that Adam,” said the vampire. “She won’t be going anywhere.” He turned and looked gently at Cammie. He stepped into the middle of the room.

“Now, my dear, please close the door.”

Cammie automatically raised a hand and shut the door.

“Now please have a seat, my dear.”

Cammie walked to the couch and sat down. She moved steadily and didn't even look at AC.

AC looked around the kitchen again. “Hey, just give me a minute to get something to drink. You guys want something?”

The goblin looked confused while the vampire looked amused. “I'll have something to drink a little later,” said the vampire. He looked at Cammie and grinned. This time his pointed teeth were unmistakable.

“Uh, beer if you've got it,” croaked the goblin. His voice resembled steel grating on pavement.

AC opened the fridge. Perfect! A large jar of minced garlic. He grabbed the jar and twisted off the top, hiding the garlic with the refrigerator door. “No beer, he called. “Hey, how about a duel?”

“A duel?” asked the vampire. His voice was faintly amused.

“Not with you. I don't duel vamps – too dangerous. I'm talking to the merc. How about it stinky? A duel?”

Suddenly the goblin looked very formal. “You know I can't refuse.”

“Of course not.” AC winked at the vampire, though inside he could feel his heart beating madly and the palms of his hands had begun to sweat.

“As the challenged I shall name the terms,” said the goblin. Ugh, that voice.

“Oh, I think you are forgetting your manners,” replied AC.

“You are the challenger, and I am the challenged. According to the rules of etiquette I am entitled . . .”

AC cut him off. “That is you would be entitled to the choice of terms if we were on equal footing.”

“This is neutral ground, ain’t it?” The goblin looked towards his companion as if he had been lied to.

“Oh, the ground is safe enough, but clearly as a mercenary of the first order of Borg the Bold you outrank me a hundred fold.” AC hoped his bluff would play. “As a mere human and this being my first duel, you must admit this is not a duel between equals.”

The goblin gave him a shrewd look but waited for AC to continue.

“Enough of this. Cleaver, kill him. Now.” The vampire lashed out angrily. The odor of garlic in the kitchen was beginning to affect him.

“A challenge has been issued.” AC tried to look as bold as his gamer avatar did, but a faded t-shirt, jeans and converse sneakers with holes in them couldn’t compete with the slick, sexy, confident appearance he had taken so long to craft online. “What about it, Cleaver? The terms are simple. Life for life.”

“And the weapons?” grumbled the goblin.

“Riddles of course.”

“One of the them, eh?” The goblin sounded happy. “Thinks he’s smart. Riddles suits me fine – been duelin’ at ‘em since I was a brat in the warren.”

AC felt dismayed, but tried to regain some confidence. “No help from him.” He nodded toward the vampire.

“Won’t need it.” The goblin, who had seemed a little put off by the challenge at first, now regained his composure. “Terms accepted. Let’s get it over with.”

AC stepped from the fridge, holding the open jar of garlic and walked into the living room. The vampire recoiled. “I’m sorry if my snack bothers you,” said AC as he poured a handful of the garlic into his hand and slurped it noisily, rubbing a mess of it over his face. “Uh, By the way, do you have a name?”

“Oh, how droll. How very polite.” The vampire smirked. “You may call me Uji.”

“Whatever,” interrupted Cleaver. “Now, as I’m the challenged I goes first – that you can’t argue with.”

“Of course.” AC breathed deeply and sat next to Cammie, trying not to vomit back up the garlic. It was disgusting. Deliberately he smeared garlic on her face.

“What are you doing?” she said suddenly. “Eww, gross!” The vacant expression had gone from her eyes.

“Just sit still and watch.” AC spoke sternly, “and don’t wipe off the garlic.”

Uji looked nauseous but stood his ground firmly, watching the goblin. Cleaver stood squarely in front of AC, and produced a little book from some hidden pocket. “Life for life,” he said greedily. His eyes twinkled as he spoke, and suddenly AC felt reassured. How many times had he faced this very challenge online? Okay, in truth not for a very, very long time, but he hadn’t been beaten yet.

“Ask away,” said AC.

“Conundrum of conundrums, hey diddle, diddle, what am I?”

Cammie suddenly laughed, “You can’t be serious – that’s so easy.”

“Shut up!” AC hadn’t meant to be so angry with her. There was no way for her to understand how serious this really was. “Don’t say anything.”

Cleaver looked suddenly fierce. “No help! Them was the rules.” The book dropped and suddenly the goblin held a long knife with a wide-flat blade, like a bowie knife, in his hand. Where had that come from? This guy was better than most goblins. Cleaver sneered and twisted the heavy bladed knife in his hand. “No helpin’.”

AC tried to remain calm. “There was no hint given. Ask another if you want. I’ll play fair. She’ll stay quiet.”

“Of course she will.” Cleaver sneered, and suddenly, with a flick of his wrist the blade dashed across the room and lodged in Cammie’s chest. She gasped, but couldn’t speak. Her limp body slumped next to AC. Across the room Uji took an involuntary, greedy half-step toward the couch as the smell of blood reached him. AC felt numb. The numbness started at his hair and worked its way down his face. He couldn’t look at Cammie. He felt the bile rising in his throat.

AC took a deep breath. He looked directly at Cleaver. “The answer is riddle.” He focused solely on the goblin. He dared not look at Cammie or across the room at Uji or even down to his hands covered in minced garlic. He tried to blot out the smells of goblin breath and blood and imagine he had on his headphones and controller in his hand.

“Once over a bridge from grassy knoll to grassy knoll, three gruff goats stole, but I put them into my bowl.” AC spoke the little rhyme in a monotone, trying to get the words out without falling apart. This ridiculous rule that dueling riddles had to rhyme. Who came up with that anyway?

“Ooh, that’s a tough ‘un.” Goblins, that’s who came up with that rule. Without it they wouldn’t have a chance. “Uh, three guesses, maybe?”

“Not in the rules,” said AC flatly.

“Hole, roll, coal,” mumbled Cleaver to himself. Clearly he was trying a subterfuge by randomly mentioning rhyming words to see if AC would react, but AC just stared straight ahead and waited. Suddenly Cleaver’s eyes brightened. “Troll. By my aunt Basher. Troll is the answer. It was a cousin ‘o mine that et them goats.”

“Your turn,” said AC.

“I’m sharp and I’m neat, above and beneath, an’ I always hear you breathe.” Cleaver appeared very happy with this one.

“You can always just concede defeat, Cleaver,” said AC. He realized he had heard this riddle at least three times before in previous duels.

“Quit playin’ fer time.” The goblin spoke with renewed confidence.

“The answer is teeth. My turn.”

Cleaver suddenly looked dejected. He looked at Uji who appeared both angry and bored. “He’s better’n I figured,” admitted the goblin.

“I’ll give you a thrill or cure all your ills, but if you’re not careful it’s your life that I’ll steal.” AC knew that among goblins this sort of thing was possibly, in fact quite probably unknown and he had used this winning rhyme before.

Cleaver sat down this time, and really began to think. The goblin did not notice Uji step silently behind him. “Hold it,” said AC. “No helping Uji.”

“I’m not here to help,” whispered the vampire. “I have no time for this nonsense.”

So quickly that AC barely saw the blade, Uji swept out a long samurai sword that had been concealed beneath his trench coat and the goblin’s head clattered to the ground. AC held up his crucifix with his left hand and the vampire recoiled. With his right hand he flung the minced garlic directly at Uji. With the garlic in mid air, the vampire turned to dust. The garlic

splattered on the floor and the black cloud that was Uji filtered out through the cracks around the front door.

Chapter Two:

AC heard a car pulling into the driveway outside. Apparently Cindy's date with Chuck was over. He looked down at Cammie's inert body and the head of the goblin, and realized his evening had reached a new low. AC picked up the goblin's riddle book and then quickly opened the front door.

Sure enough Cindy was just getting out of her car. She glanced up and saw him. Even in the dark and across the little lawn he could tell that something wasn't quite right. She was upset. She brightened when she saw AC. "Oh, hi," she called. "I figured you would still be working."

"Cindy, stay where you are." He tried to keep his voice calm.

"What?"

"Stay where you are and call the cops. Do it now. There has been break in."

"AC, what are you talking about?"

"Please, Cindy. Just do it. Don't go in the house."

Cindy pulled out her phone. "Okay, AC. Just tell me what's going on."

"I think Cammie is dead."

"What? How?"

"Just call the cops."

Cindy dialed while AC reviewed in his head exactly what he was going to tell the police when they arrived. No way they would believe the truth, but they should buy the story of a break in. Sooner or later they would figure him for a suspect, but hopefully not until he could figure out why all of a sudden vampires were chasing him through the city.

“AC, tell me exactly what happened here – please.” Cindy was holding herself together, just barely.

“There were these two guys. One of them followed me from my apartment. Cammie let me in and they convinced her to let them in too. Look, I’ll explain everything to the police. Just don’t go in there.”

Ten minutes later four sets of flashing lights alerted the entire neighborhood that they would be in the newspapers the next day. Cammie was still breathing, but they couldn’t get any response out of her. Cindy couldn’t make up her mind to go with her or stay behind. One of the officers talked her into staying behind – Cammie’s parents would meet her at the hospital. Nobody could say if she would ever wake up again.

Of course the officers began asking questions, but it seemed like AC had to repeat his story seventy times before a detective arrived. He half expected to be arrested on sight, but soon realized things didn’t work that quickly. Cindy watched, huddled in a blanket, sipping something warm one of the neighbors had brought her. All she could do was sit and wait.

“Do you want to call your mom or somebody? You might as well go somewhere and get some sleep,” AC suggested.

Her eyes were puffy and exhausted. She had been crying before she got home and crying again since. “Only if you promise to call me tomorrow.” Her voice suddenly dropped to a whisper. “AC you have to tell me what’s really going on.”

Detective Hartley, a tall, thick man in a polo shirt and jeans walked out of the house and over to AC. “Are you Adam Jones?” His voice was kind but firm?

“Yeah. People call me AC.” AC tried to sound normal – as if normal was any part of his life anymore.

“Well, AC, I would like to have you come to my office to answer some questions.”

“Are you arresting him?” Cindy blurted out the question before she realized how silly it was.

“No, m’am I’m not arresting him. Why would you ask that?” Hartley was more amused than intrigued by her question.

“I don’t know. I’m just tired I guess.” Cindy said. She was about to cry again.

“I can take you in my car if you like, or you can drive yourself.” Still Hartley was being kind.

“Damn! I totally forgot! You guys need to see my car!” AC was suddenly excited as he spoke. “No, really. The one guy, the pale guy with the sword – he totally followed me and he pulled the battery out of my car. That’s why I had to walk. I swear. You have to see it.”

“Okay, AC. I’ll take a look. I just want to understand the truth of this.” Hartley gestured to his car and AC moved automatically to it. The detective turned to Cindy. “I’ll call you in the morning. Do you have someplace to stay?”

“Yeah, my mom lives in Sandy. She’ll be here any minute now.”

“I’ll have an officer stay with you until she gets here. He’ll help you pack a suitcase if you want. Hopefully we’ll be done soon.” Hartley pulled a card out of his pocket. “If you need to talk to someone – a professional – this is a friend of mine. She handles a lot of cases like this. Cammie was your friend wasn’t she?”

“We were roommates for two years,” said Cindy,

“Then it will take some time. Give my friend a call,” said Hartley.

AC opened the door of Hartley’s Honda and sat in the front passenger seat. Hartley was still talking to Cindy. He felt horrible for her. Obviously something had happened with Chuck

and now Cammie was dying or already dead and he would never be able to explain what was going on. No way she would believe him. He didn't even believe it himself.

He felt the riddle book pressing against his thigh inside his front pocket and pulled it out. He knew he was an idiot for taking it. If the cops ever found out he would be toast, but he needed something to start with. The cover was leather embossed with gold. He tried to open it, but the pages felt glued together. AC held the book close to his lips and whispered, "Borg curse my children." The pages parted.

There it was. Before him, in goblin scrawl, was the lore of all the goblins. Simple rhyming riddles for every occasion. Most goblins had very poor memories, and only the truly exceptional could muster the discipline to study. But those who did often made formidable riddling opponents – at least after the preliminary rounds. Naturally AC could read nothing in the book.

Hartley opened the driver door and sat down. "Ready?" He asked.

"Sure."

"Then let's check out your car. Over on 33rd South and 21st East?"

"Yeah. You know the apartments behind the gas station?"

"Yes. We get a few calls in that area."

"I'm not surprised."

AC breathed a sigh of relief when he popped the hood of his car and the battery was still missing. Up until that moment he wasn't sure he hadn't just been imagining things.

"Looks like somebody cut some hoses and lines too." Hartley seemed definitely interested now. "Whoever it was didn't want your car running again anytime soon." Hartley

was right. He held up a little flashlight and AC could clearly see where pretty much every hose in sight had been punctured.

“No, I guess not.”

“Mind if I come in your apartment. We can do the interview here instead of at my office if you’d like.”

“Sure, I guess. Whatever. I . . .” AC couldn’t find the words he wanted.

“You what?”

“That guy. I’m pretty sure he’s going to come back.”

For the first time Hartley drew attention to the shoulder holster and the .357 he had been carrying the entire time. “If there’s anyone here, I’ll call for backup. Let me just check it out.”

“Okay.”

They ascended the stairs casually, but detective Hartley pulled up suddenly. The front window of AC’s apartment was shattered. “Was it like that?” Hartley asked the question, already knowing the answer.

“Of course not. It’s freaking October.”

“Didn’t figure, but I had to ask. You wait here.” Hartley drew his weapon. The front door was not latched and opened easily.

AC stood outside, shivering a little as the night grew colder in the predawn hours. Vaguely he recalled something about how cold the weather was going to be for the next few weeks. Why that mattered right now, he couldn’t guess. He felt himself wearing out and realized he couldn’t begin to think straight if he wanted to. The surreal night had stolen the last dregs of his intellect. He waited stupidly for the detective to come back.

“It’s all clear, but you better take a look.” Hartley startled him out of his stupor.

“What’s wrong?” AC asked.

“Better come inside.”

Inside, the apartment was freezing from the open window. Both of his television screens were smashed in the front room. Bits of glass and plastic lay strewn across the room. A large hole pierced the middle of his Xbox. AC stared dumbfounded at the wreckage.

“It’s the same in the back,” said Hartley. He quickly closed the front doory. “Whoever it was came looking for something – or else they were just angry that they missed you.”

“That explains why it took them so long to catch up with me,” said AC.

“What do you mean?” asked Hartley.

“I figured Uji would be on me in less than ten minutes. Instead it took him closer to two hours,” said AC.

“Uji?” Asked Hartley.

“That’s what he said his name was when he was holding us hostage back at Cammie and Cindy’s. He said, ‘You may call me Uji.’ All formal and stuff. He was being a real prick about it, of course,” said AC.

“And you never saw him before tonight?”

“No. He was a strange character. He had a genuine samurai blade though. I don’t really know anything about swords and stuff, I mean other than what I pick up gaming, but it looked pretty authentic to me, and it was sharp as hell. He took that guy’s head off in one stroke.” AC could feel the horror of seeing Cammie stabbed again as he recalled the night’s events.

“Any idea why they would be after you? Where they came from? Anything?” For the first time AC felt that Hartley was beginning to believe his story.

“Look, I’m as confused as anyone about this. But there is one thing, and trust me, I don’t believe it myself. But Uji had a ring.” AC tried to find the words to explain what he was thinking but couldn’t quite.

“What kind of ring?” Prompted detective Hartley.

“Well, you know I play this game – Alathor,” said AC.

“Yeah,” said Hartley.

“Well, there’s this place in the game – a place nobody else has been. I’m sure of it. I mean I’ve been everywhere. It’s a huge game, and some parts are just impossible to get into. You have to have the best equips and buffs even to begin thinking about it, and on top of that everything is so secret. I mean it took me over a month just to figure out that this place might actually even exist and then a ton of scheming to figure out where it might possibly be and then what seemed like forever to even begin scouting how to get in, and I’ve got equips and spells and crap that nobody has.” AC felt like he was babbling.

“Just say it straight AC,” said Hartley.

“The ring he had was from the game,” said AC after a moment of thought.

“Like a promo gift or something?” Asked Hartley.

“Look, only the developers could know about it, and no it’s not a promo item. At least not one that I know about and I get a lot of promo crap. Just look around. I’ve got shirts and action figures and stuff that only developers get because they try to promote their game and their too cheap to give me cash. I keep winning contests and stuff in the game. No, it’s like the ring is from the game. I don’t know what I’m saying other than it’s really weird.”

“So somebody from the game is taking it too seriously and has brought the game to your apartment?” Hartley was clearly looking for answers now.

“Yeah, maybe. I don’t know. There’s a lot of money tied to the game, but still, this is nuts.”

Hartley seemed to realize just how exhausted AC was. “Okay. I think I’ve got enough for tonight. At least we have a suspect. Do you have someplace you can stay? We’ll want to go through your apartment for evidence.”

“No,” replied AC simply. “I don’t have anywhere to go. Cindy is my only friend and obviously I can’t go back to her place. My family is all in New Mexico. Look, can’t I just sleep in my room. I promise not to touch anything or screw up anything. He isn’t stupid enough to leave any fingerprints anyway.”

“No. Definitely not. He’ll be back. I know a motel. It isn’t anything special but I’ll put you up for tonight,” said Hartley.

“No. No motel. He won’t be back. He can’t.” AC felt himself arguing, almost irrationally. How could he explain that motels were public places and he would be dead before dawn. The vampire couldn’t come inside his apartment and had never been inside. The wreckage was Cleaver’s style. The vamp had to get better help this time and wouldn’t be back before dawn, which meant he wouldn’t be back at all until tomorrow night, which gave AC a solid fourteen hours or so – if he could just ditch the detective.

“What do you mean, ‘can’t’?” Asked Hartley.

“Look, I just don’t think he’s working alone – I mean I don’t think that’s his way. If he wanted to kill me by himself he would have just come in and done it the first time, but he didn’t. He’s finding somebody else to do his dirty work and he won’t find anyone before tomorrow. I just want a couple of hours of sleep. Look. I won’t touch anything. I’ll just stay in my room.”

Hartley relented. “Fine. But you need to be gone in the morning, say by 8:00.”

AC nodded his assent. "I'll be out by eight."

After Hartley left, AC grabbed the rest of the garlic, rubbed it all around his bedroom door and window and went to sleep. The night was cold, but he dug out his sleeping bag that his uncle had given him when they went camping three years ago.

The alarm woke him at 7:00. He hit the snooze once and was going to sleep a second round when he remembered he needed to be out before the police arrived. One thing was certain – okay, two things – vampires and goblins existed.

The apartment was freezing. AC showered quickly and then packed as carefully as he could. He had a larger backpack – one he didn't use for school, and this time he thought through his choices more carefully. Food he could get elsewhere, so no Mountain Dew this time. He filtered through the few spices he had left over from the special meals he had prepared to impress the blind dates Cindy always wanted him to go on. Cinnamon sticks – useful in some potions. Cloves, crud he only had ground. Not as useful, but still, effective in a pinch to at least annoy lycanthropes. His pocket mirror – essential. Zip lock bags. Not as good as stoppered phials, but they would have to do. He left his hard drive in his pack.

"What am I doing?" He stopped in the middle of packing. "One crazy night doesn't make the game real." He held the bags in his hands for a few minutes, deciding, and then finally stuffed them into the pack. "It doesn't mean it isn't real either."

AC wracked his brain. Jewellery. He had a little gold necklace his little sister had given him about ten years ago – but shiny things were usually useful to fantastics. He could think of a hundred different things he would find useful, but he just didn't have them. It was ten to eight.

He used his phone to look up a tow truck. At five to eight he was standing next to his car, explaining that he needed them to tow his car to a shop. “No, there hasn’t been an accident. I was vandalized. How long? Okay, I’ll wait.”

Ten minutes later the tow guy was there. He was nice enough to give him the address of where the car would be, but no he couldn’t ride in the cab. “Sorry, kid. It’s only a couple of blocks, but you can’t ride. Company policy.”

The police arrived while the tow truck was still hooking up his car. Detective Hartley was with them. He wanted to get some pictures before they took the car away. “I got some last night,” he explained, “but it was dark and I don’t think they were the best.” He looked haggard. AC suspected he hadn’t had a lot of sleep.

“You got someplace to go today?” Asked Hartley.

“I’m going to see Cindy, get my car fixed, and get some groceries. I’ll be around I guess.”

“We should be done by this afternoon. I’ll call you if I need you.”

AC walked out of the parking lot towards the shop where they would hopefully tell him his car could be fixed the same day.

Chapter Three:

AC dialed Cindy.

“Hey, are you okay? Did you get any sleep?” AC asked.

“I’m still in shock. You have to tell me what happened. I mean the whole truth. What’s going on?” Cindy was more than just a little panicked.

“Sure. I need to talk to someone. This is crazy and I mean off the deep end crazy. Can you pick me up? The cops are all over my apartment. My car was broken into and I need a ride bad. I promise to tell you everything, and I mean everything.”

“Okay. Where are you?”

“I’m walking towards the shop where my car was towed. It’s on 21st East. I’ll text you the address. I’ll meet you there.”

“Okay.”

Finally, someone to talk to. Of course she would think he was nuts, but AC needed to try. A vampire and a goblin in the middle of town – today – was unthinkable. Okay, any day would be unthinkable.

Under the flickering light of the greasy shop office, AC received the daunting news that pretty much every hose and cable in eyesight had been wrecked. The job wouldn’t take long, assuming the parts were all in stock, but the job would be expensive.

“You’re better off just buying a new car. A wreck this old might not be worth the money.” Greg, the shop owner was a kind-faced man who spoke with honest eyes. “Hey, I just don’t want you throwing your money away.”

“I have to have my car – by tonight. It’s an emergency. Can you do it?”

“Sure – if that’s what you want.” Greg seemed incredulous.

“It’s what I need. Thanks,” said AC.

“You need a loaner for the day?” asked Greg.

“My friend will be here in a minute. I’ll get by,” said AC.

“Okay. I’ll call you when she’s ready.”

AC only had to wait a few minutes before Cindy pulled up.

He tried to be friendly as he opened the car door, but one look from Cindy shut him up instantly. She would ask the questions and he would give answers or else he would be walking.

“When I left your apartment you were working. You said you were going to work for another hour or two and then go to bed. Next thing I know you are at my house and Cammie is dying. You know she might never recover, right? I saw her last night – she’s in a coma. Now what the hell is going on?”

“Will you believe me if I tell you?” AC’s voice was hard. The question was more of a threat than a plea.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Were you planning to lie to me?” Cindy asked.

“It means that what happened – what is happening – is way out there. So far out there that I’m not sure I believe it myself yet. I need you – I need someone – to understand this with me. This is so screwed up.” AC felt himself beginning to feel the full depth of the situation.

Cindy seemed calmer as she continued. “Okay. So tell. What’s going on?”

“I’m not sure. Look, do you remember when I told you about Vampville?” said AC.

“From Alathor?” Cindy asked, surprised.

“Yeah, from the game. You remember how I told you nobody has ever been there?”

“Sure,” said Cindy, “but what’s your point. What does this have to do with Cammie?”

“Just follow me, please,” said AC. “I told you I had been there and nobody else had ever been there. That it is a place, in the game, that is physically impossible for humans to enter. The only way in is to teleport or to use gaseous form – you know, turn yourself into mist or dust or something.”

“Like Sandmand from Spiderman?” Cindy clarified.

“Yeah. Anyway, there aren’t many wizards in Alathor, at least not many good ones and certainly none powerful enough to perform that kind of magic, except me. I mean people get into the game and want to start down that path because it seems like it could lead to so much power, but the truth is you have to do horrible things to the fey to get that kind of power and they get really pissed so you end up getting mobbed like instantly, so nobody survives.” AC had almost forgotten where he was going as he talked about his work.

“What in the holy hell does this have to do with Cammie?” Cindy was pissed again.

“Everything. Just listen.” AC was focused again.

“Okay. Just make it quick. Where are we going?”

“You know that kooky shop over on Highland and 21st South? The one with all the witchcraft crap?”

“Yeah?”

“There.”

Cindy gave him a look like he was completely crazy, but he just looked back at her and blinked.

“So what does Vampville and being a wizard have to do with Cammie having a knife through her heart?”

“Last night a guy showed up at my door wearing a ring straight up from Vampville. I mean exactly like a ring from that place. And his suit was exactly like the suits the vamps in Vampville wear. Remember how I told you they were all businesslike and just straight up different?”

“What? Are you telling me a vampire did all this? Oh, for God’s sake. What in the hell is wrong with you? Look, I can smell bullshit three miles downriver.” Cindy was practically screaming.

“What I am saying – and remember I don’t know for sure and I sure as hell don’t want to believe it – is that Alathor Online is real, or at least connected somehow to some seriously weird and obviously dangerous shit. Now do you want to hear what happened or not?” It was AC’s turn to be pissed now.

“So this guy shows up in a suit and a trench coat, wearing sunglasses at one in the freaking morning. He asks if he can come in. Now normally I would tell anyone to take a hike, but I really felt like I needed to invite him in. In fact I almost did. Then it clicks. Pale skin, sunglasses at night, and no reflection in the TV. He’s a vamp. So I tell him no and shut the door. But he keeps knocking and knocking. Well I fished some old garlic out of the fridge and rubbed it on the door – so he turns into a bat and flies off.”

“Wait a minute.” Cindy cut him off. “I thought you told me you had to have the garlic flowers for it to be effective.”

“You have to have the flowers if you want true protection, but any garlic will at least be annoying. A true high level vamp can mostly ignore just the cloves, but it will slow them a bit. Since I already told him he couldn’t come in he just buggered off. No point standing there

knocking on a stinky door all night when I obviously knew who he was. I probably should have stalled him longer now that I think about it.”

“Okay, so he left. Then what?”

“Well I figured he would be back with help – a pup or something. You know, something that can just kick in the door and rip me apart. Well, no point just waiting around for death so I grabbed a few things and took off. My car was toast, so I walked to your place. While I was out he doubled back with Cleaver – that dead guy in your house – and trashed my place. Cammie didn’t want to let me in, but she gave in and while I was there they showed up. Before I could stop her she invited Uji – the vamp – in. Next thing I know I’m wracking my brain to figure out how to stay alive. Uji couldn’t touch me himself because I had my mom’s cross on, but Cammie was under his spell instantly. She was totally not herself.”

“She must have been out of her mind to let you in,” said Cindy. “She really hates your guts, you know.”

“Yeah, I know. Look, I’m sorry. Look, if I thought she was going to get hurt I would never have gone over there. I didn’t know where else to go. What the hell would you do if some stranger showed up at your place?”

“Call the cops, duh!”

“And tell them what? Somebody suspicious knocked on my door? Shit. I get a drunk every other week knocking on my door looking for that hoe across the parking lot. There are cops out there every weekend.”

“Well you call the cops. And you call ahead. Didn’t you even think? You are such an idiot sometimes.” Cindy was more sad than angry now.

“Look, I have proof – at least I think I do. I hope I do. Maybe. I don’t know. If this is real then I’m dead. Even if it isn’t I’m still dead. Don’t you get it? Somebody is trying to kill me. Somebody came to my apartment and then followed me to your house. They trashed my car. They are hunting me down and trying to kill me. You can get as pissy as you want, but the fact is if I’m right then I have until tonight – while this vamp trash is sleeping – to figure this out or I am dead. Period. And if I’m wrong, then I have no idea who is behind this and no way to stop them and I’m dead anyway.”

Cindy parked the car just around the corner of Betty’s Boutique and with one word lifted a ton of worries from AC’s shoulders. “Okay,” she breathed. It was an okay that resounded, not of approval, or even of understanding, but simply of the oft missed acceptance of a friend.

“You believe me?”

“No. I mean I believe it wasn’t your fault and that you really are in deep shit, but vampires? No, I don’t believe that. Let’s go.”

They reached the door of Betty’s Boutique, but they didn’t open for another half hour.

“Now what?” asked Cindy.

“Let’s pop over to Fred Meyer. I’ve got a few things I want to pick up. Then we’ll swing back.”

When they were in the car, Cindy said, “You never finished your story. What happened after they got into the house.”

“I dueled the goblin at riddles. Uji got pissed because he realized the goblin couldn’t win and then he would be screwed. The deal was life for life so I would have had a slave, so the vamp sliced his head off. I got this.” AC held up the goblin riddle book. “It’s written in goblin – at least it looks exactly like in the game. So I’m going to test it out. That’s the proof I’m

talking about. I'm going to make a see magic ointment. It worked in the game. In real life it will probably blind me for life."

"Your nuts. Nuts and an idiot. Okay. Fred Meyer."

At the store AC made a mental list of things he would need. Cindy followed, wondering if she should call the cops.

"Squirt guns?"

"Yeah. I can't get the custom made stuff I need, but these will do in a pinch."

"For what?"

"Holy water, belladonna infusions, the uses are endless." AC looked at her like she just asked what two plus two was.

"Hello, this is the deep end calling – you've fallen off." Cindy was not laughing.

"Half an hour – then you can call in the white coats. In the meantime I'm not taking any chances," AC responded.

AC also bought a trench coat, a pair of plastic guns (just because they came with snazzy little holsters), a junior chemistry set, some wooden bowls, two wooden spoons, a hunting knife, a book on wildflowers, hiking boots, a University of Utah baseball cap, a bottle of vodka, ten packs of skittles, and a couple of water bottles.

Cindy just kept her mouth shut and watched in disbelief.

"They're open now, let's go," she said, looking at her watch.

"Yeah, I know. I'm sure I'm forgetting really important stuff here, but I guess I can come back. Let's go."

"What are you hoping to get at Betty's anyway?"

“Witchcraft stuff, obviously. Mostly charms and essential oils. But there is some stuff that I normally doubt I could get anywhere,” said AC.

“Like what?” asked Cindy.

“Like plants.”

“Plants? What kind of plants do they sell here and not at a nursery? Are you talking about pot or what?” Cindy was whispering at the top of her voice.

“Proof first – at least proof to me. Then we can talk about the plants I need, and no, marijuana isn’t one of them,” said AC.

They rode in silence back to the boutique. A skinny girl with huge glasses and a spike in her cheek and a nose ring waited next to the counter. Her too dark lipstick and eye shadow seemed completely in place with her black t-shirt and shredded jeans. This was a store for those who wanted to go beyond dabbling in the off-beat.

“What can I find for ya?” She asked. Her voice was pleasant but a little tired.

“Witch Hazel and peppermint,” said AC.

“All we have is the oil for the Witch Hazel. We won’t get any flowers or leaves in for another week.”

“That will be perfect. What about the mint? Do you have the essential oil?”

“Of course. Anything else?”

“Incense, and matches.”

“Sure.”

AC looked around the store, trying to think what he would need if this worked. This place was a treasure trove – if he could get his hands on a fairy.

AC paid and said his thanks as they left.

“Now what?” asked Cindy.

“Now I do something completely nuts. We find out if I’m crazy – although I know what I saw last night. Come on.”

The Witch Hazel and peppermint bottles both came with little droppers and AC breathed a sigh of relief. “We’re going to need an eye dropper. Would you mind running back in there and seeing if they have one while I mix this?”

Cindy grunted, but went ahead. AC carefully dropped four drops of Witch Hazel and three of the peppermint into one of the bowls. Then, using a safety pin he found in the car seat he pricked the end of his finger and squeezed out one drop of blood.

“What the hell is that?” asked Cindy.

“That is pure disgusting. But I’m going to do it anyway,” replied AC. “All magic requires some sacrifice. Most of it needs something truly fantastic to even begin working, but something like this can be done just using normal life energy. I mean to see magic you just need the right ingredients and the right sacrifice. If we’re lucky we might even catch a fairy.”

“Here’s your dropper.”

“Thanks. Now take a look at this.” He held out the goblin riddle book. Cindy took the book and perused it curiously. AC knew that she had a love for quirky little fantasy looking knickknacks, and this book fit the bill perfectly.

“It’s all scribbles. I mean it kind of looks like a three year old writing in Egyptian or something,” said Cindy.

“Exactly. It’s goblin scrawl. It’s a language, but they aren’t the smartest, and obviously they don’t have very good hand writing either. And you can’t read it and I can’t read it. So the test is can I make so that we can read it.” AC sounded apprehensive.

“How? With that?” asked Cindy.

“You put it in your eyes – one drop in each,” replied AC.

“Witch Hazel and peppermint in your eyes – uh, that is going to sting – a lot!” yelled Cindy.

“No shit. Look, I don’t exactly have my magic contact lenses from Alathor, do I? Now, would you mind doing the drops. One in each. Here, let me mix it.” AC used the dropper to mix the ingredients carefully and then filled the dropper with the mixture.

He handed Cindy the dropper and tilted his head back. He held each eye open as she dropped in one drop of the mixture. She was right – it stung, a lot. He felt like his eyes were melting, but he clenched his teeth and tried to hold back the tears.

“Shit that hurts.”

Cindy actually laughed. “No kidding. You are such an idiot.”

AC grabbed the book and looked. There it was in plain English. It looked like it had been written in crayon, but the words were clear, “Conundrum of conundrums, hey diddle, diddle, what am I?” Cleaver hadn’t even gotten past page one. No wonder Uji was pissed. He hired a bad mercenary, even for a goblin.

“It worked!” AC was happy, but in pain all at the same time. “It worked. Okay, your turn.”

“What! I’m not putting that in my eyes.” Cindy barked.

“You want proof? There it is.”

Cindy hesitated.

“Yes, it hurts at first, but the burning stops pretty fast. Look, you’ll see what I see and then you’ll know,” AC urged.

“Okay.”

Cindy held her breath as she tilted back her head and he dropped in the first drop.

“Holy shit!” screamed Cindy. “That hurts.” She pounded her fist on the steering wheel and clenched her teeth.

“One more eye,” said AC firmly.

It took a few minutes, but finally Cindy relaxed and held still long enough for him to add the second drop. “That really burns. Now what?”

“Read the book.”

Cindy read. “It looks like a kid wrote this.”

“Can you read it?” asked AC.

“Yes,” she admitted. “I can read it. It’s nonsense, but I can read it.”

AC flipped through the pages. “It’s got a different layout than my others, but the riddles are the same. Must be a tribal thing. I stopped picking up riddle books after about fifty. Nothing new in here. You can keep it if you want.”

Cindy was quiet for a moment, but then sounded serious when she spoke again. “You’re screwed. You know that, right?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. At least I know what’s coming.” For the first time since Uji knocked on his door AC felt confident. “I’m the best in the world, remember. I’ve been through this. They’ll send a pup next. I’m pretty sure they meant to try to capture me first, but Uji’s pissed. He’ll kill me.”

“Are you sure it will be a werewolf?”

“Not a hundred percent, but most likely. There are a lot of more powerful things out there, but they don’t do work for hire. It might not be a wolf, though. Around here I would

expect a mountain lion. Wolves are considered extinct in Utah. There have been a couple of sightings or possible sightings, but mountain lions are much more common. A werecat could be found in downtown Salt Lake and not be too suspect. Mountain lions had been seen in the foothills several times. It always made the news.

“But aren’t werewolves huge – twice as big as a normal wolf and all that?”

“No. A little bigger, but not much. Too many books and movies for you. How do you think they’ve been able to blend in for so long. They just run a regular pack. In fact, if there are any lycans here, I would expect them to be weredogs. Nowhere near as fierce, but just as magical.” AC was thinking hard.

“Weredogs?” asked Cindy.

“Yeah. They are much more common than werewolves, but just like dogs they aren’t normally aggressive or anything. I mean dogs don’t normally kill people. Wolves don’t either, but they are certainly more capable. So those kinds of lycans can live around people without arousing too much suspicion. Not very good mercenaries, though. Excellent servants, but crappy fighters.”

“So now what?” asked Cindy.

“Now we see what that store really has to offer.”

She followed AC back into the store. Now that her doubts were gone, her fear was beginning to show.

“Back again? You guys really just can’t get enough of this place?” The girl was looking over the top of a book as they came in. Obviously Saturday mornings were usually pretty slow.

“Well, we have needs.” AC took a second to look for her nametag, but she didn’t have one. “What’s your name?”

“Laura.”

“Well, Laura, we need all the classics. You know potions, charms, protections, a little bit of everything.”

“Anything specific?”

“Lycanthropes. Any belladonna?” AC was friendly, but serious. He felt like he was really able to take charge now.

“You know that stuff is poisonous, right?” Laura sounded skeptical.

“Of course. Don’t worry. No pets and no kids. Got any?”

“Yes. Live plants, only.”

“Perfect.”

AC bought everything he could reasonably carry – Eyebright, Orris root, a couple of small, cheap locket (not actually magical, but easily enchantable), and their whole collection of essential oils.

“Do you have enough to pay for all this?” Asked Cindy.

AC laughed wryly. “If I don’t it won’t matter much, now will it?”

“I guess not.”

They left the store, and stepped into the crisp October air. AC didn’t know if he would be ready when the next attack came, or even if it would come. Everything felt so random and strange still.

In the car AC carefully plucked a few leaves of belladonna and placed them inside one of the charms he bought. Then he slipped the charm into his pocket. He had no true magical energy for the moment so he would have to rely on mundane protections for now. In Alathor he knew dozens of useful spells to deal with practically any situation, but until he could get

something that carried magical essence, like fairy dust, he couldn't power any of them.

Hopefully the smell of belladonna – also known as wolfsbane – would give any werewolf, or other lycan, second thoughts about attacking.

“Now what?” Asked Cindy.

“A church. I need holy water,” said AC, “and wafers.”

“Over on 7th East. You figure they'll just give them to you?”

“I have no idea. My mom's Catholic and all, but I haven't been to a church since I was a baby,” AC admitted.

“Don't look at me. Church and me parted a long time ago. I mean it was kind of okay when I was a kid, but I'm not into it. Cammie goes every Sunday, but she's Mormon.”

The church was only a few minutes away, and neither of them felt much like talking. AC realized that his friend probably was even more confused by all of this than he was. Of course he had been playing games forever, at least since he was a little kid, but games were just a way of passing the time. He loved to win, but never took them seriously. Everyone loves to imagine things – to pretend they are a superhero or whatever, but to AC it was about being the best.

“So does this mean everything about the game is real?” asked Cindy.

“No idea.”

“So what happens when you mix a fake potion and you poison yourself?”

AC managed to laugh. “I guess I die.” He laughed again. “Potions aren't my thing anyway. I mean I'm pretty good – nowhere near as good as some of the clans, but they aren't my deal. I played to win, not to hoard gold.”

“Gold?”

“Yeah, game gold. Alathor is like every other game out there. You can get gold buying and selling stuff. I mean it’s pretty realistic in a lot of ways, but you can get items and money way faster than you ever could in real life. A lot of players just found ways to farm gold and then sold it off for real money to other players. There’s a huge secondary market out there – people all over the internet selling stuff for the game. Potions are a good way to make money fast. The ingredients, at least most of them, are relatively cheap and easy to come by. Then all you have to do is raid some goblins or fairies or whatever to get the magic to power them. I mean you would never get anything powerful, like invisibility or anything like that, but you could get some instant cures, love potions, that kind of thing. In a world where most players don’t live out the first week people pay for even the smallest help.”

“How do they die?”

“Disease mostly. Just about everything fantastic is poisonous to humans. Pretty much anything breaks the skin, even a little fairy bite, and you’re going to get a magical disease. It kills you or enslaves you or whatever. Game over, unless you can get your hands on a cure, and in Alathor nobody just gives anything away. You get bit, you fork over a buck or two to get the cure or else you have to start over again. Or else you join a clan and then you work for them. So many different ingredients each week or so much loot each week and you get to stay and get a free cure each week.”

“Most players make it a month or two between deaths, if they have a good clan. Officially there is no PVP – you can’t directly attack another player or loot their inventory or anything, but still you can raid their houses and stuff, which amounts to the same thing. Take their cures and clans can’t protect their players. Without protection they can’t raid anymore. That, and the constant attacks. If you raid the fairies then they’ll raid you back, and they can be

pretty cunning. They have invisibility and crap, so if you aren't careful you're dead. One thing is for sure, in Alathor there are a lot more fantastics than there are in real life, and they are a lot more aggressive, but otherwise it's actually a pretty normal world – for a game.”

“Sounds tough,” said Cindy.

“More like impossible. But it's addictive.”

“Why don't people just quit?”

“Well, there's the whole RP aspect. I mean aside from raiding and fighting and all that, people like to just hang out virtually, and Alathor is the best at that. You can literally do almost anything in the game. If you can think of it, you can do it. It's like life, only without the risk. You can hook up or just hang out, change your appearance. In a couple of days you can upgrade your house or whatever. People like to collect stuff and they can do that without all the repetitive raiding you get from most games, so they stay. As long as you don't piss off the fantastics, you are pretty safe. You can stay alive quite a while and get good stuff. People stay for that. But then they get seduced by some skankpire and its over.”

“Skankpire?”

“When a vampire is young, it just looks to meet its needs – blood and sex. They are almost like animals, but of course they can talk and they look human. So if you aren't paying attention you'll meet somebody who's attractive as hell and super charming – the perfect date. I didn't really understand it until I heard Uji talk last night. When he was talking I was totally convinced he was my best friend. If I didn't know – I mean just plain know – that he was a vampire, I mean if I hadn't seen so many of them in Alathor, I would have invited him in without a second thought. Skankpire's are like that. Charming and sexy and next thing you know you're enthralled and game over. Happens all the time to people who are just online for the RP aspect.”

Chapter Four:

The parking lot of the church was mostly empty. It was an old building, but the stone work was stylized to look even older. Interesting stone statues decorated the roof. The front doors of the building were unlocked, and inside the church the solemn darkness covered them like a muffling blanket. Nobody else was present. They walked as softly as they could. AC's converse sneakers didn't make any noise, but Cindy's heels seemed to echo across three states.

AC guessed the man was a priest by his clothes, based on what he had seen in movies, but wasn't sure. "Uh, can you help us?"

"That's what I'm here for," said the man. "I'm Father Aaron. What can I do for you?"

"Um, I was hoping to get some holy water." AC felt like an idiot while he was speaking.

"Of course. We have plenty. Is there a particular need?" The priest was calm, and seemed unsurprised by their request.

"I just feel that I would be safer with it," said AC. The truth seemed like the best answer – just maybe not the entire truth.

"You're not the only person who feels that way." Father Aaron reassured them as he spoke. "I know several who keep some at home or who carry it with them. I keep it right over here. Did you bring something to carry it in?"

"Oh, crap! I left it in the car," said AC. "I'll be right back."

He dashed back outside. The church had a wide lawn with a fairly long sidewalk in front of the parking lot. AC jogged toward the car, and as he did he noticed another car pulling into the lot – a silver Lexus, driven by a large man. AC reached the car and opened the door. His water bottles were still in the back. They still had their price stickers on them. The car pulled up

next to Cindy's. AC grabbed his bottle and began jogging back to the church. Behind him he heard the door of the Lexus open and close. AC gave a backward glance and saw the large man getting out of the car, but AC ignored him and rejoined the priest and Cindy.

"Here, use this." AC was a little out of breath as he spoke. He handed Father Aaron the water bottle.

"This isn't for drinking, my son," said Father Aaron.

"I'll put it in something better when I get a chance. I promise. I'm not going to drink it."

"Okay, no problem. Let me see your bottle." Father Aaron smiled slightly. He seemed to understand AC's need without judging.

As the priest began to get AC's water, the man from the car walked up. He was easily over six feet, with a broad, strong chest. His dark hair was cut short and slightly spiked. He walked quietly for such a large man, even though he wore cowboy boots on the stone floor. He wore black jeans and had on a black western style button down shirt. "Howdy," he said. His voice was friendly, if only a little too loud for the church.

"Hi," said Cindy.

Once again AC felt the familiar chill of fear crawl up his spine and into his throat. When he turned he found himself looking into a pair of eyes that were just too yellow to be brown – eyes he had seen many times before, animal eyes.

"You Adam Jones?" asked the man. His slight drawl sounded perfectly natural. AC guessed he wasn't from Utah.

"Who's asking?" said AC.

"Fair enough. Figured you'd be a might jumpy after last night. Name's Marcus Thompson." He held up his left arm and unrolled the sleeve a little. "You'll recognize this."

On his arm he carried a scar – four identical puncture wounds placed in a diamond pattern on the inside of his forearm. His eyes rolled over AC as he spoke. For the briefest instant AC noticed Marcus' eyes linger on the pocket where he had the hidden belladonna.

“Here's your water,” interrupted Father Aaron. “Anything else I can do for you?”

“I was hoping to get some holy wafers as well,” said AC. He could hardly take his eyes from Marcus' arm.

“I think we can do that,” said the priest. He smiled, but seemed to sense the tension that Marcus had created. He turned to Marcus, “I'll be with you in just a moment, my son.”

“Actually, I'm here to see him,” said Marcus. When the priest hesitated, he added, “but I'm in no hurry. I'll wait in the narthex.” Marcus walked casually back to the entrance of the church.

“Where's the narthex?” Cindy asked in a whisper.

“The narthex is just a fancy name for the foyer,” said Father Aaron. “I'll get your wafers so you can talk to your friend.”

“I don't know anything about a narthex, but I'm not looking forward to talking to him no matter where it is,” said AC.

“Friends can be like that,” Father Aaron chuckled a little as he walked away.

“Who is he?” asked Cindy.

“Thompson clan – werewolf. He might be okay or you might be about to witness a very grisly death. I'm not sure how well my little charm is working. Just don't piss him off.”

“Serious?” asked Cindy.

“Serious,” said AC.

They waited without talking for the priest to bring back some wafers. He returned with a small box. “You can make these yourself at home,” he said. “Just google the recipe. Or you can order them from Amazon. No need to come back here. Now, is there anything else I can do for you?”

“No, I think we’re good,” said AC.

“God is good. The rest of us just try,” said Father Aaron. “Here, take this. If you have a need, use it.” He handed AC a business card. “And one for you.” He gave Cindy another. “I’ll be here. I know trouble when it walks in on a Saturday morning. I’m here to help.”

“Thanks, Father,” said AC. “I’ll call if I need it, really.”

“Go in peace, children,” said Father Aaron.

They found Marcus waiting calmly near the entrance. He smiled broadly, showing perfect white teeth. His eyes almost glowed beneath the Stetson he had placed on his head.

“Proud to meet you,” said Marcus, extending his hand.

AC met his grip warily, but he found the handshake firm and friendly. “I didn’t expect the Thompson clan. I didn’t know if you were real,” said AC.

“Real enough. We thought for sure you were dead once I caught wind of Uji. He doesn’t make many mistakes.” Marcus’ eyes fell on AC’s crucifix. “I guess he hadn’t counted on you having protection. Not many folks carry it these days.”

“Just lucky I guess,” said AC, trying to sound casual.

“What about pups? You ready for that?” Marcus’ question was pointed.

“Ready enough,” replied AC. “If push comes to shove I can hold my own, against you. A few more hours and I’ll be able to handle anything that comes my way.”

“Not me.” Marcus shook his head. “I’m one of the good guys here. Hell, I’ve got nothing against humans. I say live and let live. Keep the hell away from me and I’ll stay the hell away from you. Give me open range, room to stretch, and I’m happy. Uji though, his bunch would just as soon see you all food or slaves or whatever the hell they get into their heads. And you, I’m sorry to say, AC, are the key to a whole new plan.”

“Alathor?” AC asked.

“Yep.” Marcus’ response almost sounded like a bark.

“You going to tell me about it?”

“Sure, but not here. You need to be ready for action, and I’m guessing they caught you with your pants down just like the others. Of course you’re better than them or else we wouldn’t be talking, now would we?” Marcus actually seemed a little impressed as he talked.

“What others?” AC asked.

“I’ll tell you about it when we get there,” said Marcus.

“Where?”

“Wherever in the hell we’re going. You said you need to get ready, so get ready already. I’ll follow in my car.” Marcus actually laughed.

“Where to?” Cindy asked.

“You think your Mom would let me use her kitchen?” AC asked.

“I don’t know. Let me call.”

Vicky, Cindy’s mom, liked AC and always asked about him. He had only visited a few times, but she was always super nice.

“She says no problem, but not to leave a mess.” Cindy seemed to be finally relaxing a little. “She lives in Sandy. You have a cell? I’ll text you the address in case we get separated.”

“Ok, let’s go.”

Saturday traffic on the freeway was light. Marcus followed them so close the whole way that Cindy was afraid to use her brakes. AC was busy trying to think in the car, and Cindy didn’t seem in the mood for conversation, so the ride was quiet. Vicky lived in a cute little subdivision in Sandy – one of those places with lots of big gray-brown houses that all look alike. AC could have taken a picture of her front yard and plastered it on a developer’s billboard somewhere – welcome to life in the burbs.

The lawn was perfectly manicured – just like everyone else in the cul-de-sac, except for one place that looked like it was sprouting toys instead of grass. Vicky’s Camry was parked in the driveway.

“Hi, AC, how’ve you been? I sure haven’t seen you much lately,” said Vicky when they walked in. She was an otherwise attractive brunette who had put on a little weight after two kids and two marriages. She had a kind face and happy voice that only occasionally rose to an angry pitch, and despite all the lessons life had forced upon her tried to assume nothing was ever wrong.

“Hi Vicky. I’ve been busy with school and work. I work a lot,” said AC

“Really? Where? I had no idea.” Vicky seemed genuinely happy to hear about it.

“I work from home, on the computer.” AC really didn’t want to tell her that he played a game all the time.

“Are you a programmer? Cindy never told me that. She said you just played games a lot. Cindy I don’t think you give this young man enough credit. And aren’t you about finished at the U?” Vicky asked.

“Yeah – I mean I could be finished already. I did my chemistry degree already, but I want to finish my math degree so I have this quarter and then winter quarter. I might take a class in the spring just to do it. I don’t know how much longer my job is going to last, so I kind of need to find something permanent,” said AC.

“Mom,” said Cindy. “We have another friend, is that okay. We’ll only be a couple of hours and then I think I’ll take AC home, if we can. I mean the cops might still be there or something.”

Vicky looked suddenly disturbed. “I’m sorry AC. Cindy told me all about it last night. I’m so sorry. Whatever you need, just tell me.”

“I didn’t tell you everything, Mom,” said Cindy. “I mean, I didn’t know everything. His place was broken into last night as well. They trashed his apartment.”

“Well you can stay here!” Vicky brightened immediately at the thought, and AC knew he would never be able to tell her no. “I mean Greg moved out this fall – living with what’s her name, so his room is empty. I mean I’ve been thinking of throwing his junk out anyway. It’s just me and Ron and he won’t mind. I know he won’t. He’s away on business for another week anyway. We’d love to have you! I mean it. In fact I’ll get started right now. It’ll be fun, won’t it Cindy!”

Cindy groaned and rolled her eyes, but she also knew they would have to accept the inevitable. AC never really understood what the disconnect between Cindy and Vicky was, but she always seemed to be trying to keep AC from getting to know her mom very well.

“Mom!”

“What Cindy?”

“Mom, this is Marcus. He’s a friend of AC’s.” Cindy gestured to the huge man filling her front doorway. “He’s going to be hanging out with us today.”

“Sure honey. Maybe he can help me move stuff,” said Vicky.

“Sure thing, m’am. Let me just park my hat and I’m at your service,” said Marcus.

Marcus followed Vicky up the stairs and AC and Cindy went back to the car to get the rest of his things. AC set a pot of water boiling in the kitchen and they began unpacking the things he had collected that morning.

“I guess I have enough to get on with, but nothing here is really any good without some pixie dust or goblin snot or something,” complained AC. “I really wasn’t thinking last night.”

“You sound like you’re getting ready to go dungeon delving or something. I thought this was just about staying alive,” said Cindy. “You’re talking like this is another round of one of our role-playing games and this is just another adventure.”

“Look, Cindy,” said AC. “Staying alive is great. I plan to do it – well, for the rest of my life, but don’t you get it? This opens up a whole new world for me. I spent my whole life planning to be a chemist or a mathematician – probably end up teaching school someplace, but I am good, really truly good, at one thing. How many of us, anywhere, ever get to say I am number one – the best, the best in the whole world? Nobody. Well today I found out that I am not just the best at some stupid game. I could be the best at something that actually matters. I know it isn’t a game. I get that. But if I can use what I know about gaming to be the best in real life, then why not?”

“What are you talking about?” Cindy sounded a little frightened.

“I’m talking about making it real. Look, in Alathor I’m the most powerful being alive. Do you realize how much good I could do with that power here, now, in real life? Do you have any inkling? I can save lives. I can make a real difference now,” said AC.

“It’s a game,” said Cindy.

“It was a game. Now it’s my life. Why do you think Marcus is here? Because something big is happening. These fantasy creatures are reaching out – at least some of them, and I am not going to pass this up.”

The water had reached a boil. “Do you have any scissors?”

“Yeah,” said Cindy. She shook her head and walked out of the kitchen. “You’re nuts.”

AC took the pot off the burner and let it cool while he got out his other water bottle. It was thick hard plastic so he didn’t think it would break. When Cindy came back with the scissors he carefully snipped two leaves of belladonna into his water bottle.

“What about a marker – the permanent kind?” He asked.

“I’ll have to look,” said Cindy.

Using a funnel, he poured the hot water over the leaves. When the water hit the leaves, a nasty smell filled the kitchen.

“What is that?” Cindy asked. “It’s gross!”

“That is the disgusting smell of death to lycans. We just have to let it cool down and figure out how to get it into the squirt guns. It’s an infusion of wolfsbane. Our friend Marcus is highly allergic, and to the rest of us it is deadly poisonous. Not something to be toyed with. It also has various magical applications, but most of them aren’t nice. Where’s that marker?”

“Here.”

AC carefully labeled the water bottle and gave it a date.

“Uh, I think that’s last year’s date,” said Cindy.

“Yeah, I know.” AC didn’t feel like explaining every detail to her, but gave in when she gave him that look. “Okay – I put the date a year prior so that if someone jacks my stuff they think it’s gone bad. They chuck it, which is better than having them use it against me or someone else.”

“Who is going to steal a bottle of nasty leaves?”

“I don’t know, but it happens all the time in Alathor,” said AC.

“So what else do we have to do?” Cindy asked.

“Not much. Fill the squirt guns. One with this stuff,” he held up the bottle, “one with the vodka, and one with the holy water. If Marcus isn’t in a hurry then I want to do some shopping and some research, otherwise I guess I need to hear his story.”

Marcus walked into the kitchen as AC was finishing up. He let out a low growl, that was distinctly animal. “What’s going on here?”

“Pup poison – obviously,” said AC.

Marcus gagged suddenly and ran for the front door. Cindy rushed after him, but AC just smiled and kept working. Somehow he figured he wouldn’t be too popular with Marcus. He walked to the base of the stairs in the front room. “Hey Vicky,” he called.

“Yeah, hon,” she called back.

“Do you have one of those bulb syringes?”

“Not sure AC. Look in the bathroom.”

AC started for the bathroom when Cindy came back. “He puked all over the flowers. Whatever you did totally messed him up.”

“Where is he now?” Asked AC.

“In his car.”

“Open some windows. When the smell is gone he’ll be able to come back. Help me find a bulb syringe. Your mom said there might be one in the bathroom.”

“I know where it is,” said Cindy.

Using the bulb syringe, AC carefully filled a squirt gun with a different liquid – holy water, alcohol, and the still warm belladonna infusion. He then labeled each one carefully and strapped it into one of the little holsters.

“You look ridiculous,” commented Cindy.

“I’d rather look ridiculous than be eaten alive. I wonder how Marcus is doing?”

Chapter Five:

Marcus was sitting on the front steps, texting on his cell when AC opened the door. He growled, but said nothing. AC could see the hair bristling on Marcus' neck and realized he was fighting hard to keep himself from transforming.

"I'm sorry about the smell," said AC. "I told you I was getting ready for trouble. You probably aren't the only lycan in the area, and I would hate to be caught off guard if someone unfriendly shows up."

"They'll regret it if they do. What is that stuff? I feel horrible, and I only smelled it." Marcus sounded sick.

AC showed him the water pistol with the belladonna infusion. "Belladonna, otherwise known as wolfsbane. It's been used to ward off werewolves for centuries. Until now I figured that was just a legend of some kind. I'm sorry about making you sick, but I'm glad to know that it works."

"Put it away, please," said Marcus.

AC holstered his water gun.

"Look, are you ready to tell me what's going on?" AC asked.

"I can tell you what we know," said Marcus.

"We?" Asked AC.

"Let me explain the situation first. I'm not sure how much I can tell you about who is involved – let's just say a group of friends, not just lycans, but a bunch of us fantastics. Anyway, as you know, there has been a big debate for centuries about how much we should interact with humans. Some want to kill you all. Some want to enslave you. Some want to ignore you. And

some of us, a few of us, want to protect you – to keep you alive because, well, because it’s just the right thing to do, and most of the time it’s pretty fun. It doesn’t pay much, but it’s exciting.”

“Well, somebody – and I won’t name names – had the bright idea of see what would happen if we revealed ourselves openly to all humans, so we came up with Alathor.”

“So the game was made by fantastics?” AC asked. “I mean it was programmed with magic and stuff.”

“Exactly,” said Marcus. “We hired a development firm – all human – out of Asia, and a couple of our friends who know computers weaved magic into the code so that it could anticipate and create effects that are otherwise impossible. Not to mention it completely speeded up the process. We just told our development team that we had another team writing code in the U.S. – which is technically true, except for the fact that they are using spells instead of keyboards. And it worked amazingly well, as you know.”

“Yeah, I know,” admitted AC. “That game is my life at the moment.”

“Well, then you can understand why some fantastics would be upset about the game,” said Marcus.

“If what we did to fantastics in that game is real, then I’m surprised there haven’t been more murders.”

“There have. All the top players are being targeted,” said Marcus. “Companies have been sabotaged. People are dead. We just began figuring it out a few days ago. Whoever is doing this must have stolen our list, because that is exactly who they have targeted. Siria, she’s more or less our leader, had this idea. We would contact the top players and let them in on the secret. Then we would get their help and advice about how best to keep humans safe or what we should tell you about ourselves. Personally I think it was a bad idea from start to finish, and I

think the results speak for themselves. Five are dead that we know of for sure. We thought you were dead, but you got lucky I guess.”

“You realize that in the game I tortured the hell out of fantastics?” AC asked.

“Yep.”

“I killed half your clan in the game.” AC tried to keep his voice steady as he talked.

“I know,” said Marcus. The werewolf didn’t look or sound happy.

“Then what are you doing here? Why not just let me die and be done with it?”

“Hell if I know. Like I said, I thought it was a bad idea to begin with. But, from the looks of it you wouldn’t be so easy to kill, so I guess I’d rather have you on our side than the other.” Marcus growled again – a distinctly animal sound.

“So now what?” AC asked.

“I’m supposed to take you to a meeting place – let Siria and the others get to know you. We want to try to reach the other players before they are killed too. We had a list of the top ten – I’m sure you know them.”

“You realize I’m nothing without my powers, right?” AC said.

“And you realize that I could care less, right?” smirked Marcus. “Not really my problem, and not really something I’m going to do anything about.”

“Fair enough. Where are we going, and when will we be back?”

“Hard to explain where, and as for when we get back – I have no idea.”

“Good enough. Looks like I don’t have much choice. Let’s get it over with.”

Cindy suddenly spoke. AC hadn’t even realized she was standing there. “I guess I’ll tell my mom you won’t be staying.”

“I’ll be back,” said AC.

“Grab your stuff. Let’s go,” said Marcus.

AC sat silently in Marcus’ car as he drove towards I-15. He now wore his trench coat and he hugged his backpack on his lap. Whatever else happened he wasn’t about to lose his gear. Marcus’ story was plausible, but he wasn’t sure how much of it he was buying just yet. The Lexus was far more comfortable than his Toyota, or at least it would be if Marcus weren’t so angry next to him.

“So what else do you have up your sleeve – I mean besides anti lycan juice?” Asked Marcus.

“A little of this, a little of that,” said AC. He wasn’t about to start spilling his secrets. One thing he had learned in Alathor was that information was worth more than your life. “I’ve enough to keep us alive. Why? Are you expecting trouble?”

“I’m not worried about me, punk. I’ve been living this game my whole life. But Uji’s not to be messed with – and you already pissed him off. By tonight we’ll be swimming in . . .”

Suddenly the car rocked to the left as something massive hit the back passenger side. Marcus braked and steadied the wheel. Something smashed into the roof, and AC saw a dent appear just over his head.

“Shit! What is it?” Marcus growled angrily.

Another slam on the roof and AC saw one stone claw poke through. The claw gripped the ceiling and ripped upwards. Through the widening seam AC could see flashes of a grotesque stone body.

“Gargoyle!” shouted AC.

“What the hell?” shouted Marcus.

“It must have followed us from the church. It will run you off the road – make it look like an accident.” AC wracked his brain to come up with an answer. Gargoyles didn’t have many weaknesses. It wasn’t uncommon in Alathor for different types of fantastics to be unfamiliar with other types of fantastics, but AC was still surprised by Marcus’ reaction. Hadn’t the werewolf known enough to be able to locate AC? Something wasn’t quite right, but AC didn’t have time to think about that at the moment.

“How do we stop it?” Marcus asked.

“Without acid? We don’t. We outrun it. Punch it! Get on the freeway!”

Marcus hit the gas and the Lexus sped through a red light. He hit the on ramp at fifty and kept accelerating. They both felt the weight drop from the roof as they drove north on I-15.

“It will follow if it can,” said AC. “It must have been at the church, waiting and watching. It took it a while to get to Vicky’s. They fly pretty slow I guess.”

“How do you stop it if it catches us?” asked Marcus.

“No idea. Unless you can fight it there’s nothing I can really do about it. In the game I would just blast it with a spell, but I don’t have any magic here. All I can do is run,” said AC.

“You need to get some magic, boy,” said Marcus.

“I don’t think you would like that,” replied AC.

They both fell back into silence as the adrenaline wore off. AC was tired. He felt himself dozing a little, wondering where they were going. In the game he would have just teleported to their destination and then taken a nap. Marcus turned off towards the airport and drove around to road that said, “Private.”

“You can sleep on the plane if you want. It’s about two hours I guess. I don’t think that gargoyle will catch up with us,” said Marcus.

“No it won’t, and you can bet that Uji will know exactly what happened and by tonight he’ll be moving on to the next target, if he isn’t already. Ten to one he skipped town this morning on a cargo flight to wherever the next person on your list is. He’s got a thrall somewhere in town here running things for him. He wouldn’t stick around when he knows he can’t personally touch me,” explained AC. “Unless he’s as stupid as . . .”

“As stupid as who?” growled Marcus.

“Forget it. Where’s the plane?”

Sure enough a small plane was waiting for them. The pilot greeted Marcus by name and shook his hand. He also shook AC’s hand and called him sir. He offered to help AC with his bag, but AC wasn’t letting it out of his grip – even for a minute. “It’s the difference between life and death,” he explained.

Before they even took off AC was asleep. His body craved sleep and his mind was too tired to begin sorting things out. Despite the fact that he needed answers, the morning had already been added more to his stress than he wanted. On top of everything else he had homework to finish before Monday. It wouldn’t kill him if his grades dropped a little, but he was proud of his grades. He had spent a lot of years working on them and he would hate to see them go down because some stupid game turned out to be real.

“Hey, Adam,” said Marcus, pushing AC’s shoulder to wake him. “We’re almost there. You better wake up.”

“Where are we?” asked AC.

“Colorado. This is one of our little hubs. It’s a ranch – pretty isolated, like most of our hiding spots,” said Marcus.

“Thompson ranch?” asked AC.

“No,” replied Marcus. “Thompson ranch is in Texas. This tiny little playground doesn’t even begin to compare. Back home this wouldn’t even be considered a ranch. But it’s big enough to lose yourself on if you aren’t careful, so don’t go wandering off. Siria wants to meet you, and so do a bunch of others.”

“Who’s Siria?” asked AC.

“She’s the boss,” said Marcus.

“I guess I mean’t what’s Siria,” said AC, hoping he wouldn’t offend Marcus yet again.

“Siria is a person of great power and importance,” replied Marcus angrily. “A person, just like you or me.”

“Yeah, okay,” said AC. Yes, once again he had pissed off the werewolf. “I mean, like what makes her important.”

“You’ll see,” replied Marcus.

The plane landed on a little runway in a wide green valley. Cattle were spread across the valley, like enormous black ants. Snow dotted the ground in skimpy patches and suddenly AC was very glad for the heavy trench coat.

“The weather is clear but cold,” said the pilot. “It’s supposed to be clear until tomorrow evening, so no need to rush.”

Marcus told the pilot thanks, and AC stared numbly around, trying to take in the scene but realized that his brain was not able to take in the new surroundings as quickly as he wanted. He had that odd sensation he would get on family trips as a child – like he was entering a new world whenever they went to visit his grandparents over Christmas. Popping around from town to town online was one thing, but in real life he couldn’t even seem to adjust after one simple plane ride.

“This way,” said Marcus. “Let’s get in where it’s warm.”

A couple of four-wheelers waited near the runway and AC rode behind Marcus as the lycan drove them over a narrow trail to the ranch house. The trail met a dirt road that ran between corrals and into the ranch yard. The yard was a wide dirt area between corrals in front of a big double-wide mobile home. A large satellite dish stood beside the house. A gray horse watched them ride up from inside the corral to their right. Something seemed a bit odd about the horse, so AC looked again. This time he saw the single horn protruding from its head – apparently the see magic ointment was still working. How much longer would the eye drops last? Two more hours? Three? He smiled at the unicorn. It didn’t smile back. Nothing about this place felt friendly.

The house was nothing special to look at, just a regular beige double wide, probably twenty years old, but the see magic ointment revealed the presence of at least three auras enveloping the entire house, and one extending out into the driveway. Each was a different color that pulsed or shifted slightly – like a computer screensaver. The largest, the blue one, the one that extended down the driveway was to repel visitors. This ward was typical of all fantastic dwellings – at least the safe ones to visit. Only the fantastics looking for an easy meal let humans wander into their houses. The second, a yellow-green aura that sometimes pulsed with an orange line, was a standard alarm. It was fairly easy to produce for any low level caster and there were a number of different items that could produce the charm on command.

The last aura, a green one with blue circles flowing over its surface frightened AC the most. It was part of a binding spell or a summoning spell. In either case it could be used to either conjure or imprison fairly powerful creatures. If they were intending to keep him here, that aura would certainly do the trick – provided they were able to complete the rest of the

binding, which would be somewhat difficult considering it was designed to be used on magical creatures. Of course AC had modified the binding before to trap humans, but it was tricky and you had to have a fairly gullible adversary. Telling someone, “Here, hold this,” didn’t usually work in Alathor. Alternatively it could be the aura of a recall point – a pre-arranged teleport destination for those unable to teleport themselves.

Marcus opened the front door and held it open for AC to enter. “You first,” said AC.

“Suspicious, aren’t we?” mocked Marcus.

“You don’t get to be the best by walking into a trap with a werewolf at your back,” replied AC. “Go ahead.”

Marcus shrugged his shoulders and walked in first. AC followed cautiously, after checking his squirt guns.

Inside, the living room was nothing special. A couch from the seventies with a matching recliner and coffee table. The fabric was a green plaid that looked like something direct from a second hand store. The carpet was probably brown, but might have been another color at some point. It was so worn near the doorway that the subfloor underneath was showing. On the couch lounged a skinny girl with long blonde, almost white hair, waving a remote at the television. She was wearing cut off shorts that showed a pair of very nice legs and had on a yellow tank top.

“Hi Marcus,” she said, as he walked in. She appeared to ignore AC.

From this angle he couldn’t see her wings, but AC knew immediately that she was fey of some sort. Nobody had skin that flawless – or that sparkly. Not all fey were beautiful, but many were. AC had to guess that she was some sort of nymph, probably some grassland variety that had lost her connection to her native place but still managed to survive. It took a very powerful

fey to survive a disconnect from nature. Most fairies and the like spent their immortal lives never leaving a very small area, most couldn't survive being removed even for a short time.

"Trina, this is AC," said Marcus.

"Who?" Trina asked. Her voice had a musical quality, like tiny silver bells tinkling.

"Adam Cornelius – you remember, the guy I went to get," Marcus sounded exasperated as he spoke.

"Oh yeah! Adam Cornelius – AC," she giggled, as if she had just figured out some desperate secret. "Nice to meet you." She bounced off the couch and extended a hand.

AC shook her hand gently and couldn't help smiling back. Careful he thought. When the fey are nice think twice. "Nice to meet you too," he stammered. At the touch of her hand AC felt a slight tingle, something so subtle he might have missed it except that it felt the same way that the fey touch sounded in Alathor. He couldn't explain it, but he was sure of it. At the same time his eyes burned, and through the renewed pain he knew that the potion he had mixed earlier was being intensified by her touch. Then he suddenly remembered himself and held her grip for an extra instant and looked directly into her eyes. "It is truly a pleasure to meet such a beauty. You have such lovely hair."

Involuntarily Trina touched her hair. "Do you really think so? I've been brushing it all morning, but I don't think it's just perfect yet." She might be bigger than a typical fairy, but AC knew she would be just as vain.

Marcus suddenly cut her off. "Where's Siria?"

"Siria's in the kitchen," said Trina. "She's been wondering where you were. You didn't call. I think she's a little upset. You better talk to her or something." Trina sounded suddenly deeply sad, as if Marcus had done something awful.

“Okay, Trina. I’m sure she’s fine. We ran into a little trouble, but nothing serious, okay.” Marcus tried to reassure her, but already she had turned back to the television. She had found one of those fashion makeover reality shows and was apparently comparing her own outfit to those on the screen.

“Come on AC,” let’s go see Siria.

AC paused. “You go ahead Marcus. If Siria’s upset, I don’t want to see her. I’ll just watch TV for a bit with Trina.”

“Not a chance. Siria would skin me alive and feed my heart to Uji. ‘Don’t leave him alone with little princess precious.’ That’s what she told me,” said Marcus.

AC had to laugh a little. “Whatever you say.” But inside he knew exactly what Siria was thinking. Fairies of all kinds were powerful and even dangerous, but he had made a specialty of trapping them in Alathor. Their power could be harnessed fairly easily and at this point he needed magic badly. If they knew anything about his activities online they would be keeping him as far away as possible from any fairies – especially those as obviously powerful as Trina. He followed Marcus into the kitchen.

“He wanted to watch TV,” said Marcus when they were in the kitchen. He raised his voice to a tone of mockery. “Just wanted to hang out with Trina.”

A table dominated the dining portion of the kitchen. It was a small octagonal affair with four chairs with wicker seats spread around it. On the table lay a book, and reading it was a small woman with long black hair streaked with silver – the silver streaks seemed to glisten. When she looked up AC realized he could not guess her age. Something about her cheeks seemed like she might have been in her teens, but her eyes were startling and deep – a crystalline

blue that felt like the sky on a summer day. She might have been sixty or sixteen. Though he couldn't say for sure, AC didn't think she would stand taller than his chest if she stood up.

Her voice was calm, even, and kind as she spoke. "I'm glad you followed my instructions then, Marcus. It wouldn't do to have Trina distracted, now would it Mr. Jones."

AC knew at that moment that he was being addressed by someone much more powerful than anything he had dealt with in Alathor – something legendary. He knew Siria wasn't reading his mind, but something told him she certainly understood him and his intentions better in one glance than his own mother had his entire life.

"Of course not. You wouldn't want to lose a battery, now would you." AC couldn't help being impertinent as he spoke.

"That's not very nice," replied Siria.

"It's an unpleasant world," retorted AC, "and the statement stands. Trina's your battery here. She keeps the auras up so you can concentrate on other things. And yes, I was about to steal her from you. But why don't you skip to the part where we talk about something at least one of us doesn't know yet."

"Very direct, isn't he," Siria addressed Marcus this time. "You had better go and get the others, and keep Trina and her sister out of it. Their father would not be happy. We'll be in the basement, Marcus. Follow me, young man. And don't think for one second your skittles and goo-goo eyes will work on me."

"In my experience goo-goo eyes do not work on living legends," replied AC.

Siria deftly closed her book and hopped from her seat. She was tiny, even shorter than he had judged. AC wasn't a tall man, but Siria barely stood above his waist. Her movements were

agile and quick, but without any wasted energy. “I think you’ll find the basement much more comfortable,” she said. The statement was a command.

AC followed her out the back door to a set of cement steps that led down to another door into the basement. AC took note of the auras on the door, but didn’t spend a long time thinking about the significance of each one. Of course there would be protections. Besides, if Siria decided to do anything he wouldn’t be able to stop her anyway. His most powerful tool here would be keeping his mouth shut and not making anybody angry.

Inside, the basement the furniture was much more up to date. Two leather couches mirrored each other across a large, low mahogany table. A fireplace behind the couch on AC’s left burned softly. A large flat screen television was hung at the wall at the far end, but currently it was turned off. Siria sat down on one couch and gestured for AC to take a seat on the other.

“Marcus tells me you managed to evade Uji and that you make him more than a little uncomfortable. As you have guessed, I’ve reviewed what you’ve done online,” said Siria.

“Like I said, get to the part we both don’t know.” AC was tired, but more importantly getting impatient.

“Such as,” suggested Siria.

“Such as what you want. You didn’t leave me to be slaughtered, so obviously you think I’m valuable – either as an ally or in trade. I’m guessing it isn’t trade because you don’t just hand over somebody with my knowledge to the enemy. So level with me and I’ll level with you. What do you want and what do I get?” AC hoped he didn’t sound too insolent.

“The real question, Adam . . .”

AC cut her off. “The name is AC. Only my mom gets to call me Adam.”

“AC. The real question, AC is what do you want,” said Siria.

“What do you mean? What do I want?” asked AC.

“I mean just that. Now that you know that Alathor is real, what do you want? What are your goals and ambitions? You see, I need to know where you stand before I can decide what to do – and I should warn you that lying to me is very dangerous,” said Siria.

“Lying to you is suicidal,” replied AC.

“Smarter than I guessed,” said Siria.

“I know who you are and I know what you are,” said AC, “but your secret is safe with me. Don’t worry. To everyone else I’m sure you’re just a sweet little witch who happens to direct their affairs, but Alathor let on to too many secrets and I managed to unlock most of them. I’m not stupid enough to lie to a dragon.”

Siria seemed to wince at the word – if only slightly, but otherwise maintained her girlish smile. “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t spread that around. After all, I have enemies,” she said.

AC paused, thinking deeply. He breathed deep and then let his breath out long and slow. “I have one intention at the moment and only one – to survive, to stay alive. After that – I mean after I feel secure, then I’m going to do exactly what I told Cindy I was going to do. I’m going to get my power – all my power – just like in Alathor, and I am going to use it to help people,” he said.

“How do mean, ‘help people’?” asked Siria. “And who do you mean?”

“I mean everyone – others. I’m studying chemistry because I want to do research – figure things out. I don’t know maybe medicine, but stuff that people need. I want to do something that has meaning and you need power to do that. Knowledge is power – so I’ve been getting that in the real world – I mean in the non-magical world. But if I can get real power, magical power, than so much the better. Cure cancer, solve problems. Does that make sense?”

AC hadn't really realized until that moment exactly what he was trying to say, but sitting there in front of a being that could practically read his mind, he knew that for the first time he was being completely honest with himself.

"What about the fantastic creatures you have to take the power from?" asked Siria.

"I won't hurt them – not if it can be helped. Yes, I would have borrowed Trina's power – just like you are, but I won't hurt her, not if I can help it. We always hurt each other – that's part of life – but I wouldn't mean to," said AC.

Siria looked at AC for a long time. She seemed to be studying him very carefully and thinking deeply at the same time. "You're human," she said at last, "far too human."

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked AC.

"It means that your intentions are irrelevant, that you are too young, that you will change, and that it is impossible for me to not trust you. Anyway, I need your help. Do this for me, and I will be your ally. Work long enough at it and one day you might be my friend," said Siria.

"I'll settle for ally," replied AC. AC couldn't bring himself to trust her. She wasn't lying, but she was being very careful about the words she used and the way she used them. AC had played enough games – not just Alathor – and read enough stories to know that fantastics spoke in riddles even when it wasn't a riddle duel. He would stay alive only as long as Siria needed him or only as long as she or her friends were afraid of him.

"Fair enough. I think it's time to meet the others."

Siria lifted a finger and the basement door opened. "Sorry to keep you all waiting," she said. "Please, come in and sit down."

Marcus came in followed by a man, two women, and someone wrapped completely in black clothes so that AC couldn't tell if it was a man, a woman or even human. Each of them sat

around the room quietly. AC looked at them as carefully as he could without staring, but realized that he would never be able to remember all of their names.

“You’ll need to introduce yourselves, please,” said Siria. “This is AC. He’ll be joining us this weekend, and possibly in the future as well.”

“You already know me,” said Marcus.

Next to Marcus sat a thin man with balding dark brown hair combed over the top of a rather pale head. “My name is Mr. Bains. I teach school and do some computer programming on the side. You could say that I more or less led the Alathor project, which unfortunately seems to be coming to an end.” Mr. Bains’ voice was polite and very proper.

“Let me guess – you teach math,” said AC.

“Oh no,” laughed Mr. Bains. “Physical Education.” AC couldn’t recognize immediately what fantastic power Mr. Bains might hold, but he guessed that his power was substantial.

On the other side of Mr. Bains sat a young woman dressed in tight black jeans with a form fitting pink top and a black leather jacket. Once again AC didn’t need to see the wings to guess that she was fey – probably Trina’s sister. They had the same eyes and the same cute little laugh lines.

“Leena,” she said, and refused to smile.

“Very pleased to meet you,” said AC, making his voice as pleasant as possible. He had dealt with fey like Leena before. They put up a rough, if not attractive exterior to try to hide their natural vulnerabilities. “Love the tat.”

She had a tattoo of a phoenix wrapping itself around her left forearm. AC had learned to notice the details. In Alathor they meant the difference between life and death.

“Oh thanks,” she replied – almost involuntarily. “I got it last summer – over in Ft. Lauderdale.” She would have continued with her story, but was interrupted by Siria.

“He’ll have to hear the rest of his story later Leena. I think it’s Aamil’s turn,” said Siria.

Siria nodded toward the person wrapped all in black. The voice that spoke could have been the voice of a man or of a woman. “I have many names, but you may use Aamil,” it said. “If Siria vouches for you, then you have my trust – for the present.”

The final woman – who AC now noticed had distinctly pointed ears and slightly slanted eyes – spoke. Her voice was high pitched, with a distinctly insect-like quality. “I am Nal,” she said, and AC for the first time noticed the large antennae that protruded from her hair. She was wearing a long blue dress that covered her entire body, and although she seemed distracted, AC had the feeling that she was taking in much more of the room than he could. AC could try to guess what Nal was, but he had yet to encounter anything quite like her in Alathor. Apparently he still had worlds left to uncover.

AC zipped open his backpack and took out a pack of skittles. Siria gave him a deadly look, but he just opened the pack and popped a few in his mouth. “I’m hungry,” he said. “It’s not like anyone offered me a snack since I got here.”

“There are four remaining on the list,” said Siria, ignoring AC. “The seven of us, and Trina, if she chooses, need to try to reach them as soon as possible. We have two jets and I can transport up to two others with me.”

“Trina isn’t going anywhere,” said Leena, and she glared at AC. AC just smiled back, and winked. Leena rolled her eyes. AC took a handful of skittles and then tossed the pack onto the table.

“Well I am going,” said Siria.

“It is not wise for me to travel,” said Aamil. “I have risked much to come this far, and I don’t think I wish to be involved any further.”

“We need your answers more than your strength or power,” said Siria. “Guide us and we will be grateful.”

“The course of history is not to be guided by such as I,” replied Aamil, “but this wisdom I can impart.” Aamil’s voice became suddenly soft as a whisper and yet everything he or she said was heard clearly by all, as if the words themselves could reach inside of them. “The ancient power of the dead must prevail – only then can hope find us, unsought from the blood of a man to raise the fallen star and stopper the unopened bottle.” Aamil fell suddenly silent. Around the room everyone seemed to be holding their breath, as if waiting for Aamil to continue. There was no more.

Finally Marcus let out his breath in an exasperated sigh, “Helpful, as always,” he commented.

“I do my best,” replied Aamil. “The art of guiding the future is more difficult than you might expect. Perhaps if I had a greater interest it would be easier, but your mortal problems are both fatiguing and uninteresting for the most part. It is not in my nature, nor within my abilities to give you more.”

Marcus rolled his eyes, and said, “I’ll take AC with me, where are we going?”

“Your impatience is not helpful,” said Siria. “We shall all decide who is going where. As it happens we don’t necessarily need to split everyone up. Two teams will suffice. Myself and Mr. Bains will go with Nal. Unless I am mistaken she will have the most difficulty traveling and I can help the most with that. There is a young man in Seattle that I wish to visit. That leaves you three to go to Chicago. Here are the addresses. You have two visits to make there, a

man and a woman. After Seattle we will hop the border into Canada.” Siria handed Marcus a piece of paper.

“Now I want it clearly understood that you are likely walking into traps. So far we have been completely behind. We don’t even know who is masterminding all of this, so this is just as much about figuring out who we are facing as it is finding these people.”

“We don’t even have any leads,” said Leena. “Until AC, I don’t think there were even any witnesses.” Leena reached across the table and took the pack of skittles. She popped one into her mouth automatically, as if out of habit. “I’m still not sure why you brought him here Siria.” As if she suddenly realized what she was doing Leena dropped the pack of skittles to the table and sat on her hands. Siria shot AC another mean look.

“Siria’s business is Siria’s business,” said Nal. “He’s here and he may prove extremely useful to us.” Leena stuck out her tongue at AC and made a face.

“I’ll keep my eyes on him,” said Marcus. His tone was final.

“As Nal said, I have my own reasons,” replied Siria.

“It’s the necromancer,” said Marcus. “He’s the one interfering with our plans. He’s the only one powerful enough to mastermind it.”

“Not true,” replied Siria. “There are others – us, for example.”

“Yes,” agreed Mr. Bains, “there are others – but they are sleeping. Or they are not interested in the affairs of humans.”

“We can hope they are sleeping,” replied Siria. “Until we know for sure, be prepared for anything. Whatever else happens, stay in close contact. Cell phones will do for this trip. Trina will ensure that the summons remains effective, which reminds me.” She suddenly dug into a pocket of her dress and produced a small blue stone. “Just a piece of glass like you could find at

any dollar store, but it will bring you back to the house if you hold it like this and say, “Colorado House.”” She demonstrated by holding the stone in the center of her upturned palm. Then she gave the stone to AC.

“Thanks,” he said.

“Just don’t lose it,” suggested Leena with a sneer. She had begun eating skittles again.

“That’s it then,” said Siria. “Planes leave in few minutes. AC, let me see your phone so I can put all our numbers into it. Just in case.”

The others began to get up to leave as AC handed his phone to Siria. She began entering the numbers, but was watching the door, waiting for people to leave.

“That was a rather mean trick you pulled with Leena,” she said. “I don’t think it was wise.”

“Time will tell,” replied AC. “At this point I’m not sure I have other options. So unless you have other suggestions, please let me just do my thing.”

“I am ‘letting you do your thing.’ If I wasn’t, I would stop you. We both know that, so drop the attitude. You may have the rest of them fooled – except of course for Aamil, and possibly Nal, but I am not fooled. Remember that. And remember, AC, just because they’re fairies doesn’t mean they don’t have feelings. They feel just as deeply as you do, perhaps even more so. Be careful.”

AC took back his phone and looked Siria in the face. “I am careful – always. How else do think I’m still alive. I have no idea what your game is, but I’ll play along for now. It’s plain that there is a conflict of interest here – someone trying to kill off the players. Which side are you on? Marcus said live and let live. Is that where you stand?” asked AC

“Like I said, for now you get to be an ally. Do this now and maybe I’ll start to trust you. I make my own plans and I keep my own confidences,” said Siria.

“Then let me tell you something else I know. You’ve been betrayed – by someone who just sat at this table, and you know which of them it could be, but you aren’t saying because you still need Alathor – at least you think you do. You tell me to be careful, but who’s watching your back? Anyone? No. So let me give you some rash human advice – you be careful. I’m coming back from this trip, alive – are you?”

“Anyone ever tell you that you’re too smart for your own good?” asked Siria. She stood up and walked out of the room, leaving AC to think. He noticed his pack of skittles was gone. He smiled, dug out another pack, and left it on the table.

Chapter Six:

AC had never been to Chicago. In fact he had never really been anywhere – at least in his own mind. He grew up in a bunch of little towns in Arizona and New Mexico, but graduated high school in southern Utah, so he had a break on tuition if he went to college in Utah. He had only been to Salt Lake twice before he moved there for school. The only other big city he'd visited was Phoenix.

The plane took four hours to reach Chicago. This time AC took time to get to know the pilot, and this time they ate on the plane. Marcus dug some sandwiches and sodas out of a little refrigerator and AC ate his without thinking about what might be in it. He noticed the sodas were all sugar free. He was hungry and tired and still too uncomfortable around these people to say very much. Leena didn't seem to be much in the mood for conversation. She spent her time alternately checking her hair in the window and glaring at AC.

Finally he had to chuckle a little quietly to himself. The whole situation was too surreal. He had lived this scenario before – online. He dug through his backpack until he found the pocket mirror. “This might help,” he suggested to Leena, and he handed her the mirror.

Despite her best efforts she couldn't stop herself. She still tried to look unhappy about it, but took the mirror and checked to see if everything was perfect. AC knew that she wasn't wearing any makeup – no self respecting fey princess would bother – but she couldn't, by nature, ever be sure if she looked just perfect or not. The sugar from the skittles was affecting her as well. Her skin had a shine to it now that it had lacked before, and AC could almost feel the energy radiating from her.

“Don’t encourage her,” said Marcus, rolling his eyes. “If they’re supposed to be the protectors of fairydom or whatever, I don’t know how they’ve managed to stay alive this long.”

“That’s not nice,” said Leena, pouting slightly, and smoothing an eyebrow. “I’ve been protecting my sisters for over two thousand years now, and I am quite sure we can continue to manage just fine without you. Mortals created these problems you know – with their hunger for power. I still don’t know what mother sees in you.”

“I’m just helping her be happy,” commented AC. “The Queen Mother would want her to be happy – especially if we are going into danger.”

Leena suddenly looked angry. “What do you know of the Queen Mother?” she asked sharply.

AC’s reply was ready, but he spoke carefully, clearly, and slowly, “The Queen Mother blesses all the earth with her goodness and her beauty can be found everywhere the wise choose to look.”

Leena relaxed, but did not smile. “You speak wisely for a foolish mortal.”

AC dug another pack of skittles out of his backpack.

“You really have a sweet tooth,” laughed Marcus.

“I got keep my energy up,” replied AC. He noticed Leena eying the pack, but did not offer her any.

“How about sharing some,” said Marcus.

“No, definitely not. These are mine,” said AC. His voice was hard, but he tried not to sound too angry.

“Whoa, just asking,” said Marcus.

AC opened the pack, poured a few skittles into his hand and then placed the pack on the seat next to him. Then he got up to go to the bathroom. When he returned the skittles were missing and Leena was chewing on something but stopped when she caught AC looking.

“Leena, did you take my skittles,” asked AC.

“What’s the big deal,” growled Marcus. “It’s just some damn candy. Let it go.”

“Be quiet and pay attention, Marcus. You might learn something,” said AC. “Now Leena, did you take my skittles.”

Leena suddenly began to cry. Between sobs she mumbled, “Yes,” and passed back the empty candy wrapper.

“Leena, you know you shouldn’t take things that don’t belong to you, right?” said AC.

Her sobs became more profound, to the point she couldn’t speak.

“I’m not angry, Leena,” said AC. “I promise to let you make it up to me.”

Leena recovered to the point she could talk. “You foolish human. You left them just right there. I didn’t mean to. It’s your fault. I didn’t even want them. I just took them. I didn’t mean to.”

“What is going on?” asked Marcus.

“Look at her,” said AC. “Haven’t you noticed the change? She’s practically sparkling. Fey are addicts – all of them. Leena and Trina as free nymphs have more intelligence and less instinct, but they’re still addicts. In their case addicted to sugar. It gives them energy – literally. It makes them even more beautiful if possible and far more powerful. Hence the sugar free soda, and I’m guessing very little sugar anywhere back at that house.”

“You tricked me!” cried Leena. “You tricked me! You’re a sneaky little mortal. I don’t like you at all!”

Marcus laughed. “So what? Get over it. One pack of skittles isn’t going to make your ass grow overnight or anything.”

“I don’t think she’s worried about her weight, Marcus,” said AC. “Don’t you ever read fairy tales? In the old days people played tricks on fairies – usually with cakes or other sweet things, but sometimes with toys or shiny things. The idea was simple, trick the fairy into taking something of yours and they would have to give you something in return.”

“So now what?” asked Marcus. “She owes you? Those are what fifty cents, if that? So she gives you a buck and you call it even.”

“It isn’t that simple,” said AC. “She took it without asking. She owes me a – well let’s say she owes me pretty much whatever I ask for, and since she took it twice, I get to ask twice.”

Leena was sobbing again, but managed to ask, “What do you want?”

“I’ll tell you when the time comes,” said AC, and he fell silent. He was at once ashamed and pleased with himself. He had managed to secure a favor from a very powerful magical being, but he hated himself for having to play the trick. Despite Leena’s continued sobs, AC closed his eyes and tried to sleep.

It was raining in Chicago when they landed. The wind was blowing just enough to make it miserable. AC huddled in his trench coat as they hailed a cab. Marcus gave the cabbie the address and they rode in silence. AC was careful not to talk to Leena, and Marcus seemed fed up with the whole situation. The cab stopped in front of a large apartment building. Marcus paid the cab and they got out into the rain. Although it was now just seven, already the streets were dark. The air was getting colder, and AC had the feeling that soon the rain would be turning to snow. They looked at the building number and then checked the buzzer box – this was the right place.

“How do we get in,” asked Marcus. “This place is locked up tight.”

“Either break in, or ask her,” replied AC.

“You ask her,” growled Marcus.

“No dice,” said AC. “I’m not talking to her, yet.”

“This is stupid. You are stupid. I’m stupid for standing here in the rain with a pair of idiots.” Exasperated he turned to Leena. “Can you open the damn door without tripping the alarms.”

“I guess,” said Leena.

She walked over to the door and blew softly into the keyhole. Then she opened the door.

“See, easy,” said AC. “Fairies are specialists at getting in and out of places unseen.”

“Obviously,” replied Marcus, “but I thought fairies were supposed to be tiny.”

“A few of them – those powerful enough – can grow to take on a human-like shape. In the case of Leena, she has always been that size. Woodland nymphs typically can’t leave their native woods – unless the woods are destroyed and they somehow survive. I’m very sorry, Leena.”

“Whatever,” replied Leena. The word carried all of the disgust and hatred of centuries.

They found the elevator, but Leena wanted to take the stairs, so they began walking up the stairs instead. The address was on the sixth floor, and AC felt his legs burning by the time they reached the top. He tried to hide how tired he was, but Marcus just grinned and laughed. The lycan hadn’t even been breathing hard.

When they stepped into the hall of the apartment Marcus stopped suddenly.

“What is it?” asked Leena.

“It’s that shit you made back in Salt Lake,” he said in an angry whisper to AC.

“Belladonna?” asked AC.

“Yeah, sure, whatever it is you’ve got in that squirt gun. The place is crawling with it,” Marcus sounded angry and disgusted.

“You better wait outside then,” said AC. “Ask her to check for auras. I don’t see any, but she might.”

Marcus rolled his eyes, but asked Leena to check for auras.

When she spoke she pretended AC wasn’t there. “I don’t see anything magical. But I smell something. Something old. It kind of reminds me of before.” She began walking toward the door.

“Stop her Marcus!” AC snapped.

“Leena, stop!” Marcus grabbed her arm.

“Who’s place is this Marcus? What’s the name?” asked AC.

“It doesn’t have a name, just a code,” replied Marcus. “BossGal2013.”

“Shit!” AC’s epithet escaped before he could think.

“What’s the problem?” asked Marcus.

“She knows,” said AC.

“Knows what?” asked Markus.

“It’s real. She knows Alathor’s real. I don’t know how, but she figured it out. She’s ready too. Something has already tried – I’m sure of it. It’s a trap – for both of you. You’ll be dead or crippled if you go in there, Marcus. And if you think skittles are bad, you haven’t seen anything yet, Leena.”

“You can’t go in alone,” said Marcus.

“If you let Leena go in there, you’ll never see her again,” said AC. His voice had assumed his flat, authoritative tone. “Let me do this.”

“How? You don’t have any powers,” said Marcus.

“I will in a second. Leena, it’s time. Kiss me,” AC ordered.

“Eww, gross!” she said. “Do I really have to?”

“One kiss for one pack of skittles,” said AC.

Leena looked like she was going to be sick, but she took a step closer, and then one more step, and finally leaned in for a kiss. AC grabbed her head and kissed her full on the lips, holding the kiss long and hard. He felt her saliva burning into his lips, and when she opened her mouth he forced in his tongue. It burned with white hot intensity, and for one painful instant he almost broke off the kiss. He held it as long as he could stand it and then finally broke away, panting with tears streaming from his eyes.

“That was so disgusting,” said Leena, waving her hands and jumping up and down. “You taste like babies!”

AC had collapsed to the ground and was kneeling there, reeling in pain. His face was on fire, but he could feel the power beginning to settle.

“Are you all right, man,” asked Marcus.

“Give me a minute,” said AC.

“I have to brush my teeth,” cried Leena, “now!”

AC flung his backpack at her. “In there. There’s a toothbrush and toothpaste. Knock yourself out.”

“You’ve been planning this,” said Marcus, as he realized what was going on. “You’ve been planning on getting her power since before we left.”

Leena already had a toothbrush in her mouth.

“GOG_AC89,” said AC. “That’s what was on the slip of paper Siria gave to you when you came to my apartment, wasn’t it.”

“Yeah.”

“God of Gaming, Adam Cornelius,” said AC. “In Alathor I was a god. I plan. I stay alive. In there,” he pointed at the apartment door, “is someone like me. She, I assume it’s a woman, stays alive. She plans. Wait here. I’ll get you if it’s safe.” AC managed to get to his feet. The burning had subsided, but now he felt light headed. He knew he had magical energy now, but wasn’t sure how much. He grabbed his backpack and slung it over one shoulder.

“Okay, AC,” said Marcus. “I guess I have to trust your judgment on this.”

“Just keep your eyes open. It’s dark enough out that Uji could already be walking the streets – or something worse.”

“What’s worse than a maniac samurai vampire?” asked Marcus.

AC just shook his head and walked up the hall to the door. “Get out of sight,” he whispered, before he knocked. As he waited for an answer AC checked for auras again. Nothing in the hall. Nothing on the door.

“Who is it?” The voice was a woman. She sounded a little older than AC or maybe his same age.”

“GOG_AC89,” he said.

He heard the sound of locks being opened. Then the door parted a crack, still held with one chain. She was almost as tall as AC, with dark, perhaps Asian eyes, and long black hair.

“You alone?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he lied. “Can I come in?”

“So polite of you to ask this time,” she smirked. “I mean I assume it was you poking around my garden the other day. Nobody else would have been so bold, or so careful.”

“This isn’t Alathor, BossGal, and I think we should talk,” said AC.

“About what?” she played dumb.

“If you don’t want to talk, fine, but you know as well as me that your life is danger. This isn’t a game anymore,” he said.

“Fine. But don’t touch anything,” she said.

“I’m not stupid,” said AC with a laugh.

She opened the door and AC stepped cautiously inside. She was an attractive blonde – probably in her early thirties. Dressed in jeans and a faded sweatshirt, she didn’t look dangerous at all, just sexy in an understated way. Exotic plants of all types crowded each corner of the apartment. A tall, slender man was neatly trimming a bush in the living room. “Don’t mind him,” said BossGal, “he’s just helping me a bit.” The man moved in rhythmic, definite motions and didn’t seem to even notice either of them.

“When did you figure it out?” asked AC.

“Oh, I’ve known, or guessed for years that magic was real,” she replied, with a wide smile. Her voice was pleasant, but it took on a slight condescending tone as she continued. “Alathor just gave me an excuse to begin experimenting in earnest. Of course if I had a pixie, then I’d be set. But I make do.”

AC knew she was not being completely truthful. He couldn’t say exactly why, but he knew. Then he realized it must be part of Leena’s special gift – to know or sense the truth. He had stolen some of her magical essence so he had stolen a little part of her gift as well. He figured he might be able to run a bluff – a more likely scenario.

“Of course when Uji showed up, you decided to bargain rather than fight. That would be your style, wouldn't it?” said AC.

“Uji?” she asked.

“Don't play dumb. This place has enough wolfsbane to kill off ten packs of lycans, and there are enough garlic flowers to run an Olive Garden for ten years. You've been visited by vamps and you expect worse any day. But you aren't scared because you're ready. I'm here to find out why, and to protect you if you need it,” said AC.

“I certainly don't need your protection, young man,” she said. “Although thanks for the offer. Now why don't you sit down and have a cup of tea with me and I will explain everything.”

AC didn't know much about property values, but he knew that an apartment like this in Salt Lake was way above his student pay grade. Whatever she did for a living she made money. She wandered into the kitchen and AC found a place on her sofa to sit. Once again he checked for auras, but found nothing. Whatever she was doing she wasn't using raw magic the way he had expected. Still, there were enough ingredients here to create immense effects – if she had the right fantastic energies to power these concoctions stored someplace. The man had now moved on to another plant, still ignoring AC.

“Now, first of all, my name is Samantha,” she said when she returned from the kitchen. She was holding two cups of steaming liquid. She was still smiling. Her eyes were blue and beautiful over her cup – the kind of eyes that might normally get a smile in return from AC, but he felt far too nervous at the moment.

“I'm AC,” he replied.

“Now I assume you just figured out that Alathor is real,” said Samantha. Her voice was sweet and she smiled now, as if she knew something AC didn’t.

“Yeah, not long ago,” he replied.

“Well, I’ve known longer than you, then,” said Samantha. “Of course, I still use Alathor for running experiments and things, and of course the clan is tremendously helpful for that. Now you, on the other hand, are probably in quite a state of shock. You relied so much on magical power in Alathor I expect you feel a little vulnerable without it. Fairies don’t grow on trees.”

AC sniffed his drink and then brought it down to rest between his legs on the couch. Sleeping draught. If Samantha noticed his movement, she didn’t say anything or react.

“And I expect that you are wishing you had access to a few more exotic ingredients. You’ve got quite a collection here, but it’s mostly worthless without fantastic parts to go in it. No imp droppings or troll tears. Like you said, it would be nice to have a pixie in your pocket,” said AC.

“Which is exactly why I bargained with that vampire – just like you guessed,” said Samantha.

“You know better than to deal with vamps,” warned AC.

“Oh, give me a break,” replied Samantha. “This, as you said, isn’t a game. There is no good and evil. I have things I can offer them and they have things they can offer me. As it happens I have things I can offer you as well. I’m here to survive and while I’m at it I plan to get rich and comfortable. This apartment is nice enough, but the truth is it’s been trapping me for years. I’m getting out of here, and my particular talents are useful to everyone involved.”

“Just like in Alathor,” interrupted AC. “You and your crew are the middle men. Only in Alathor it was between clans – everyone fighting the bad guys.”

“Like you were the good guy?” laughed Samantha. “Feyhunter. Pixie Poker. Nymphcatcher. I could go on and on. Naturally I never actually saw your fortress, but if half the rumors I heard about you are true, and I happen to know that more than half of them are, then you are certainly no saint. You had power in Alathor because you stole it, killed for it, or tortured to get it. Don’t preach to me about good guys and bad guys.”

“So selling charms to vamps and pups in real life is okay?” asked AC. “These guys can and will prey on living human beings, and you plan to help them.”

“And you can and will prey on fantastics,” replied Samantha, mimicking AC’s voice, “and I plan to help you.”

AC glared at her. He hated her for her motherly tone and totally twisted logic.

“AC, I just want to make a living. It’s obvious to me that you aren’t working alone, so just go back to whoever sent you and tell them that I’m willing to work a deal. A little pixie dust and I can work miracles. Cures all around. Why don’t you throw in with me? We could be rich and be doing something we both enjoy?”

For the second time Samantha glanced at the clock on the wall. AC set his mug of sleeping draught on the floor.

“No dice, Samantha,” he said. He stood up. “As long as Alathor was a game that was fine. A game is a game, but this is life. My life and your life. I won’t hurt innocent people. I’m outta here.” AC stood up. He needed backup, and Samantha was clearly waiting for someone. He needed to be gone before they got here.

“Sit down, AC,” she said suddenly, pulling a gun from her sweatshirt pocket. AC sat. “Now who’s in the hall? Who sent you?”

AC raised his hands calmly, palms forward and softly said spoke the words of power.

The spell floated across the room and Samantha and the man collapsed onto the floor, instantly asleep. AC grabbed her gun and quickly patted her down. She had a wallet, but no extra clip. It was a .22 semi-automatic. AC knew enough about guns from gaming to know that it wasn't a big gun, but it would certainly do the job. She had been expecting someone or something very soon. He had to hurry. He checked the clip, hoping the rounds would be coated in silver – no luck. He slipped the gun into his coat pocket and moved into the kitchen.

There had to be a clue somewhere. Of course she couldn't have a fantastic farm here in this apartment, but obviously she had some fantastic ingredients somewhere. It was obvious the man was under some sort of control, which wasn't possible without some fantastic ingredients, probably vampire hair. The kitchen held nothing, and neither did the bathroom. He was about to open the bedroom door when he recognized the aura protecting it.

AC focused and whispered and the aura disappeared. He opened the door cautiously. Inside he found stacks of books on herbology, witchcraft, and of course a copy of *The Gamer's Guide to Alathor*. One book lay open on the night stand, *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.*. Someone had been perusing the story of Rip Van Winkle. Other collections of stories, including a volume of stories by Nathaniel Hawthorne were open on top. A sudden loud noise from the hall startled AC, and he jumped. He dashed out of the bedroom, closing the door behind him. Samantha and her slave still slept. AC had nearly reached the front door when he remembered the bedroom door aura, and returned to put it back in place.

By the time he opened the front door, a battle was raging in the hallway. An enormous wolf had latched onto the back of a large black bear, and was biting at its neck. Both were wearing the remains of shredded clothing. The bear roared and raised on its hind legs, shrugging the wolf to the ground. A gunshot rang out and a bullet lodged in the door frame near AC. He

ducked and crouched in the doorway. He couldn't see Leena anywhere. AC drew out the water pistol filled with the belladonna infusion, but he didn't dare try to shoot. He would be sure to hit both the bear and Marcus. The wolf re-engaged the bear, leaping up again. AC finally realized that the shot had to have come from the right of the doorway, from near the corner where the elevators were.

Either they were hiding around the corner or they were invisible. Consciously AC tried to gage the flow of magical energy inside his body. How much had the sleeping spell drained him? Finally he mustered the courage to raise a shielding spell, and stepped into the hallway. The gun flashed, but there was no shooter behind it – clearly invisible. The next second he heard a loud smack as something hit something else very hard, and Leena's voice exclaimed, "Got him!" She suddenly appeared and bent over apparent nothingness in the hallway. "Look out!" she yelled when she saw AC.

AC turned just in time to see the bear roaring towards him. He dropped the shield spell and raised his right palm, mouthing, "Inferno!" The bear was caught immediately in a wave of intense fire and howled in anguish. It continued to rush forward, but could no longer see AC and crashed past him and into the wall beside Leena. AC dashed to Marcus. The wolf lay unconscious, but clearly he was still alive as he had not resumed his human shape.

"We have to get out of here, now," he yelled at Leena. "The cops will be here any second."

"Can you carry him?" she asked.

"Hell no. Look at me," he retorted.

"Can't you use magic or something?" Leena said.

"I'll need that other kiss now. I'm almost out of energy."

“Ugh! Really?” Leena was clearly disgusted.

This time AC braced himself for the burning energy that hit his body. It came with greater force this time, but he managed to absorb it without collapsing. “Get the elevator,” he ordered. “I’ll get Marcus.” Rather than enchanting himself with super strength, which he wasn’t sure he could do, AC levitated Marcus from the ground and then grabbed him, guiding him through the air. The were-bear was still howling in blind pain as AC edge past towards the elevator.

“Take my hand,” he told Leena. When she hesitated, he added, “I won’t be able to see you when we go invisible.”

Reluctantly she took his hand. Before the elevator reached the ground all three had disappeared. They had to walk slowly and carefully to avoid the police and fire crew who were beginning to reach the building, but they managed to make it safely down the street. Two blocks away AC found a concealed alley and dropped the invisibility.

“What about him?” asked Leena.

AC swore. “I almost forgot!” AC took out his squirt gun, “He’s going to kill me for this.” He uncapped the fill tank and wafted it under Marcus’ nose. AC continued forcing the wolf to smell the infusion, careful not to spill any, until Marcus let out a low whimper and began to resume human form.

“Is he going to be okay?” asked Leena. Her eyes were beginning to fill with tears.

“I have no idea. Let’s get a cab and get back to the plane. We’re done in Chicago.”

“What about the second address?” argued Leena. “We should check it out.”

“Leena, in like two minutes every cop in the city is going to have my description. I’ll be arrested. Samantha – BossGal – that woman up there knows who I am. She’s going to turn me in,” said AC.

“Well I’m not leaving until I’m done,” replied Leena. “Siria wouldn’t want me to.”

“Look, I don’t have enough magic left to get us out of another scrape like that. I’m useless now,” said AC. Leena just continued to glare at him. Finally shame and anger overcame his better judgment. “Fine. Where’s the address?”

“It’s a house in Highland Park. I’ll get a cab.”

Leena had no problem convincing the cabbie to take them where they needed to go, despite their awkward appearances. AC realized she was probably using her fey charms on the poor guy, but didn’t argue.

Leena still wasn’t speaking to him, and Marcus was sleeping again, so AC just tried to relax and sort through what he had found in Samantha’s apartment. Clearly she was planning something and researching something, but he couldn’t guess.

His phone rang.

“Hello,” he said.

“AC, this is detective Hartley.”

“Oh, hi. How are you?”

“Fine. Hey, AC, I was hoping to talk to you. Where are you?”

AC’s stomach sank. This was not going to be good. No way he could lie here and pull it off. “I’m in Chicago.”

“Chicago? What are you doing in Chicago? I need you back here, pronto.” Hartley sounded really angry.

“It’s complicated,” said AC. “I think I might have some information for you, though. I’ll explain everything when I get back, I promise.”

“You had better have a damn good explanation or else your ass in jail when you get back. What are you thinking? You can’t skip town like this. You were seen in a rental car that was all busted to hell and gone.”

“They are still after me,” said AC. “They followed me to Cindy’s.”

“Who? What the hell are you mixed up in?” Hartley’s voice was a mix of concern and exasperation.

“I’ll explain everything when I get back. Honest. You’ll be the first person I call. And don’t worry about arresting me. If I don’t call you it’s because there isn’t enough left of me to hold the phone.” AC hung up.

Whatever Leena overheard of his conversation she kept to herself. Marcus opened his eyes briefly from time to time, but said nothing. Leena whispered softly to him to go to sleep, and AC hoped she was using some sort of fairy magic to help him recover. Whatever that bear did had really messed him up, and forcing him back to human form hadn’t helped much either.

The house was dark when they reached the address. “Leena, what was the name Siria gave us?”

Leena read of the name, “H4rdR0ck.”

“You could have told me sooner and saved us all a trip. He hasn’t been online in a couple of days. He’s gone. Look, you call Siria and check in. I’ll go see the house.”

“Whatever you say,” replied Leena. AC was already opening his door.

There was no police tape, but the house was definitely dark. There was a small yard dominated by a large covered porch. Fallen leaves cluttered the yard and the porch. The cloudy

night was completely dark by now, although the rain had stopped. Here and there leaves still dripped. AC ascended the steps and rang the doorbell. He could hear the bell echoing throughout the house. For a second he thought something moved in the shadows to his right, but when he looked he saw nothing. AC opened the screen door and knocked. AC was going to try the door when he heard someone on the sidewalk.

A woman was walking down the sidewalk, just by the next house. She was dressed in a skirt and top that were definitely not weather proof and had only a light pink jacket that was unzipped. AC closed the screen door and slowly walked down the porch so that he could meet her in front of the house.

“Do you know the guy who lives here?” he asked.

She spoke in a thick Chicago accent. “Yeah, but nobody’s seen him in a couple of days. Took his dog with him and everything. Usually he leaves it across the street, but this time he took it.” Something about her voice was particularly alluring, and she ran her tongue over her lip in a distracted sort of way. “You a friend of his or something?”

AC dug into his pocket for the water gun with the holy water. “Yeah,” he said. “I got a gift here for him, but I didn’t know he was out of town.” He pulled out the squirt gun and fired, trying to aim low with the plastic gun.

The woman cried out, “Hey!” but then clutched at her leg and collapsed in agony on the street.

Leena got out of the car and ran over.

“Skankpire,” said AC flatly to Leena. “Watching the house.” He turned to the woman, who was snarling. He pointed the water gun at her face. “Shut up,” he commanded.

“AC, wait,” cried Leena.

“I’m not going to kill her, not yet. I need to know what she knows.” AC noticed her crawling towards him and he fired another jet of holy water, this time catching her in the shoulder. The vampire snarled and clutched her shoulder.

“H4rdR0ck is alive. I just talked to Siria. He logged in a couple of hours ago. It’s a different IP address, from a different provider, so we don’t know where he is, but he’s alive,” said Leena.

AC still faced the vampire. “Who sent you?”

The vampire just cringed and whimpered.

“Who sent you,” he asked again.

“This is pointless, AC, let’s go,” said Leena.

“Was it Uji?” asked AC.

“I serve only one master,” said the vampire suddenly. AC recognized the building rage in her eyes and the sudden strength in her voice. She was preparing herself for a death struggle. AC sprayed her mercilessly with the water pistol, trying not to choke through the fumes that rose from her melting body.

“You didn’t have to do that,” said Leena sullenly.

“True,” agreed AC, “but I wanted these.” He deftly swept two canine teeth into one of his test tubes. “And this. He carefully collected as much of her ashes as he could into another test tube.

“Anything else?” asked Leena, obviously disgusted. “Maybe her panties or something?”

“Don’t be gross,” said AC. “I’m not some pervert.”

“Right,” said Leena, more than a little sarcastically.

In the dark it was tricky to see what else might be collectable, but AC also found a few strands of unmelted vampire hair.

“We better get going before that cabbie get’s suspicious,” he suggested.

“No worries. He’s mesmerized. He won’t remember or care about anything he sees tonight,” said Leena.

“In that case we can afford to take a look around. He might have left a clue,” said AC.

The front door was locked, and so were the windows. AC didn’t see a security system, and Leena assured him that there were no magical protections. The back door was also locked, and AC hesitated to break in through a window.

“Well, either we break in or we quit,” suggested AC.

“I’ll go in,” said Leena. “You wait here.”

AC wanted to argue with her, but he knew that she was definitely better suited for this job than he was, so he just brushed the leaves off of a chair on the back porch and sat down. Silently Leena disappeared. A window opened and closed, and AC found himself alone, waiting in the night. The back yard was dominated by an enormous black walnut tree. It was about the only kind of tree that AC could recognize. He had an uncle that used to own one, and as a kid they would swing in a tire hanging from that tree. A slight breeze moved the branches irregularly, and AC found himself starting to doze as the events of the day caught up with him.

With a start AC forced his eyes open. Something had moved. Perhaps it was just a cat, or maybe that skankpire had a partner. AC took out the holy water again. He waited quietly, but now his eyes were searching every shadow. He couldn’t be certain, but it looked, or maybe it just felt, like the tree was closer than it had been a minute ago. A faint breeze stirred the leaves and AC turned his head where he thought something moved to his left. A leaf brushed his face

and AC turned, startled. The tree was nearly on top of him now. One gnarled branch nearly blocked his way off the porch.

AC sprang from his chair and over to the back yard gate at the side of the house. The tree was clearly moving now. At the gate a root suddenly pushed through the ground and wrapped itself around his ankle. Desperately AC clung to the gate as the root began pulling him back into the yard. His arms had just given way when he heard Leena's voice clearly stating, "Stop that! He's with me."

Immediately the root disappeared back into the earth and AC was able to stand up and begin brushing himself off.

"I don't think she recognized you," said Leena, with a smile.

"Really? You don't think so," retorted AC sarcastically. He tried to get the dirt and wet leaves off of his clothes as Leena began speaking to the tree in a sweet musical language AC couldn't begin to understand. AC stood, listening and wondering, completely baffled.

Finally Leena stopped and the tree stood perfectly still again.

"So?" asked AC.

"So Greg's at a friend's house – somewhere in Maine. She's been watching the place for about a hundred years, so she knows the family really well. They take good care of her, so when that vampire started hanging around she let him know and he took off. Apparently we aren't the only ones to come looking. She didn't recognize me at first or she wouldn't have bothered you," explained Leena.

"Let's go," said AC.

They walked back around the house to the cab and were just getting in when Leena's phone rang. She said hello and then listened for a minute and then hung up. "We have to go,

now!” She was frantic. “Use your stone! Now. Siria’s been attacked.” Leena held her blue stone and disappeared.

Marcus was still sleeping in the back of the cab. AC opened the door. “Hey, you awake?”

Marcus opened one eye. “Yeah, I guess.”

“We gotta go, now. Use your stone. Siria’s in trouble.”

Marcus fumbled through his pockets and pulled out his stone. A second later he was gone. Then AC did the same thing. He figured there would be some rushing sensation or strange feeling of being pulled through the air, but nothing like that happened. One second he was on a dark wet street in Illinois and the next second he was in a double-wide trailer home in Colorado.

Siria lay on the couch, literally trying to hold her guts. Blood was seeping everywhere. Trina screamed in panic. Where were Nal and Mr. Bains?

“Do something,” growled Marcus. He was looking at Leena, but could have been yelling at anyone.

AC yelled back. “I need your claws.”

“What?” asked Marcus. “What in the hell for?”

“Now, you stupid mutt! You good for nothing dog – your claws!”

Lost in rage and panic Marcus lashed out suddenly. In mid swing he made a partial transformation, turning his hands and arms into wolf arms with vicious claws. “You want claws you son of a bitch!” He ripped a huge gash across AC face. “Have some claws!” Two more swipes and AC could no longer see out of one eye.

He collapsed to one knee, but focused solely on Siria. Marcus slashed at his back. AC was trying to hold his face together with his hands as he crawled towards her. He could feel the flesh of his cheeks hanging down like shredded curtains. She had one hope. He crawled forward and buried his face in her ripped open stomach.

Icy burning such as he had never felt in his life overwhelmed him. First his face and head and then his entire body felt like they had been plunged into liquid nitrogen. He tried to scream but his mouth was frozen shut. Finally, mercifully, he passed out.

Chapter Seven:

AC woke in a bed he did not recognize in a room he did not recognize. The alarm clock buzzed 6:30. He had no idea how to work the stupid thing, but finally managed to find the snooze. Mercifully the noise stopped. Why were his ears so sensitive? He closed his eyes. Again the alarm was beeping. This time he found the off switch.

“Where in the hell am I?” he groaned.

Someone knocked gently at the door and then opened it. Vicky stood there wearing pink teddy bear pajamas and an enormous, kindly smile. “Your friend told me to make sure you got to school on time this morning, AC, but I really think you should take a day off. You should have a doctor look at your face, don’t you think?”

“What?” asked AC. “What about my face? What friend?”

“The short older gal,” said Vicky. “I think her name was Sarah or something.”

“Siria? She’s alive?” AC tried to sit up, but his head hurt.

“AC, you’re not making any sense. Of course she’s alive. She was just here. She and your cute friend Marcus brought you by yesterday. You’ve been asleep since then,” explained Vicky. “Really, you should just sleep a bit more. Missing one day of classes won’t hurt.”

With an effort AC sat up. “I’ll be okay Vicky. It’s Monday then?”

“Yeah, it’s Monday. “ Vicky looked serious for a minute. “AC, I don’t know what you were doing, but I don’t think these friends of yours are a good influence. You look horrible.”

“It’s not what you think, Vicky. Honest,” said AC. “We aren’t out partying or anything like that. Look, they are helping with some problems I didn’t know I had. It got a little out of hand I think. Nothing illegal, I swear.”

“Hey, I just want you to be safe, okay,” said Vicky. “Now why don’t you stay home today?”

“I’ll be fine once I get a shower. Really. I think getting back into a normal routine will help more than anything. Things have just been so screwed up the last couple of days.”

Vicky seemed unconvinced but didn’t argue anymore. She left him to get showered and dressed. AC didn’t bother trying to find a shaver. His face still had thin scab lines criss-crossed on both sides, including one where Marcus’ claw had gone right through his left eye. AC found some acetaminophen in a draw and took two. In the shower he found bruises on parts of his body he didn’t know he even owned. Everywhere he ached. Even as the warm water soothed his body, he realized that Vicky was probably right – he should miss a day of school. On the other hand if Siria had insisted that he be on time to class then she had something planned that he definitely shouldn’t miss.

AC found that someone had brought over clothes from his apartment and stowed them carefully in the dresser. He wondered what Vicky must have thought when they brought him home. Was he still covered in his bloody clothes? His trench coat was hanging dutifully in the closet, and all of his gear was still in his backpack. He would need to rearrange all of that in order to accommodate his books. Where were his books? There they were, sitting on his dresser. Someone had been more careful than he was. Sure enough there were blood stains on his coat and backpack.

Downstairs he found pancakes, bacon, and eggs waiting for him, but he couldn’t really eat. Vicky coaxed him into eating a few bites and at least drinking a whole glass of orange juice.

“Your car is still in the shop, but I can drop you off at the campus. Will you be okay on the buses today?” asked Vicky.

“Sure, no problem. I’ll get a bus over to the garage later and pick it up. You don’t need to worry about me. I really appreciate letting me stay here,” said AC.

“I won’t be home until at least six. I’m not sure what time Cindy gets off today – I think around four, but if you decide to come home early then just go around the back. I’ll leave it unlocked today – until we can get you a key,” said Vicky.

“I’m sure I won’t be home that early. I have a bunch of homework to get caught up on, not to mention work. They are going to be pissed. I didn’t get anything done all weekend,” said AC.

Vicky drove AC up to the university campus and dropped him off. Luckily traffic wasn’t horrible, but still it wasn’t pleasant either. AC didn’t have class until ten, but Vicky needed to get to work so he would have some time to kill. He decided to head to the library and see if he could rush through his math. He found an empty study booth. It smelled strongly of perfume even though it was empty and the seat was cold. Somebody must have spilled something here. Somewhere he heard the clicking of a keyboard, but again he didn’t see anyone with a laptop.

AC focused. He needed to get this taken care of. Of course his GPA didn’t matter much now, but still he wanted to keep his good grades – if only because of his personal pride. The homework was much easier than expected. This morning, even though he felt miserable, the math seemed to just click. Problems he had been dreading since class last week just seemed easy. Then he remembered detective Hartley. He jammed his books back into his pack and rushed outside. He dialed the detective quickly.

“Hello?”

“Sorry detective, I almost forgot,” said AC.

“So you’re back in town?” asked Hartley.

“Yeah. Apparently I’ve been back since yesterday – but I just woke up. It’s a long story,” said AC.

“Apparently Chicago was busy,” said Hartley.

“Yeah, you could say that. Look, did you need to talk to me about something?” asked AC.

“What’s your schedule look like today?” asked Hartley.

“My last class is over at two o’clock. I have a couple of breaks in between, but I don’t have my car back,” replied AC.

“I’ll pick you up after your last class outside the Park building – at the top of the circle, okay?”

“Sure, okay.”

“We can pick up your car, and you can tell me all about Chicago. Sound good?”

“Okay. I’ll see you then.”

AC hung up the phone. A chill wind suddenly blew across the courtyard outside the library and AC shivered. He smelled something vaguely familiar – a person – but couldn’t quite place it. He looked around but he was alone. AC slipped his phone back into his pocket and wandered back into the library. A dozen smells seemed to hit him at once and he felt suddenly queasy. He barely had time to reach a stall before he began vomiting. Over and over he retched until his abs throbbed with the effort, despite the fact that now nothing more could come up. Finally he sank back onto the floor, leaning against the stall door, absorbing the coolness of the hard floor. He could feel himself sweating from the effort.

“Not feeling so good, eh, AC?” Marcus deep voice mocked him from outside the stall.

“Go to hell,” replied AC weakly.

“Been there and back again,” scoffed Marcus. “Siria said you might still be feeling a little sick this morning.”

“How is she?” asked AC.

“She’s moving a little slow, but she’s hiding it pretty well. That was pretty disgusting shoving your face in her guts like that, but it saved her life. How in the hell did you know to do that?” Despite his gruffness, Marcus sounded impressed.

“Trade secrets,” replied AC. He was feeling sick enough to be surly this morning.

“Where is she?”

“Outside, waiting for you.”

“Gimme a minute to get cleaned up, okay.”

“Okay.”

AC heard the sound of Marcus’ boots as he walked out. Reluctantly he dragged himself off the floor and looked at the mess around the toilet. He washed his face and hands and did his best to wipe up the mess. Then he washed his face and hands again. The effort of vomiting had reopened some of the wounds on his face. They weren’t bleeding badly, but he was holding a paper towel to the left side of his face when he exited the restroom.

Marcus was waiting for him near the restroom. Finally AC recognized the smell from outside – it was Marcus. His unique odor of cologne mixed with dog and denim – of werewolf cowboy lost in an urban quagmire. Marcus waited for AC to reach him and then began walking, but slow enough that AC could stay beside him, even walking awkwardly with his hand at his face.

“Leena told me all about Chicago,” Marcus said. “You’re a sneaky little bastard, but you saved my life. I owe you one, I guess.”

“No,” said AC. “You don’t owe me. Look, this whole situation is so screwed up. I survived. That’s all anyone can ask. Just get through one more day.”

“Loyalty means something to me, AC,” said Marcus. “It means more to me than you can understand. You weren’t a coyote when you could have been. According to your own logic when you should have been. Thanks.”

AC didn’t argue. He didn’t reply. He just let the other man’s words find their place and settle in. They were beginning to understand each other a little, and there was no reason to try to spoil that.

Siria was sitting on a couch in one of the common areas. She was pretending to read a book, but even from this distance AC could see she wasn’t paying attention to the pages. He smelled her from across the room – clean and fresh, like strawberries that have just been rinsed. She also smelled weak, hurt. He could smell her blood – not the oozing, sickly metallic smell after an accident, but that hospital smell of someone after surgery. So that’s how Marcus knows.

“Hi, AC,” she said when they were close enough to whisper loudly. “How are you feeling?”

“Different,” he said. “Sick. Weak. Okay I guess.”

Siria suddenly laughed lightly. “You’re in for a lot of changes. I don’t think you understand what you did to yourself.”

“I knew what I was doing,” he replied. “At least in theory. I don’t know anyone else who ever forced a dragon to regenerate like that before.”

Siria held a finger to her lips and shushed him. “Nobody is supposed to know my little secret,” she said. “Not even Marcus.”

If Marcus was surprised he covered it well. He kept his mouth shut and looked out the wide window. Siria patted the seat next her, motioning AC to sit.

“Leena and Marcus told me everything about Chicago, but they weren’t able to fill me in on the details of what you saw in that apartment. I’m guessing it wasn’t good,” said Siria.

“And I’m guessing Seattle didn’t go so well either,” replied AC.

“It was a trap. The whole thing,” admitted Siria. “What happened in Chicago? What did you find?”

“Look, Siria,” said AC. “As far as I’m concerned I’m not sure I’m going to tell you anything. I went because I didn’t have a choice. Now I have a choice.” He snapped his fingers and a tiny ball of flame appeared in his hand. “Right, wrong, or indifferent, I’m not your puppet. Maybe I saved your life and maybe I just stole your power. That’s what has to be nagging at the back of your mind right now, and you’ll never know, and I’ll never trust you until you trust me – which you never will. So if you want to know about Chicago – and you definitely want to know – then you talk first.”

“AC, this isn’t some game. This isn’t some stupid fantasy. People’s lives are on the line here. Good people,” Siria was calm, as she spoke, but he could see the fear – the concern – in her eyes.

“My life is on the line, Siria,” he said.

Siria cut him off, and there was a stern tone in her voice that AC had never heard before when she spoke. “Our life, AC.”

“Who’s life? Who is so important that I am part of it. A few days ago none of you gave a shit about me. Now it’s ‘our life?’”

“You aren’t listening, AC,” she replied, slightly annoyed. “I mean ‘our life’ because your life and my life are the same now. You forced your life into mine – I don’t know why, and right this very second I don’t care, but when you did you also stole my life, my energy. If you did it because you wanted my magic, well you got a whole lot more in the bargain – you got my life. And I got yours. Our life is on the line – and you just totally screwed me over. Because of you a secret I’ve been guarding for thousands of years is out – or at least it will be soon. On top of that I have to keep you alive whether I want to or not, and you, Mr. ‘I have to stay alive one more day’ had better understand right now that if I die, you die, so helping me out is your best bet.”

AC didn’t respond. He leaned his arms on his knees and lowered his head – partially because he was sick and tired, and partially because he just couldn’t bear her anger. He tried to breathe deeply.

“AC, I’m grateful for what you did,” Siria continued. “You saved my life when nobody else could. I still don’t know how you managed to walk into the room, take one look, and just figure out who I am, much less know anything about dragon regeneration or the effects of dragon’s blood for magic, but I’m grateful. But you made a choice that has made your life far more complicated. You may have my power now, but you also have all my problems.”

AC sat up. “I have class in a few minutes,” he said. “I have a break after this class. We can talk more then if you want. If it makes you feel any better, I still don’t know for sure why I did it. I wanted your magic, but I couldn’t just watch you die either. If you don’t trust me – well, look, I don’t trust myself either. I gotta go.”

During their conversation Marcus hadn’t turned around at all. He found his backpack and books and headed to class. AC made it to class with a good fifteen minutes to spare, and

slumped against the wall outside the door. AC left her sitting in the library. Somehow he didn't really feel like sitting and talking to Siria right then. He was tired – beyond tired. Had he saved her life purely because he wanted her magic? Was that the kind of person he was inside? AC snapped his finger and a puff of flame appeared. He blew it out.

The door opened and students poured out of the classroom. AC waited while the professor gathered her things and exited before he sneaked in to sit on the very back row. Usually he sat somewhere near the front, but today he was just making an appearance. Besides, partial differential equations made sense.

AC flipped through a notebook and began doodling. He hardly noticed as other students began filtering in. The professor came in and AC hardly looked up. Eventually AC realized that he was just sulking and allowed himself to become a part of the conversation. When class ended he even managed to write down the homework assignment.

Siria was waiting in the hall with a look on her face that told AC he couldn't just walk away this time.

“Where's Marcus?” he asked.

“He wanted to take a walk downtown, so he did. Somehow he doesn't figure this is really any of his business, and he's probably right. I only brought him along because I needed a driver. How long before your next class?”

“Fifty minutes, roughly,” said AC. “We can go to the student union or something if you want to talk. It's cold outside.”

“No. I think we should go someplace else. I have something I want to show you. Let's go outside,” Siria said.

Once outside Siria began looking around cautiously.

“What are you looking for?” asked AC.

“Just making sure nobody’s watching. Here, take my hand.” Siria held out her left hand for AC, which he reluctantly took in his own right hand.

Suddenly the breath disappeared from AC’s lungs as he found himself standing above the clouds on a mountain top. He gasped, struggling for breath.

“Cast a breathing spell,” shouted Siria. AC barely managed to hear her over the wind that howled in his ears and kicked up shards of blinding icy snow. He had to cough and gasp for a while before he remembered the correct words. At once he found himself able to breathe again, but still quickly in danger of freezing. Once more he focused and whispered a spell to help his body withstand the elements.

“Better?” asked Siria. AC nodded. “This way.”

She led him a short distance to a large cleft in the ice. A chasm plummeted down at least a hundred feet with sheer ice on both sides.

“Stand back a minute.”

AC took a few steps back. Siria raised her arms and looked into the sky. As she did her body began to grow. Soon the immense form of a dragon towered over AC. She stretched her huge wings, each with two talons at the end, partially blocking the sun and covering AC in shadow. Though in shape she could have been compared to a dinosaur, her features were far more rugged than any brontosaurus AC had ever seen in any book. Her head was huge, and she suddenly let out a long, piercing roar that forced AC to cover his ears. It reminded him of a tyrannosaurus in a dinosaur movie, only far too close for his liking. Her body was covered completely in sparkling crystalline white scales. Around her neck and down her spine grew a shimmering mane of gold.

“It’s been a very long time,” she said, and her voice was like a mountain waterfall. She stretched again and then held out one enormous claw. “Come here,” she commanded.

AC hesitated, but finally obeyed. She clutched him gently in her claw and then sprang suddenly into the air. She circled for a brief minute and then plunged into the ice chasm. Fifty feet down she swerved into the ice cliff face and clung to the ice with her two back claws while using her third claw to rip chunks of ice from the face of the cliff. In seconds she had opened a hole into a hidden ice cave. Seconds later she placed AC gently inside and then began working the hole larger so that she could fit her own enormous body through. AC moved away from the widening hole and the terrifying ice chasm. In only a few seconds Siria was inside. Then she turned and breathed a shimmering stream of blue ice, sealing up the entrance she had just worked so hard to open.

Then, as he watched, Siria once again transformed. Before him stood the same short, inscrutable woman in the same modest dress he had seen before.

Chapter Eight

“I usually prefer to teleport directly,” she said, “but I wanted you to get the whole experience. Besides, at some point you are going to need to be able to get here by yourself.”

“Where are we?” asked AC.

“We are in my home,” replied Siria, “my true home.”

“I mean where are we, as in where in the world?” said AC.

“Alaska,” replied Siria calmly. “You would recognize it as Mt. St. Elias if you looked it up on the internet. I have other names for it, but those are for me only. Now come with me. We don’t have a lot of time, right now, but there are things you need to understand and begin to think about.”

As she talked she began walking, leading AC down a wide passage that would have fit her enormous body had she still retained her dragon shape. As they walked, the walls began to glow slightly with little sparkling veins of colored light. AC felt himself caught up in a dreamscape where everything was bathed in beautiful but surreal color. Eventually they reached a wide cavern. At the edge of the cavern Siria spoke in a language AC did not understand and the cavern sprang into bright white light.

The cavern floor was perfectly smooth with an enormous silver and gold mosaic sunburst inlaid into the floor. A large crystal ball stood on a high pedestal directly across the room from where they entered. The ball collected the light and scattered across the room. Several statuettes of dragons stood on pedestals around the room, each one in life-like detail, and captured in exciting action poses.

“This room is more for display than anything else,” admitted Siria. “It is like a shrine to my ancestors. Come this way where I can show you what I wanted to show you and we can talk more comfortably.”

She led him to the right, where they found a smaller, human-sized passage that led into a lavishly decorated sitting room. As they moved near to the little statuettes, they came to life, stretching as if waking up from long naps and then dancing lightly atop their little pedestals. As they left the main hall the statuettes slowly stopped moving and then finally froze in their last pose.

“Beats an old trailer house in Colorado,” said AC.

“Thank you,” said Siria. “I’ve worked hard to make it presentable over the centuries, although to be honest I don’t have many visitors.”

The sitting room was much smaller, though still a very large room. Three ornate couches surrounded a low but heavy table that had been carved with delicate dragons in flight. Two large fireplaces came suddenly to life when they entered and an immense chandelier, hung with dozens of candles filled the room with light. Along the walls hung portraits of dragons – either captured in flight or posing majestically atop cliffs. The dragons were of many different colors, but most had blue, white, or golden scales. Nearly all had the Siria’s same golden mane.

“These are my ancestors,” said Siria with deep respect. “For millions of years we have dwelt here.”

“Amazing,” was the only word AC could utter. He was beginning to feel the fatigue of maintaining the breathing spell. He felt the warmth of the fires and decided to let the resist cold spell fade away. He was too tired to really absorb everything and just sat in one of the

comfortable couches. Siria sat next to him and began talking in a half lecture, half story telling tone.

“Dragons have been around since the time of the dinosaurs. In many ways we are dinosaurs – though don’t get any wrong ideas. There really were T-rexes and all that – even before our time. Our most ancient histories suggest that dragons came to this planet a long time ago, as an accident of some sort. We liked it, so we stayed. At first we thrived. There must have been thousands. Great clans arose. But dragons live a very, very long time. A hundred thousand years is not uncommon, and our thirst for blood and violence is unparalleled. We are the perfect predators.”

“Even in the good times, when food was plentiful and easy, surviving to adulthood was difficult. Dragons hate each other. It is a rage – an inexplicable, horrible rage – that consumes us. Even mothers cannot stand their own young for long. We are driven out to fend for ourselves when barely able to fly and then hunted by our own kind. Yes, many survive, but many more do not. Even breeding is fraught with peril. Two come together and in the violence that ensues there is procreation and hatchlings and the cycle continues.”

“When the ice age came, life for dragons became difficult. Those who could hibernate and hide did so. Those who could not sleep for ten thousand years starved or killed each other. And then the humans came. At first they were weak – merely curious creatures playing with little fires. They were a joke among the fantastics because they had no magic. But humans had one thing nobody counted on – they had the ability to overcome instinct. That is something that no other creature – no creature no matter how powerful had ever been able to do.”

“Humans could stand and fight in the face of fear, and they learned to make peace where their instincts told them to make war. They could do perfectly stupid things which even the elves

or the fairies could not do, and so they prospered. They built civilizations and created farms. They learned to fight against nature instead of working with it, and they won. Where there were once thousands of dragons there were now only a few dozen, and where there were once only a few humans, now there were many thousands.”

“In conflict after conflict humans succeeded. Either through intelligence or superior numbers or just plain luck. Fantastic creatures everywhere have taken their magic into hiding. What once we thought to share with humans now we guard, but we are failing. In another thousand years there may be no magic left, or so little that we can’t ever recover it. Everywhere humans are pushing us out – unseen, unnoticed, but still pushing us.”

“Did you know there are only five dragons left in the world?” asked Siria.

“Five?” questioned AC. “Why so few?”

“Breeding is violent and takes years, and generally we have to be worked up into such a bloodlust for it that we intrude violently onto human territories. Then we are hunted and killed, and if the breeding was successful and there were eggs, they are hunted and destroyed as well. We dare not attempt it. So we live in secrecy – even from each other.”

“So you are just going to go extinct?” asked AC.

“I don’t know. Maybe. I am the last female dragon, AC. I haven’t made that choice yet. I had hoped to not have to make it for a long, long time. But now, because of you my secret is out. It won’t be long before he finds a way to enlist their aid. The other dragons want to find me very badly.”

“He who?” asked AC. “Who are you talking about?”

“Mr. Bains,” said Siria.

“Mr. Bains was the traitor?” asked AC.

“You can call him that if you like,” said Siria, “but I don’t think he betrayed anyone. Rather I look at him as an enemy who out-maneuvered me. He is who he is because it is his nature. True I disagree with him. I think he is vile and despicable, but my feelings wouldn’t have mattered in the slightest if he had succeeded – and he may well still succeed.”

“What happened in Seattle?” asked AC.

“It was a trap – as you well knew before we ever left. He has been a part of our plans from the beginning. He understands me very well. I met him about twenty years ago. He appeared as an amateur magician then, dabbling in minor sorceries, but it is apparent now that he was masking his true powers. Most of that is unimportant. What is important is the fact that he knew how badly I wanted to be able to get humans on our side. Without human help all fantastics will go extinct. He used that to help convince me to create Alathor. My plan was to recruit the top players. Tell them that the game was real and then get them excited about becoming ambassadors for magic. I can’t say exactly what his plan is or was, but I can guess that it was similar – only he is recruiting for an operation of evil. Or perhaps the game has nothing to do with his overall plans. He might have been using it just to get close to me – to figure out who I am and then move against me. There are only a very few truly powerful beings in the world, and if you can lower that number by one then by default you move up the ranks.”

“So he just got you alone in a dark place and attacked?” asked AC.

“More or less, yes. He convinced me to leave Nal standing guard outside the apartment. When we got inside he used a variety of spells to weaken me – to prevent me from transforming, reduce my defenses and then he spilled my guts with an enchanted spear. You may have heard of it. It was famously used by St. George centuries back to slay a dragon. He had disguised it as a ball point pen. I’m so stupid for missing it. The wound was mortal, but it would have taken

me hours to die. He needed to cut off my head to finish me, but I had my recall stone, so I returned to Colorado House.”

“Then Trina called and we showed up,” said AC.

“How did you know I could regenerate?” asked Siria.

“I’ve been researching dragons in Alathor. It’s about the only fantasy game out there with no dragons, so I figured there must be a reason. I kept digging until I found out rumors about them. Millions of players and no sightings? I knew they had to be real because everything in Alathor is real. If you can find a rumor about it then it is real – you just have to keep looking. Like the secret vampire fortress.”

“What vampire fortress?” asked Siria. “You mean that’s real too.”

“Very real,” replied AC. “Anyway, I kept searching and eventually I was able to figure out that dragons can take human form.”

“Something we only recently developed a need for – in the last ten thousand years or so,” said Siria.

“Then it was just a matter of following habits. A lot of genealogy – asking around – until I found one. An old guy in New Flavins – a huge city in Alathor. He was heavy into buying precious metals and he spent a lot of time with fantastics. The only people that spend time with fantastics are other fantastics or leeches – people trying to get their power. Well, I knew all the high profile players – so he had to be an NPC. I mean the game is really smart. It creates false profiles all the time, so you can never be sure if you are dealing with a human or a bot, and the bots in Alathor are definitely the best, but he was too high profile to be a human, so I checked him out.”

“In case you haven’t guessed, we used a lot of magic to create Alathor,” said Sira. “We don’t even know what it’s doing most of the time. It pulls memories and then creates entire cities and settings that mirror real places.”

“It’s pretty amazing,” agreed AC. “Anyway, I checked this guy out. Sure enough he had the eyes, the looks, everything the legends say. The only way to be sure was to take him back to my lab, so I did.”

“You what?” asked Siria.

“Look, it’s a game. In the game I have a lab – most players do sooner or later. I knocked him out and took him back to my lab. Sure enough he transformed. He tried to burn the place down, tried teleporting, tried everything, but in Alathor one of my nicknames is the zookeeper. Nobody gets away from me, not even dragons.”

“You captured a dragon?” asked Siria. Her tone was more than a little disgusted.

“Dragons, fairies, trolls, elves – the whole gambit. And then I experimented. I took blood samples. I mixed potions, worked recipes – anything and everything you can imagine. And we talked. He told me basically everything you just told me – only his vision of humans was a little different. He was plotting to enslave us all, which made me feel a whole lot better about the torture thing. I haven’t had as much time as I would like to interrogate him, and getting information from dragons is difficult,” said AC.

“I had no idea,” said Siria. “The game doesn’t let us see much of what the players do. I mean we all have boss accounts, but even then it doesn’t tell us much.”

“It wouldn’t,” agreed AC. “You have to know where to go and what to do with what you find. Too many secrets in Alathor. But very useful. You know BossGal is using Alathor right

now to experiment and recruit for her real life guild. She sold me out already and somebody is feeding her information and magical supplies. She already has one thrall.”

“That’s sick,” said Siria.

“I hate to be the one to say it – I mean it would cost me my job and everything, but you need to shut the game down,” said AC. “Now that the secret’s out, you are going to have problems. Things like this can get out of hand fast.”

“No,” said Sirai. “Not yet. The game is still useful – especially to you. You can help us find out who we can trust and who we can’t, and we can still shut it off whenever we want. We don’t need to make a decision right now. Besides we don’t have time. There is something else I need to show you, and then you’ll need to get back to class.”

“What about Mr. Bains?” asked AC.

“He needs to die,” said Siria, “but we can talk about him later.”

Siria got up and AC followed. She led him back through the main chamber and through a series of passages. AC quickly became lost. His head was throbbing again. Eventually they came to a sheet of solid rock.

“The only way through this wall is if you have dragon blood of the line of my sires,” said Siria. “Not a perfect defense, but very effective.” She stepped into the stone. Then one hand waved at him out of the wall to follow. AC tentatively put one foot to the wall. It felt like stepping into thick gelatin. The stone was spongy, but moved aside for his leg. He took a deep breath and stepped through. The wall was thick enough that for a time he was completely inside of the wall. He kept walking and emerged into a dark chamber on the other side. He felt air around him again, but there was no light. AC hesitated for just a moment but then snapped his fingers to summon a flame at his fingertips.

From the complete blackness the soft glow of the flame reflected off of piled treasures. Even in the darkness AC could tell that the horde rose higher than his head and stretched sideways far beyond his sight. Siria gently touched his shoulder and walked with him to the edge of the heap of piled precious metals. Most of it was in ingots or coins.

“Touch it,” she suggested.

AC lifted one heavy golden ingot. The metal was cold as ice, but it soothed him – like a cold drink on a summer day. He felt the lightness of relief as the dull throbbing in his head subsided. He felt he could breathe again.

“You haven’t been feeling well today because your energy reserves are far too low,” said Siria. “You spent so much effort trying to heal that you have hardly anything left – let alone anything to sustain spells with. Dragons draw their energy from precious metals. Something about it gives us our magic.”

AC felt much better – in fact he felt better than he had in what seemed like a very long time. “I suspect it is something like the allergy that some people have to different metals, only with dragons instead of being annoying it’s actually helpful,” he said.

AC placed the ingot back on the pile. “I guess I need to start a horde,” he said.

“No,” replied Siria. “You and I are stuck together now.” She took a handful of coins and poured them into AC’s hand. “These will help you get started setting up your own home. I know this place isn’t your style, but you can take what you need whenever you want. I’ll bring you here again, until you know it well enough to teleport without help. You can’t teleport directly into the house, so you’ll have to figure out how to fly down, but I know you can manage that. Once you are all set up someplace we can transport what you need, okay?”

“Why are you helping me?” asked AC. “I thought dragons killed their own kind.”

Almost immediately AC regretted the question.

“You aren’t my kind,” she replied, and her voice was both hurt and angry. “You are me. I don’t fear much, AC, but I do fear death. If I thought it would keep me alive I would lock you in here for eternity, but I know you would wither away – lose your will to live. So I am going to do the human thing. I am going to go against my instincts and risk everything. I am going to let you live your own life, but don’t expect me to be very far away.”

“Are you sure?” he asked.

Siria closed his hands around the gold and said, “Of course. Take it.”

“No, I mean about our bond. Are you sure you’ll die if I die?” asked AC.

“I wasn’t positive until you walked through that wall,” replied Siria. “Now there’s no doubt. Blood bonding is rare and complicated and an obscure part of dragon lore that I doubt even Alathor has access to. But I am positive – completely positive. I have no idea what else may have happened to you – or to me – but that much I am sure of. Our lives are tied together.”

AC shrugged. “So you’re just going to give me a load of gold and set me up with a place to work?”

“Don’t think I’m doing it to make you happy and comfortable. I like living. I like it a lot and I’m not going to let my life be cut short because some puny human doesn’t have access to the things he needs,” said Siria.

AC smirked. “Now that I believe. Everything else you told me might be true or half true or pure fantasy, but I believe you when you say you want to stay alive. Fine. I accept. I’ll take your treasure horde and I’ll get my lab going and if you’re lucky I might even figure out a way to keep living for a really, really long time.”

“You could just say thanks,” said Siria.

“Let’s get going. I’ve got a class,” he said.

“I think you can manage the teleport on your own,” replied Siria. “I have some other business to handle. I’ll meet up with you later. I’ll call you.”

“Okay,” said AC, and he was gone.

Teleportation in Alathor was mostly handled by the game. If you visited a place often enough it would tell you the odds you had of making it successfully. If you failed then you usually had a painful death with half your body stuck in a wall somewhere. Now he realized he would have to focus very carefully. He decided for his first jump that he would go somewhere he knew perfectly – his bedroom in his apartment. He envisioned himself lying a foot above his bed – just where he knew nothing else should be, and he appeared exactly there. Only someone had left a few of his books lying on his bed and he fell a foot onto them. Moderately painful, but he didn’t die.

For his next jump he needed to get back to the university. He didn’t know the campus perfectly although he knew his classrooms well enough. But if he tried to teleport somewhere they had moved the desks he could have a serious problem. Instead he decided on a place under a tree in a little courtyard between the Henry Eyring building and the biology building where he had walked several times. There would probably be someone there, but he didn’t have time to catch a bus. He appeared about six inches above the ground, and was grateful he had given himself the extra room as there was a large rock he had forgotten about. He would have had his foot stuck inside it if he hadn’t given himself the extra space. He landed off balance on the rock and fell on his butt.

“Hey, are you okay?” asked a guy he had never seen before.

AC stood up and brushed off his clothes. “Yeah, I’m okay.”

“What happened?”

“I just tripped. I’m fine,” AC lied. He could feel himself blushing with embarrassment, but there wasn’t much he could do. He shook his head and started walking to class.

Stochastic processes were not the most interesting aspect of mathematics to AC, but he needed an elective to round out his requirements and the credit hours to keep his full time status. This time he found himself arriving at class just before the professor. He hadn’t really had time to review the material covered last time, but he found that the lecture was easy enough to follow.

Usually he spent his lunch hour studying, unless he happened to bring a sandwich or something (which was almost never), but he hoped Siria would be waiting for him or something. No hint of dragon or werewolf or anything of the kind was present, except that a pixie buzzed past. She was concerned with her own affairs, and AC knew that everyone else would just see some sort of large insect, so he pretended not to notice. The weather was still cold, but he really didn’t feel like going in and sitting down somewhere.

He needed to think. He needed to plan. He needed to know where Mr. Bains was. Obviously he had set a trap for AC in Chicago. AC doubted there were two evil masterminds working against him. What would stop him from trying again? Nothing. He needed to talk to work. They would want to know why he missed a whole weekend. He needed a new xbox. He needed a new television set. Luckily he still had his controller and hard drive in his backpack.

Finally, he took out his phone and dialed FastTrack, his sponsors. “This is Jim,” answered the phone.

“Look, Jim, I ran into some trouble over the weekend,” said AC.

“Figured. You weren’t online at all from what we can tell. Your commissions are going to suffer, bud, but no big deal. Anything we can help with?” asked Jim.

“No, not really. I gotta get a new box – maybe a new setup. My place was broken into,” said AC.

“You okay man?” asked Jim. He sounded genuinely concerned.

“I’m fine, but they messed up a lot of my stuff. I should be back online tonight though, okay?” said AC.

“Sure thing. I appreciate you letting us know. Hey, just send us the receipt and we’ll reimburse you for whatever you need to replace, okay. By the way, I was meaning to ask, what are your plans after graduation?” said Jim.

“I’m not 100% sure, right now,” replied AC.

“Well, look, this Alathor thing is definitely going to keep going for at least another two years. Some people project up to three or four, which I doubt, but we can make a place for you here if you want. I know marketing wasn’t your plan, but you know more about the game than anyone and we could use your talent. In two years you would know as much about this business as anyone here,” suggested Jim.

“I don’t know. I’ll have to think about it,” said AC.

“You do that. You don’t have to make any big decisions right now. The job is open. I mean that – open whenever you want it. Just give me a call and I’ll take care of it,” said Jim.

“Thanks, Jim. I’ll be online tonight. Email the new links and I’ll be sure to put them in my forum posts tonight. I’ve got some real news for the community – stuff that’s going to rock Alathor’s world.”

“That’s the spirit, bud. Talk to you later,” said Jim.

AC hung up the phone. He would have to set up a new system and be up late tonight working. Oh well, there were worse problems than having to stay up late playing a game.

With time to kill he walked to his next classroom. It was always empty. Nobody held classes during the noon hour. He passed a few students he knew, but just waved without saying anything. As expected the class was completely empty. The lights off. He twisted the little lever for the folding shades to close them. Light still filtered into the room, but the darkness was calming.

Somewhere in Alathor there had to be something about Mr. Bains – who he was, what he was. How would he find him? The game had created alter egos for the dragons – at least for one dragon, but after talking to Siria he was positive the game was modeling a specific dragon, not just some vague archetype. He wondered if he should start with that – finding Siria's alter ego. The Mr. Bains in the game might be someone she associated with there, just as the dragon he had captured associated with fantasies of his own.

AC looked around the room again. This building was mostly empty at this time. He realized it might be a good teleport spot to get to and from school. Not the classroom, though. He got up and checked the halls. The stairs. Hardly anyone ever used them – especially on the top floor. He climbed to a landing between floors and studied it carefully. Then he climbed to the top and teleported back to the landing. He tried it again. Perfect. Now he had a way to get to campus instantly. He would want to keep his eyes open for more spots like this.

After teleporting a few times AC began to feel a little woozy. The effort of using magic in real life was very taxing. On the way back to the classroom he put his hand in his pocket and rubbed the gold coins together. He felt the same refreshing coolness coming into his hands, but

the effect was somewhat dimmed. It would take a few minutes for his magic to recharge. He missed the overawing grandeur of Siria's horde.

This afternoon AC was feeling energetic and optimistic enough to participate fully in the class. He noticed during a bathroom break that the wounds on his face were continuing to heal quickly. Apparently the dragon's blood in his system was continuing to help. In class he was able to stay focused easily, and the concepts came to him quickly – much more quickly than usual, and AC wasn't exactly stupid. By the time class ended he was actually looking forward to seeing detective Hartley, and definitely to getting his car back.

The detective was waiting calmly in his car, parked in a no parking zone. Quite a few students and others crowded the president's circle, but AC had no difficulty finding Hartley.

"How are you AC," asked Hartley. He extended his hand and AC shook it firmly. Hartley smelled of deodorant and somebody else's cigarettes.

"I'm okay. Let's go," AC said.

When they were in the car, Hartley began with questions right away. "So tell me about Chicago. That looks like blood on your coat."

"Which version do you want?" asked AC.

"I want the truth." Hartley's statement was pointed but not angry.

"No. I mean do you want the version that makes sense or the version you won't believe but really happened," asked AC.

"Trust me, kid, there's nothing you can tell me that I haven't heard before. I've been on the job for a long time."

"Trust me, detective, you've never seen this before," said AC.

"So explain it to me."

“After I left your place I met up with a guy who said he knew what was going on. He came back with me to Cindy’s house,” said AC.

“And you believed him?” asked Hartley.

“Of course not. Nobody really knew what happened. But, he knew me. I never saw him before but he knew exactly who I was,” said AC.

“So what happened then?” asked Hartley.

“At Cindy’s he told me that he had friends in Colorado that could explain what was going on – why I was being targeted and that they could help me,” said AC.

“So you went with him,” said Hartley. There was more than a hint of disbelief in Hartley’s statement.

“He wasn’t taking no for an answer, detective,” replied AC.

“Can you describe him?” asked the detective.

“Of course, but look, you’re wasting your time if you want to talk to him. He’s not who you want. His story was legit,” said AC.

“So how did you get to Chicago?”

“These friends of his – well they said they were trying to protect me, and some others. Turns out it’s all tied to this game I play – Alathor Online. The top players were being targeted,” said AC.

“Were?” questioned Hartley.

“Okay, maybe they still are, but I don’t know. Look, it’s complicated. Anyway, the other players – they had a list off names – were in Chicago and Seattle. So I went to Chicago, but it was a trap. The one guy was just gone, and there was a skank there skulking around. She said something about working for only one master. Then she took off. The other place was a

total setup. The player was there – BossGal2013, but she was part of a trap. They tried to kill us, but we got away.”

“So who messed up your face?” asked Hartley. “That happen in Chicago?”

“No – Colorado, after we got back,” said AC.

“So who was it? One of these new friends of yours?” asked Hartley.

“I never said they were friends,” said AC. Despite the detective’s easy going manner, AC was feeling defensive. “Look, it’s no big deal. It was an accident. He didn’t mean to. Besides, what does any of this have to do with you? The guy you’re looking for isn’t from here. You don’t have jurisdiction out of state.”

“Jurisdiction has nothing to do with it. I want to find the people who attacked Cammie – or had you forgotten. You were a witness – I’m going to keep you in the witness category, for now. You were a witness to a homicide. I take that very seriously and any information you have I want. You can either give it to me politely or I can get an order and things can get ugly,” said Hartley.

“Uji’s is working with, or for or connected to a guy called Mr. Bains,” said AC. “I can describe them both for you, but that’s about it. I have no idea where they are or what they are doing or how to find them. The truth is, they’ll probably find me, but you won’t want to be there if they do.”

“Why not?” asked Hartley.

“Because then one of us is dead. Mr. Bains is behind all of this,” said AC simply.

“And you have no idea where he is?” asked Hartley.

“He was last in Seattle. He attacked the others when they went there,” said AC.

“There’s a lot you aren’t telling me, AC. I don’t know why. I’m on your side here, and so far everything you’ve said does add up, but I know you’re holding back on me,” said Hartley.

AC fell into sullen silence. How could he explain? He knew it looked bad, but nothing he could say would be believed. Hartley seemed content to just drive, but AC knew that he was thinking – calculating the possible reasons for AC’s silence.

They reached the garage and Hartley parked the car. “I’ll just tag along and make sure everything is okay before I leave you stranded,” he offered.

“Thanks,” AC replied.

His Subaru was not parked outside – usually not a good sign. Inside a woman was sitting behind a desk talking on the phone. She looked to be in her fifties and her phone conversation didn’t seem like it had anything to do with work. The office smelled foul, but AC couldn’t quite figure out what the smell was. It wasn’t a skunk or rotten eggs – it was very unlike anything he had smelled before.

“It’s a little creepy in here,” whispered Hartley behind his hand as they walked in. AC had to agree, but he said nothing. Somehow the garage felt utterly dismal. He shivered.

The woman noticed them and asked her phone conversation to hold on a minute and then addressed AC, “Help ya?”

“I’m here for the red Subaru,” he said.

She began looking through papers on the desk. “Six thirty eight,” she said, pointing to a number at the bottom of a list of repairs. The office was cold, but it could just be the October weather. AC handed her his debit card and waited as she processed it through a dusty machine on a bookshelf behind the desk. “Keys are in the ignition.” She handed him the receipt, sat down, and turned her back on AC and Hartley. Hartley looked at AC and shrugged, giving him

an awkward smile. AC stepped uncomfortably to the door at the back of the office that led into the garage. As he reached for the handle he caught a glimpse of the woman from the corner of his eye. Something about her seemed strange for a split second. It was like an aura, but different – almost as if she were covered in some illusory shape he could not quite see through.

“Come on, AC, let’s get your car and get out of here,” said Hartley. Despite the cold, AC noticed that the detective had broken into a sweat, as if just standing there were taking tremendous effort.

AC opened the door slowly, watching the woman out of the corner of his eye. There it was again – more distinct this time. Another shape was definitely covering her, like a holographic second skin. When he looked directly at her he saw nothing.

She turned suddenly and looked directly at AC. Her voice was harsh, almost guttural, but the question was completely innocent. “Was there something else, young man?” Her eyes turned completely dark, as if the pupils had completely swallowed the whites.

AC turned away and stepped into the shop. He expected someone to be there working on cars, but everything was quiet. “I’ll open the bay door,” said Hartley behind him. The door to the office closed and the click of the handle echoed.

The shop was ice cold. “Wait,” said AC softly and Hartley stopped. Low laughter echoed in the wide room, but the laughter was voiceless, drifting out from an invisible mouth. Behind them they heard the office door locking. Hartley turned and tried the door. It wouldn’t open.

“What the hell is happening,” cried Hartley.

“Stay calm,” replied AC. “Extra-planar entities – most likely demons of some kind. Possibly poltergeists. Don’t move.”

Suddenly the floor near the far wall burst into green, smokeless fire. Again the low laughter echoed. The flames began slowly spreading along the wall in either direction. There were enough combustibles in the shop to cause an explosion if the flames reached them. “Enough,” said AC calmly. He held up the palm of his hand and blew softly over it. Snow flew out and smothered the flames. He turned to the detective. “Take my hand, now!”

Hartley reached out and grabbed AC’s left hand and as he did AC waved his right hand in front of them. He didn’t have time to create a true path to the ethereal realm. That required time, energy and a lot of complicated calculations, but he could at least open a doorway to be able to see what they were truly dealing with. AC cast the spell and a shimmering circle appeared in the air. The circle grew until it reached from the floor to the ceiling and stretched almost across the entire room.

Although they were still in the garage on the other side of the circle, now the garage seemed like a world apart. Everything felt illusory, faded, as if everything had been painted with too thin watercolors. Before them floated a gloating creature with many green tentacles that reached out in all directions at once. In the center of its face was a large mouth full of jangled, broken teeth over which poured a noxious steaming vapor. Above the mouth was one lidless yellow eye.

“So mortals, you challenge me,” it began speaking a guttural, hideous voice.

“Always with the chatter,” interrupted AC. He reached across the shimmering barrier and shook his hand violently, as if trying to shake something off of a finger, but the calm smile never left his face. A tiny silver thread appeared out of the end of his index finger.

“You were fools to enter my demesne. Now I will take your souls,” said the creature.

The creature reached out a tentacle suddenly towards AC, but AC whipped the silver thread out quickly and it sliced through the tentacle. The demon howled in agony, and the noise shook the building, though AC doubted any of the neighbors would notice. Nobody ever seemed to notice the supernatural. AC whipped the silver thread left and right in rapid succession, and as he did the thread grew longer. Wherever he touched the demon it recoiled. He removed several more tentacles before the thread began to wrap itself around the creature's body. As the thread moved with lightning speed the creature began to cry out in an unknown language, harsh and horrible to hear.

Suddenly Hartley cried out in pain. "Help!" AC felt him pull on his arm and had to turn his attention away from the demon he was fighting. An unseen force had attacked Hartley from behind. Something had ripped into the sleeve of his coat. The limp body of the secretary was visible through the window on the door. AC guessed that whatever had possessed her had left and was now attacking them.

"Don't let go," said AC as he turned sideways and pulled the portal with him. He backed into the corner of the room, turning the portal until he could see their new foe. She had left behind the mortal body, and here in the ethereal realm had only her true shape – like that of a twisted, lanky gorilla with long claws and spikes jutting from every bone. One of these clawed hands had ripped into Hartley's sleeve. He quickly shook a second thread from his ring finger. With this second thread he grabbed one of the demon's arms and pulled. It screamed in pain and anger, but the silver thread held tight and the paralyzing pain it caused forced the creature into submission. Deftly AC wrapped them both in tight strands of ever increasing silver thread until they were wound like balls of iridescent yarn.

AC turned to Hartley. "I have to find a place to put these guys. It will take me a few minutes. Get my wallet out of my pocket. In it is a card for a priest, Father Frances or something. Give him a call and tell him to come down here. Then check on the secretary. She probably won't remember anything, but make sure she is okay. I'll be done in a few minutes."

AC let the view of the ethereal realm vanish. Instantly Hartley's view of the other realm vanished. He found himself in the shop, standing next to AC who appeared to be in some kind of trance. The place felt brighter somehow, and the disgusting smell seemed to have lightened considerably. Though there was a pain in his arm, there was no visible wound. He frisked AC and found his wallet.

The door to the office was unlocked now and everything appeared as if nothing had happened. The secretary was sleeping soundly in her chair. Hartley decided not to wake her, and stepped around her to the phone. He dialed the number. "Uh, I'm looking for Father Aaron, please," he said.

"Yes," replied a calm voice, "this is he."

"This is detective Hartley. I got your number from an AC Jones. I need your help right away, if you're available."

"Sure, no problem. I can come now."

Hartley gave him the address. By the time he finished speaking AC was opening the office door. Hartley gave AC a hard, appraising look, and then spoke. "What the hell was all that?"

AC tried not to sound too smug, but some of his cocky online persona was coming through. "You saw for yourself. Two demons summoned here as traps."

"I don't have time for jokes, pranks, magic or voodoo," said Hartley.

“Then you don’t have time for this case,” said AC. “You have eyes. You have ears. You were there. You can try to deny your own senses or you can admit that it was real and that you can’t explain it.”

“What is real? What just happened?” asked Hartley again.

“Everything. Magic. Voodoo. Monsters. All of it. Everything,” said AC. He was feeling a little exasperated, but still coming to grips with the truthfulness of it himself.

“Impossible,” replied Hartley.

“You don’t believe it?” asked AC.

“There has to be a better explanation,” said Hartley.

“There always is,” replied AC.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” asked Hartley.

“It means that the fantastic world masks itself very nicely. You can always explain it away as hallucinations, dreams, coincidence or something else, but that doesn’t make it any less real. Most magic can’t be recorded because it doesn’t use the visible electromagnetic spectrum. Everything you just saw – with your own eyes – won’t appear on camera. It would just show you and me standing there like idiots with a lot of garbled fuzz and popping going on, but you know what happened and I know what happened. Just like when you wake her up. She won’t remember ever being possessed and the owner, when you find him will wonder what you’re talking about,” said AC.

“So, what do I report?” asked Hartley. “I can’t just say demons appeared. That won’t fly.”

“That is your problem,” said AC.

“Thanks,” smirked the detective.

“Up until now it was my problem, but now we can share I guess,” said AC.

“So what about Cammie? What really happened the other night? What about Chicago?” asked Hartley.

“Uji is a vampire,” said AC flatly. “He’s a tier one vamp lord straight out of nightmares. He won’t hesitate to make thralls of anyone silly enough to get in his way and will kill mercilessly if provoked.”

“He’s the one behind all this?” asked Hartley.

“No. Someone else convinced him to come out of hiding to do their dirty work. And that takes some serious leverage. I think it was Mr. Bains,” said AC.

“Who’s this Mr. Bains?” asked Hartley.

“He’s the mastermind. I don’t know who or what he is, but he’s dangerous. Anyone powerful enough to pull the strings on someone like Uji is not to be taken lightly. I doubt you’ll find him even if you go looking,” said AC.

“I’ll be looking. You can count on that. If for no other reason than to convince myself I’m not losing my mind,” said Hartley.

“I’ll be looking too, in Alathor,” said AC.

“What does the game have to do with all this?” asked Hartley.

“The game is real. It was made with magic. It mirrors the actual fantastic world. It has created alter egos for all the most powerful fantastic creatures out there. Mr. Bains is in that world somewhere. If I can find him there I should have some clues about what he is and where he is in our world,” said AC.

A car pulled up outside the garage. They waited as someone came to the door. It was Father Aaron, as expected. He was smiling his usual smile, but a vague concern danced across his face.

“Hello, Father,” said AC.

“Hello again. Hello detective. What can I do for you both?” asked Father Aaron.

“This place needs ritual blessing and cleansing. I assume you or someone you know can handle that,” said AC.

“We don’t just do exorcisms on demand,” said Father Aaron, still calm and smiling.

“Of course not. Look, I’m not asking for an exorcism or anything. The demons are already gone. But these people need protection – a blessing. Whatever you can do for this place would be helpful,” said AC.

“Okay, my son,” said Father Aaron. “Kneel with me in prayer.”

They knelt and Father Aaron spoke in hushed Latin. As he spoke his voice filled with religious fervor and rose to fill the room. A quiet calm flooded the place and a smell, like dew covered roses, covered them.

“Thank’s Father,” said AC when the prayer was completed.

Father Aaron smiled again. “You aren’t really a believer, are you, AC,” he said.

“Oh, I believe a lot of things. I’m just not sure how they all fit together,” said AC.

“Why did you call me, then?” asked the priest.

“Because I knew it would help – just like wearing this helps.” AC held up his crucifix.

“Just like a lot of things you wouldn’t approve of help. They all work. I’m not sure how or why for a lot of them, but they work and I accept them. Thanks for coming Father.”

“I’m always happy to help. Please come visit me sometime. Maybe we can figure out together how things fit together. Perhaps come to mass once in a while,” said the priest.

“Perhaps,” said AC.

“The times are listed on the card. I’m glad you kept it,” said Father Aaron.

They shook hands and Father Aaron left, still smiling his calm smile. Detective Hartley had remained silent throughout. “Do you think you can work with an artist to get a sketch going of this Mr. Bains?” asked Hartley.

“Yeah. I know someone who knows him better than me, though. She might even have a photograph. Let me talk to her. I can come down to the station later if you want,” said AC.

“Call me first. That way I can have someone there. I’m going to assume I’m not nuts just yet, and assume that you are on the level. I suppose you could have planned that freak show we just watched, but that wouldn’t make any sense either,” said Hartley.

“Look, detective, I know this is all strange. I’m just as weirded out as you are,” said AC.

“There have been other strange things with this case,” admitted Hartley.

“Like what?” asked AC.

“Like the other guy’s body. The decapitated one,” said Hartley.

“What about it?” asked AC.

“It’s gone. Right out of the morgue. One minute it’s there. The next it’s gone,” said Hartley.

“Merc’s do their own burials. They hold it a matter of honor to handle their own dead – not to mention they probably didn’t want an autopsy on a goblin,” said AC.

“Goblin?” asked Hartley.

“I’m sure you noticed the warty yellow skin and pointy ears,” said AC. “Short, bad breath, scaly. All conditions that can be explained medically, but once they start running DNA tests it all falls apart. Twenty years ago they still could have gotten away with it, but you’ll probably start seeing a lot more ‘people’ go missing from morgues. DNA testing is proof positive they aren’t human.”

“You better get your car,” suggested Hartley.

This time the shop was just a quiet room that echoed with their footsteps. Hartley hit the button to lift the bay door while AC found the keys in the ignition. The car started smoothly and he backed it out of the garage. Hartley followed him out and AC rolled down his window to talk.

“If I don’t hear from you in a couple of hours, I’ll call,” said Hartley.

“I have some shopping to do, and then I guess I’ll head back to Cindy’s. Are you done with my apartment?” asked AC.

“Been done since Saturday,” said Hartley.

“I guess I better move back in then. See ya,” he said.

Chapter Nine:

AC decided to stop by his apartment before he went shopping. It was just up the street from the garage. It didn't make much sense that Mr. Bains would target him there at the garage unless he had already set it up before Colorado. Of course whoever did it had all weekend to work while he was recuperating. What other nasty surprises were lurking out there? AC pulled into the parking lot of the apartment complex feeling uneasy. Whatever else Mr. Bains was, he wasn't stupid and he wasn't careless.

The door to the apartment was locked. Why did that bother AC? The window was still broken wide open. Obviously the manager hadn't cared that much. Inside the carpet was wet. Had it rained over the weekend? It was cold inside. His stuff was still scattered all around. When he teleported here earlier he had only stayed for a few seconds and then disappeared again. He hadn't noticed how changed it felt – how empty.

He couldn't stay here until the window was replaced, and if they thought he was paying for it out of his own pocket they were nuts. He checked the thermostat. Somebody had been kind enough to turn off the furnace, so at least he hadn't been paying to heat the outdoors for the last couple of days. He would have to thank Hartley for it later.

He checked his bookshelves. His collection of comics hadn't been messed with. They were still in their plastic and all still in order. Unfortunately his action figures had been scattered all across the floor. It looked like most of the packaging hadn't been damaged too badly, but he would have to sort through them later to make sure. Hopefully these would be valuable some day, and he didn't want his retirement getting ruined by the winter weather.

A gray tabby cat suddenly darted past him from the kitchen and jumped out the window. AC was startled by the sudden movement, but then laughed it off. He wondered what other critters had taken up residence. In the kitchen he found that the cat, or something else, had knocked over the cereal and sugar. The fridge was still mostly empty, except he didn't trust the milk. Just to be safe he poured the rest of it down the drain and then emptied the fridge into the trash. He wouldn't be coming back for a few days at least, so he was better off without that stuff.

AC was still cleaning when someone knocked at the door. He put the broom down and answered the door.

Mr. Bains stood outside. He was dressed casually in a blue winter coat, zipped to the top and khaki pants. He wore dress shoes and a smile.

"Hello, AC. May I come in?" he asked.

AC sensed that he wouldn't be put off with a simple "no" and stepped back. "You're not welcome here," he said, but motioned for Mr. Bains to enter.

"I suppose Siria has been telling you her version of events, then," he said. Mr. Bains sounded sad, as if he had been deeply hurt. His sincerity was beyond question.

"The evidence seems to be on her side," said AC. He sat down in his one easy chair and motioned for Mr. Bains to sit in the couch. Mr. Bains came in, closed the door and sat down. He did not unzip his coat or stop smiling.

"I can see how it must have appeared," began Mr. Bains, "but I don't think she shared all of the facts. You see, there was a great deal of confusion in Seattle, and although it was unfortunate, I can assure you that I am not out to get you or Siria."

"Then please explain how her guts got spilled all over the floor," said AC.

“I stabbed her, obviously. It isn’t a question of what happened. It is a question of why,” he said.

“Okay, then, why?” asked AC.

“It was a matter of self defense. She attacked me first,” said Mr. Bains.

“And you just happened to be carrying the spear of St. George, carefully disguised, around for good luck?” AC’s tone was sarcastic and sharp.

“When you work with dragons, you are wise to be careful. I have known – no, I have suspected – for a long time what Siria was, and I am always prepared,” said Mr. Bains. He looked genuinely regretful and sighed as he continued. “I am sure you have a number of things to sort out here, AC, but let me assure you that hurting you or Siria or any of the others is as far from my desires as anything. I went to Seattle in good faith to see those gamers.”

“Then what happened?” asked AC.

“When we got there someone had already reached them. They were dead, and what’s more someone had already prepared a trap. A lycan and a fallen fey were waiting. I attempted a restraining spell, but I had not counted on the fey’s resistance. The spell ricocheted and hit Siria instead. She must have assumed I attacked her because she attacked back. She concentrated her efforts on me so I had to defend myself,” explained Mr. Bains.

“Why not just teleport out of there?” asked AC.

“I should have. I wasn’t thinking straight, I guess. We all make mistakes, especially under pressure,” said Mr. Bains.

“Look, I’m not buying your story, not in the least,” said AC.

“Let me show you something, AC. It’s something I’ve been working for a very long time to try to figure out myself,” said Mr. Bains.

“What is it?” asked AC.

Mr. Bains unzipped his coat and removed a plain manila file folder. “This is my dossier on Siria,” he explained. “It contains a summary of everything that I have been able to discover about her and about her motives as far back as I can trace. I have been in this game a lot longer than you, AC, so you see I think I understand some things a little better than you.”

“So what am I looking at? Get to the important part,” said AC.

“What you are looking at, if you follow it carefully, is a history of acts designed to infiltrate virtually every source of power in the human world,” said Mr. Bains. “Not only that, but also virtually every source of power in the fantastic world. Now, by nature I am a suspicious fellow, but I have trusted her and her friends for a long time because she seemed the last beacon of hope in an otherwise lost cause, but now I am not sure.”

AC looked at the papers. Of course they could all be forgeries. They listed financial statements. Accounts with transactions with several governments. Contracts with many major corporations. Mostly the papers were just summary statements with dates and locations. Death of King Fellod, near El Mina 1540, for example. Lists and lists of events. There were several instances that used the abbreviate KoL. “What is this, KoL?” asked AC.

“Oh, that – the Knights of Light,” explained Mr. Bains. “They are or were an organization dedicated to good and order among the fantastics. For a long time they sought to unify fantastic and human efforts to bring peace to the world, but they are now largely extinct. You will notice that Siria was involved in – or at least present at – the deaths of every leader of their organization since its inception.”

“Okay. Why show me this? What do you want out of it?” asked AC.

“I’m here for a couple of reasons, AC. First I just want you to understand that the people you have become involved with, myself included, are dangerous – not just dangerous but ruthless. Siria has no compunction about killing – even less than I do, and I have very little. What’s more, I don’t think anyone – myself included – has any idea what her real motives are, but I can assure you that she is NOT some champion for humankind,” said Mr. Bains.

“You still haven’t answered my question, what do you want?” said AC.

“I want you to help me,” said Mr. Bains. His smile returned. “I want you to help begin to put magic into its proper place – to bring magic back to humans.”

“What do you mean bring it back to humans?” asked AC.

“For a long time – way back in the beginning of human history – magic was a common part of everyday life. That much should be obvious from any cursory study of fairy tales. But there are those among the fantastics who have sought to hide it and keep it for themselves – to the point now where hardly anyone believes in anything even remotely magical. I would like to change that – to bring about a melding of magic and technology to improve human life,” explained Mr. Bains.

“So you created Alathor,” said AC.

“Yes, partly. I had a lot of reasons for wanting to start with something like Alathor,” replied Mr. Bains.

“And you think Siria is using Alathor to track down those most likely to learn to use magic in order to identify them and eliminate them?” asked AC.

“Yes, precisely,” said Mr. Bains.

“Which is exactly what she said about you,” laughed AC.

“I see,” said Mr. Bains.

“Look, if you really want me to help you, then you are going to have to do more than just make put downs about the only people who have tried to befriend me,” said AC.

“Okay, what do you want then?” asked Mr. Bains. AC could tell that he was prepared to negotiate, and felt suddenly that he might be stepping out of his depth.

“Well, look, do you have files like this on the other dragons, for example,” he asked.

To his surprise, Mr. Bains laughed. “There aren’t any other dragons, AC. They are all dead, I assure you. Siria is the last.” AC looked for any hint of a lie in his eyes. There was none.

“No,” said AC flatly. “You are wrong. There is at least one more. Alathor created him. He exists.”

“Are you sure?” asked Mr. Bains. He was very surprised and seemed alarmed by the news.

“Of course. Look, if you want me to help you then I need to know that I can trust you, and I need to know that you aren’t some idiot either. Now on the first count, I don’t trust you at all – for that matter I don’t trust Siria or Marcus or any of the others either. Every contact I’ve had with the fantastic world has almost killed me. On the second count you haven’t shown me anything I couldn’t have figured out on my own, and apparently I already know more than you do. So what do you have to offer me, really?” asked AC.

“Let me show you, AC. Let’s take a little trip.” Mr. Bains extended one pale hand. AC hesitated, but his curiosity overcame him. He took Mr. Bains’ hand in his own. The hand was cold and smooth – as cold as the October breeze that drifted through the apartment window. AC shuddered, and then they teleported. He was still holding that cold hand when his feet touched concrete.

AC found himself standing on a landing at the top of a flight of concrete steps in front of a wide building that looked like a school building. There was a wide lawn and long rows of windowed rooms. Over the door were the words “Bains Academy”. The air felt humid. Wherever they were it certainly wasn’t Utah in October.

“A school?” said AC.

“Not just any school,” replied Mr. Bains. He took out a key and unlocked the front door and opened it. AC stepped inside. The illusion of a normal school building disappeared instantly. Inside was a wide open lawn with paths leading in four directions to different buildings. The paths were bordered by carefully tended flower beds, but AC noticed that not all of the flowers were the usual varieties he had come to expect from parks. Mixed among the more mundane types were several plants he had only seen before in Alathor, and he realized that here were many ingredients useful in potions and spells.

“I think I read a book about a place like this – or maybe it was in a movie,” said AC sarcastically.

“Uh, yes, perhaps,” said Mr. Bains, slightly embarrassed. “Proof of concept and all that.”

Mr. Bains led the way as they walked up a short path to the central building. It had narrow gothic windows and a high arched doorway. The hinges creaked dramatically as the doors opened automatically and AC found himself standing inside a wide candlelit hall. Their footsteps echoed on the stone floor – everything had the appearance of some medieval castle brought to life again.

Ornate tapestries decorated the walls, depicting scenes of magical creatures engaged in idyllic scenes. At the moment the hall was clear, but AC could see there was room enough for many tables and chairs if necessary.

“It must take a mountain of magical energy to sustain the displacement and illusion effects,” commented AC.

“Of course it does, but then I have my ways,” replied Mr. Bains.

“I thought we were here to develop trust. Not a good way to start by holding out secrets,” said AC.

“Point taken,” said Mr. Bains. “I have provided refuge to a number of magical creatures. The brownies and grigs, for example. You may have noticed the grigs among the flowers. They want a place to play their music – and in time to play tricks on the students here. In exchange for almost unfettered freedom in this place they provide a supply of magical energy. The concept is not new.”

“No, it is definitely not new,” agreed AC. “But what makes your school of magic different from every other school out there?”

“First of all, there aren’t other schools out there. They don’t exist. Of course there are stories out there about them – all pure fantasy, but in our modern world there rest of the schools have disappeared. True, in some places the secrets are passed down in families or from those deemed by society too strange to be accepted, but there really isn’t a place where magic is actively taught – a place where the secrets that Alathor has been slowly revealing can actually be learned and practiced safely. That is my vision for this place,” said Mr. Bains.

“Why? What’s the point,” asked AC.

“The point is that magic is not meant to be hoarded!” replied Mr. Bains. He was clearly angry as he responded, though he made an effort to speak calmly as he continued. “Dragons, elves – especially elves – they all seem to think that humans are incapable of using magic wisely. Do you realize that they have cures to nearly every known human disease? Absolute cures – not

just remedies to cover symptoms, but actual cures. What do they do? They hide. When asked to share they become violent, argumentative – anything but helpful.”

“So what is your role then? You want to duplicate their work or steal it or what?” asked AC.

“I want to change the way things are. Elves have no respect for the non-magical. Dragons have no respect for anyone without power. Vampires prey on whoever they choose. Werewolves roam the countryside wreaking havoc on the innocent. The unsuspecting non-magical are always targets for those with greater power – and humans have the least magic of all. I want to change that – to finally tip the balance in favor of humans,” said Mr. Bains.

“That would be impressive. Of course with you as their leader, humans would be able to put all the fantastics in their place,” said AC.

“Someone has to lead the effort,” replied Mr. Bains. “Something must be done.”

“You realize that what you are talking about will lead to war. That Siria, all of them, will fight you,” said AC.

“I am already at war, AC. I have been at war for a very long time. If violence can be avoided I will avoid it. But I would much rather you and those like you have the tools you need to control your own destinies than to have those like Siria and Marcus – who aren’t even human, deciding who should and should not have magic,” said Mr. Bains.

They crossed the hall and Mr. Bains led AC up a long staircase that twisted toward the back of the mansion. Doors opened on either side of the hallway they entered, and Mr. Bains pointed them out. “These are classrooms, AC.” He opened a door. Inside was a room with comfortable looking student desks – all very modern – and a modern classroom complete with

smartboard and computers. “I like the idea of mixing technology and magic – finding the best blend of both possible worlds.”

“And the rest of the classes are like this?” asked AC.

“More or less. Of course not everything is completed, and of course some of my teachers have made special requests. This entire operation is completely privately funded, of course, so I have to cater to the wishes of my donors – although to be honest I am paying the lion’s share of this myself,” said Mr. Bains.

AC looked thoughtfully at the desks, and then laughed a little to himself.

“So let me guess, you have students here learning magic so you can get them ready to go out and make the world a happier place?” asked AC.

“At the moment I have nothing. But yes, my vision is more or less what you have suggested. Of course what people do with the knowledge they gain is up to them. We would teach them how to blend magic into their everyday lives. How and when to reveal what they can and how to use magic carefully and safely. Just as one would learn at any other school,” said Mr. Bains.

“So what exactly do you want from me, then?” asked AC.

“To teach, of course,” replied Mr. Bains.

“What students?” asked AC.

“Finding students isn’t difficult. Finding teachers has been very hard. I had hoped that Alathor would provide most of them, but someone has been killing them off, as you know,” said Mr. Bains.

“Someone really doesn’t like your operation,” said AC.

“Among fantastics there are differing opinions. There are those who wish to ignore humans, those who wish to share magic and live together with humans, and those who wish to enslave or destroy humans. Naturally those of differing opinions may express them more strongly than others. Of course, even among those of like minds there are different opinions about methods,” said Mr. Bains.

“So you’re saying that Siria and her crew aren’t out to save lives even though we went out to rescue people in Chicago and Seattle,” said AC.

“Are you sure you were sent to rescue them?” asked Mr. Bains. “Were those the terms used?”

“Then what was the point of Alathor? If it wasn’t to reach out to humans, to prepare them for magic, then what was the point?” asked AC.

“Maybe that was the point originally. It was certainly why I came on board. But when Siria saw the things you were doing in the game. When Leena and the others saw how you all reacted to fantastics – how they became hunted and exploited. Whatever their intentions were at first, they certainly weren’t going to keep you alive for long. I’m actually quite surprised she hasn’t killed you yet,” said Mr. Bains.

“So why bother sending me along at all?” asked AC.

“I think, especially after Uji and Marcus failed to kill you, that she wanted to try a human approach – that it would give them an easier way in. She was making the best of a bad situation, just like any smart person would,” said Mr. Bains.

“But you already reached BossGal privately,” said AC.

“Yes. I hoped she would be able to talk to you, but you were too paranoid by that time. You overreacted and made a mess. She was supposed to get you out of there and bring you safely here,” said Mr. Bains.

“And in Seattle you were trying to save those people. Siria figured out that you had betrayed her and she attacked. You were acting in self defense after all. Of course, you still are a traitor,” said AC.

“I am only a traitor when I betray what I believe in. Until then I am the truest of patriots,” replied Mr. Bains. He paused. AC was thinking – trying to analyze the situation. Then Mr. Bains continued. “I tried to reach out to others as well. I had access to the same list that Siria has been using. Samantha – you know her as BossGal – has been helping me to do some recruiting, but truthfully I could really use your help, AC.”

“What do you pay?” asked AC.

“Two hundred thousand a year, plus medical, retirement, and continuing education costs,” replied Mr. Bains.

“When do classes start?”

“Next fall, if all goes well. Most of the positions are already filled, but we should be ready to open the doors next September. Shall I add you to the payroll?” asked Mr. Bains.

“I’ll have to think about it,” said AC.

“Of course, no rush. Although I expect you may find yourself on bad terms with some people for having had this conversation. I’m sorry for that,” said Mr. Bains.

AC began walking back down the hall, taking in the castle. True it was a little too cliché for AC’s liking, but it certainly had character, and it was certainly more interesting than his latest math paper. But how did all this fit in with Siria? Obviously she knew much more than she was

letting on, and obviously so did Mr. Bains. Neither of them fully understood Alathor. What had he gotten himself into? More importantly – how would he ever feel safe again?

They toured the school, but AC wasn't paying close attention. He was still tired, and he still had a lot of work to finish later. There were the obligatory statues and everything appeared in stark medieval tones, but each wall felt like it was hiding something much deeper – as if the illusion spell that hid the castle grounds was only the first of many layers of illusions. It made AC's spine tingle. Nothing felt right – and in Alathor he had learned to listen closely to his feelings. If it didn't seem right it usually wasn't.

“Tell me about the game,” said AC. His curiosity had built a little as they wandered the halls.

“What do you want to know?” asked Mr. Bains.

“How does it work? I mean the AI and all that?” said AC.

“There is a branch of magic – I guess you could label it neuromancy – you know mind magic or brain magic, but it really has a lot to do with other things as well. Anyway, it is more or less what I specialize in – you know understanding what people are thinking. Well I created a golem that sort of filters thoughts and then programs them into creating an alternate reality based on those thoughts,” explained Mr. Bains.

“A golem? Like a living statue?” asked AC.

“Well, yes and no. Most golems are just that – living statues. They can do what they are told and usually have programs they have to follow and they are usually made of dirt or stone or whatever. Just big robots. Well, AI, as I like to call it, doesn't exactly have a body. AI is a program – created from strands of code that I have enchanted. So AI lives in our servers, but

AI's purpose is only to populate areas in the game and to make them more lifelike. AI is the secret of our success," said Mr. Bains.

"So AI, what? AI turns your thoughts into code?" asked AC.

"No, it's much more complex than that. This is a piece of magic that has taken me years to understand and even longer for technology to reach a point it could handle it. AI siphons memories and thoughts, almost at random, but especially from magical beings and then re-creates them in the game context. That is why everything you see in Alathor seems so real – because it is real or based on something real. All the creatures are creatures that someone has seen and interacted with. Of course the game changes locations and names and appearances, but the essential core of it all comes directly from AI," said Mr. Bains in triumph.

"That's pretty amazing," agreed AC.

"It is one of my many masterpieces, but just part of the overall plan. This school, Alathor, all just tools to help put humans where they deserve to be – to help integrate them into the magical world. I'm glad you like the game," said Mr. Bains.

"The game is great, and this place looks pretty awesome," agreed AC.

When he reached the main hall, AC found that he was alone. What had happened to Mr. Bains? A troop of brownies was scurrying across the hall, carrying little packs of tools. Each was only a few inches tall, and AC had to smile. This place was certainly designed to be peaceful – if only he could believe that it would ever succeed. AC walked out the front door, out the path, and opened the door back into the real world. AC paused. A thought occurred to him, and he took out his phone and snapped a quick photo of the front door.

Standing there on the steps outside the school – he wasn't even sure of the city he was in – AC realized that whatever plans he had made for himself in the past would be altered one way

or another now. He could forget about chemistry and research in the normal world. These people weren't going to leave him alone one way or another. It didn't matter if Siria was out to kill all humans or if Mr. Bains was out to kill all fantastics – he was caught in the middle of a conflict bigger than himself now. The conflict wasn't going to end just because he felt sorry for himself or because he had other plans.

AC turned and walked down the street until he found a street sign – the corner of Sterret Avenue and Madison Avenue. It could have been any city in the United States. He went ahead and snapped another photo with his phone. He was just turning up Madison Avenue, when Mr. Bains suddenly appeared next to him.

“I'm sorry to have left you so suddenly,” said Mr. Bains.

“No problem. Look, I have a lot to think about,” said AC.

“I'm sure you do, AC,” said Mr. Bains. He put on cold hand on AC's shoulder. AC shuddered involuntarily. Mr. Bains looked AC in the face. “This is a choice you have to make in a game nobody is going to win for a long time. One way or another you are just a pawn in a game that has been going on for centuries. The only question you have to ask yourself is which side you want to play for.”

“What if I don't want to be a part of your game anymore,” asked AC.

Mr. Bains looked suddenly serious. His eyes turned deadly and AC was certain they glowed suddenly red. “Then one side or the other will take you out of the game. If Siria doesn't, then I will. Make no mistake, kid, that cute little dragon of yours is playing by the same set of rules.”

Mr. Bains held out a rolled up stack of papers that was tied with a little red ribbon.

“Here's a contract. Think it over. Read it. When you're ready to sign it, give me a call.”

“Okay,” replied AC. He really wasn’t sure what else he could say.

“I’ll just take you home, AC,” said Mr. Bains, his voice calm, even inviting again.

“No need,” replied AC, and he teleported himself back to his bedroom.

Chapter Ten:

AC didn't stay in his apartment long. He was feeling hungry by now, and the apartment just felt cold, empty, and awful. He hadn't had a chance to talk to anyone. Everything was moving so fast. He hadn't even seen Cindy since he got back into town, though he was sure she had been around while he was out of it. He pulled out his phone and dialed Cindy.

"Hey, Cindy, its AC," he said.

"Yeah, kinda figured by the caller ID," she replied. "Are you feeling any better. Mom said you looked like shit this morning."

"Yeah, I'm fine. Look, I wanted to ask about Cammie. Vicky didn't say anything about her this morning and I've been worried all day," he said.

"She's in a coma. I saw her yesterday. The doctor's don't have any idea what's going to happen. Are you sure you're okay? Mom was really worried – I mean like really worried, not just her usual mom self," said Cindy.

"Really, Cindy, I'm fine. I mean it. There's been some weird crap I've had to deal with this weekend – I mean really weird, but look, I'm okay. You're going to kind of have to trust that I know what I'm doing, okay?" he said.

"That's asking a lot, AC. You can't just keep me in the dark," she said.

"You're right. Look, I'll just have to fill you in later. I'm going to go see Cammie. Do you know her room number?" he asked.

"She's in the ICU, or at least she was. There are a lot of visiting restrictions, but her family will be there. I have the instructions somewhere. I'll text them to you, okay. I gotta go, boss is here," she said.

The line went dead and AC stuffed his phone back into his pocket. He started his car and headed downtown. As he drove he considered his problems. Despite his blood bonding with Siria he still hesitated to trust her. Mr. Bains presented an interesting case against Siria, and appeared honest. The school was definitely a nice place, but something just felt wrong there, and one thing he knew from experience – always trust your feelings. He was still waiting for Cindy's text when he arrived at St. Mark's.

With nothing else really to do until the text arrived, AC decided to practice teleporting – if for no other reason than to get better at it. Of all the enemies that he had faced online, the most annoying were the ones he couldn't catch. He found a secluded spot outside and practiced, and then began looking for places inside. If he could capture a solid image of the place in his own mind he could theoretically teleport there – assuming there wasn't another very similar location closer by. He looked through his phone for the photo he had taken outside Mr. Bains' academy. The image was clear enough, but he didn't even know what city it was in. Without that information he could be teleported to any similar doorway anywhere in the world.

AC met Cammie's father outside the room where she was resting. He had never spoken with him before, though they had seen each other in passing once or twice before.

"I understand you were there when it happened," he said.

"Yeah," replied AC. "I just wanted to see her, to see how she's doing."

"You're Cindy's friend, aren't you?" AC nodded. "She told me what happened. Looks like you've had it pretty rough yourself," commented her father.

"You could say that," agreed AC. "I think it's been hard on everyone. I'm really sorry. If I hadn't come over, I don't think any of this would have happened."

“And maybe it would be you lying there instead. Or maybe we would all be at your funeral. Right now all we are praying for is that she will get better. I’m glad you came.”

They fell silent and AC just sort of looked at Cammie. The blanket was drawn up over her chest, but her arms were lying on top. He was grateful that nothing had happened to her face – he wasn’t sure how he would have reacted to that. He noticed for the first time that she was a pretty woman. Funny how he had always let their personality conflicts get in the way of that before. Cindy always told him how nice she was, but they just came from two very different worlds. For Cammie her religion dominated most of her life, whereas for AC religion was just another superstition tied up next to witchcraft and hocus pocus. But if the hocus pocus was real now, where did that leave religion?

“Where’s her CTR ring?” he asked, suddenly. He realized that the ring she always wore on her right hand was missing. “She always wore it. Doesn’t it mean something religious?”

“I had no idea you knew what a CTR ring is. CTR stands for choose the right. She didn’t have it when they brought her in the ambulance,” said her father.

“She should have it,” said AC.

“She can borrow mine for now.” Cammie’s father slipped his own silver ring with a little shield and the letters CTR on it from his own hand and placed it tenderly on his daughter’s.

“Is it okay if I send some flowers or something?” asked AC.

“Of course.”

AC realized how awkward the situation was. Cammie didn’t even like him and he hardly knew her family. To them he must have just been some strange kid who happened to get their daughter into a horrific mess. “I guess I’ll be going,” he mumbled awkwardly and walked out.

AC teleported himself out of the hospital to one of his practice locations outside. Lives were being impacted beyond his control. More lives would be in danger each time the fantastic world came into conflict with the human world. In his car AC sat silent and alone, trying to think. Finally he turned the ignition and decided to drive to BestBuy. They would have the gear he needed in order to get back online. Mercifully he was able to do his shopping in peace, although he was realizing that a number of little fairies lived within the city limits, apparently posing as insects or small birds. The illusions they created were so automatic and so perfect that nobody would ever suspect that dozens of tiny communities existed right around them – perfectly alien and completely independent.

AC reached Vicky's house after dark. All day long he had been hoping to be able to log in and get to work, but Vicky had a barrage of questions for him. She wanted to make sure that he was doing okay and that school was okay. Finally he just had to cut her short and explain that he had already missed a whole weekend worth of work, which was normally his busiest time and he had a lot of catching up to do. She finally relented and let him take a plate of food up to his room.

He had a gazillion private messages when he logged in finally. It seemed like everyone on the planet was wondering where he had been the last couple of days. Most of them were from players he didn't know well or from clans looking to cash in on the recent power vacuum. AC deleted most of them out of hand, but saved those from BossGal and H4rdR0ck.

In the peace of his online sanctum AC set to work. He had already enslaved enough fey online to generate perpetual magic. Although he detested the thought that these animated creatures on his screen now represented actual beings somewhere, he knew he had to keep going or face worse consequences in the real world. He needed to know exactly what Mr. Bains was,

and if possible try to find some clues how to piece together the truth about what he had told him of Sira. There was never a question that Siria wouldn't have dealings with major world players – the real question was what were her motives. Perhaps his captive online dragon could provide some insights.

AC moved his avatar closer to the force cage where he kept the dragon. The force cage was a cube of invisible energy – pure force – that was more solid than any elemental material. The cube normally did not allow for the passage of any particles – not even air, but AC had created a small hole in the bottom when he designed the cage so that the dragon could breathe and relieve itself. The cage was just large enough to hold a human being uncomfortably, but was definitely small enough the dragon couldn't transform. Grotesque, inhumane, utterly vicious – but then he was only dealing with animated characters, and the game was about winning.

The dragon, in human form was a swarthy man with a shock of thick black hair. When AC captured him he had been wearing a custom tailored Italian suit and expensive jewelry. Now AC realized that without contact with the gold and silver he had been wearing the dragon was weakened. Still the man before him was proud – if not arrogant – though beyond the point of resisting.

Unfortunately the online interface made conversation difficult. The game did its best to continuously update dialogue options – there was even an option to type in your own text and receive (hopefully) customized responses, but the interface was clunky and time consuming. He had never really bothered with it much before because he always assumed the program had access to only a limited number of responses. Now, with his improved understanding of how the program really worked, he thought he would give it a better testing.

“Dragon, do you exist outside Alathor?” he asked it. He still had not bothered to find out if the creature had a real name, other than the Mr. Smytheson it used in human society.

“There is nothing outside Alathor,” it replied weakly. AC had been feeding it a steady diet of supplements designed to remove heavy metals to the point now that he probably didn’t even need the cage to contain the creature. Briefly he thought back to his own experience and weakened state before he was able to touch the gold in Siria’s horde.

“Dragon, how many other dragons are there?” The question was simple enough, and he knew that at this point the dragon would not lie.

“Two,” it replied.

“Where are they?” he asked.

“Thunderskull prefers the desert. Vull hides always,” it said.

A private message from Bossgal interrupted his interrogation. “I see you made it back from Chicago, ok.”

AC ignored her message, but realized that he needed to try to contact H4rdRock. He sent a quick message to him, “Sorry I missed you in Chicago. Too many unfriendlies. PM to meet me near Bruinsbridge.”

Bruinsbridge was one of the many cities in Alathor and was generally considered to be a good meeting place for higher lever players. It was dangerous enough to keep the lower level players out but not so bad that you couldn’t hold a conversation.

AC turned back to the task at hand. “Dragon, are Thunderskull and Vull male or female?”

“There are no more females, human. None survive now but us three, and I have never seen either of them. Dragons are no more.” The creature sounded plaintive and exhausted.

“There is a female,” AC replied. He waited for the words to sink in.

The dragon raised his head. “You taunt me human.”

“No,” typed AC. “I do not. She exists.”

“Why do you tell me this?” asked Smytheson.

“Because I want you to find her. Bring her to me – I only want to ask a few questions – and then you can have her,” said AC.

“If I find her, I will never reveal her to you or anyone else. Set me free and I will destroy you,” menaced the dragon.

“No. You will merely attempt to destroy me,” replied AC into his speaker, even though the in-game dragon wouldn’t be able to respond to his spoken words. “You will hunt me the way thousands of others hunt me and you will fail.” AC began creating a complex series of diagrams on the floor using a variety of powders and magical components. Aithmancy, the study of magic and numbers was a more obscure aspect of magic that few other players managed to unravel, but the potential benefits were astounding. Rather than having to rely on continuous reserves of magical energy creating temporary or quickly dissipated effects, the process of unlocking sequences of numbers and figures could enable semi-permanent spells or effects that could be reproduced quickly and easily. In this case, attempting to bind a dragon to his will would normally require an investment of energy and psychic power normally beyond the capacity of any human. Transcribing the binding patterns in the real world would have taken much longer, but time was accelerated for most actions in Alathor, but even in the game his character would be busy for the next twenty minutes or so. One reason many players never did any complicated magic in the game was because it took so long. Few people had the patience to just wait.

He had time to catch up on his messages and work the forums for a while. He normally carried a little tablet to do his web surfing and forum posting on, and he kept it handy when playing in Alathor. The online community surrounding the game was nearly as active as the game itself and it was not uncommon for players to simultaneously interact in multiple platforms. Although Alathor did its best to facilitate voice chat and quick interactions, there were always those who went outside the normal channels. The game moderators were aware of most of these interactions and some even appeared from time to time in the forums. In many ways the game became an extension of the lives of the players.

H4rdRock had not responded, but he had left a message for AC earlier requesting a peaceful meeting. A message from BossGal arrived, "Let's talk. Tork's Park. 5 min."

"30 min," replied AC. Fine. He would meet her. He wasn't happy and he suspected a trap, but he would talk. If nothing else he could needle some information out of her – hopefully without giving too much away.

Suddenly the dragon spoke from his console. He had been focusing so much on his tablet that he almost missed it. "You're wasting your time hunting dragons," he said.

"Why?" AC replied. It was highly unusual for non-player characters to begin a conversation in Alathor. Typically a player had to go and click something for them to start talking. AC was intrigued.

"We aren't the enemy," said Smytheson.

"Who is the enemy?" asked AC.

"The King of Death, The Lich, The Dark One. Choose a name of evil and you will have named him," said the dragon.

"Go on," said AC.

“My associates and I have been fighting him for centuries – across the globe and through time. Now he seeks to rule Alathor, and his power is rising. Already many of your pathetic clans are under his dominion though they know it not. Already they serve his purposes though they guess it not. Trapped here so long in this pathetic cage I can only guess how far his plans have progressed,” said the dragon.

“Tell me about the Lich,” said AC.

“His forms vary. At first I suspected you were the Lich, but you clearly lack his understanding, although certainly your methods are quite similar. He – I say he, although he has at times past inhabited the body of a woman – is the embodiment of every reason fantastics are slow to share their magic with humans. He seeks all power – to live forever and to dominate all life,” said the dragon.

“How will I recognize him?” asked AC.

“You won’t know him. You won’t find him. When he wants you or needs you he will find you – but escaping his notice is your best hope,” said the dragon.

“Oh, so very helpful,” mocked AC, out loud to his screen. He did not have time for this nonsense. “Dragon, will you help me find the Lich?”

“In exchange for what?”

“You get your freedom. I get the Lich,” said AC.

“Why?”

“To kill him,” said AC. Anything to get this stupid video game dragon to help him out. At least now he knew there was another major player in the real game. Somebody even the dragons were afraid of.

“Deal,” said he dragon. “I will do as you request, but you must destroy the Lich.”

Sure, thought AC. You're going to do whatever I want anyway. His avatar finished inscribing the containment spell on the floor. AC moved the force cage telepathically through the air and positioned the dragon in the exact center of the complex diagram. Then he released the force cage, a few inches above the ground and the dragon dropped directly in the center.

Immediately the dragon attempted to transform, but the diagram surged with power and AC watched with interest as the binding held him in place. "Find the Lich. Bring him to me," ordered AC. The dragon howled in anguish as magical power surged over him. AC finished the spell with a teleport. The dragon disappeared.

Chapter Eleven:

AC only had a few minutes before his appointment with BossGal. What had Mr. Bains said her name was? Kelly. So he had made a deal with her and was probably the one supplying her with her magical ingredients. He was just trying to decide what gear he should take with him in the game to his meeting when someone knocked at his bedroom door.

“AC, you have some visitors,” said Vicky through the door.

AC got up and opened the door. Siria and Marcus were standing in the hall. “I’m working,” he said. He tried not to sound rude, but he didn’t want to be late for his meeting either. “Look, tell you what. I just gotta finish one thing real quick. It won’t take too long, I don’t think. Why don’t you wait downstairs. I’ll be down in a minute.”

Siria smiled and actually laughed a little. She had that look in her eyes again that told AC she knew more than he wanted her to know. “I think I’d rather keep an eye on you,” she said as she stepped past AC and into his room.

“Come on in if you want,” said AC to Marcus, “but no talking until I’m done.”

“Not interested,” replied Marcus. “I’ll be downstairs. I think Vicky needs some help in the kitchen.”

“You’ve had a busy day,” said Siria. Her tone was light, but the meaning was serious.

“Quiet,” replied AC. He knew he sounded rude, but right that second he didn’t care. Siria opened her mouth to reply, but AC cut her off. “This is serious. Now just hold on a minute.”

“It’s a game. What can be more important than your life,” said Siria.

“Your life. Now sit down and shut up,” replied AC. He put on his headset and took a deep breath. Then he teleported to Bruinsbridge. He had a half dozen safe teleport locations scouted, and chose a little further away from the center of town. He had hoped to arrive early, but by now he knew BossGal would already be set up somewhere. Rather than try to beat her to the punch he would try to sneak in and scout whatever she had set up.

She had chosen Tork’s park, an open and easily monitored park in the center of town – near the central fountain was usual. By default AC had assumed this was the location, and he was correct. She wasn’t alone. Two of her clan were stationed on rooftops. One on the bank across the par, and one on the hotel. A simple detect life spell revealed their location clearly. Their postures were far too sneaky as they tried to hide. He was surprised there weren’t more of them. Of course too many and they would have been easier to spot. Plus it might be hard to get people on a week night – not everybody lived for gaming. AC cast invisibility. At this distance any detect magic spells they had up wouldn’t see him.

She might have been invisible and she might not – he couldn’t normally tell anymore in the game because he wore contacts enchanted to see through illusions like invisibility. She wasn’t hiding, just sitting on a park bench waiting.

AC found a hiding spot behind a tree – just in case his invisibility dropped for some reason and cast an illusion of himself walking up the path to the park. The illusion would walk and act just as he did and even speak with his voice.

BossGal stood up when she saw him, but held very still. In the game she had switched her long blonde hair for short brunette spikes and rather than jeans and a sweatshirt she was geared out in a shredded t-shirt with tight black leather pants. A bandalero with potion vials ran from shoulder to hip and AC could tell that the spiked wrist bands were enchanted. The beauty

of the game was you didn't need magic to create a fantasy. AC moved his illusion carefully past her, as if he didn't see her and she didn't move. She was definitely invisible.

"Hey, over here," she said suddenly. AC turned his illusion towards her, but pretended to be confused. "There, is that better?" Back in his room AC could speak into his microphone and listen through his headphones. Thank goodness he didn't have to try to type this conversation.

"Hey, I come in peace. No need to be all suspicious," he said, hoping she would buy the lie.

"You may come in peace, but you'll be leaving in pieces if you try anything," she smirked. AC rolled his eyes at the cliché threat.

"Would you like a quarter? It'll buy you some new lines," replied AC.

"Oh, ha, ha, very funny," said BossGal.

"This is your meet. What do you want?" AC got directly to the point.

"I want to know why you trashed my apartment," she said.

"Not me," replied AC. "That would be your new friend. He set a trap. It backfired, and you got hurt." AC was guessing here. He didn't know for sure that Mr. Bains had set up the attack in Chicago, but he was pretty sure.

"Mr. B. wasn't in Chicago that night," she replied.

"No shit. He was in Seattle. His lackeys were in Chicago. Are you really this stupid? Am I really having this conversation?" asked AC.

"Don't get all pissy with me. You came to me, remember," she said.

"No. I went to you because I didn't have a choice, and because I thought your life was in danger. Turns out you've already signed on with the big bad Mr. B. and you don't need me. So now why are we here? What do you want?" AC was positively getting irritated now.

“I want to know what he told you,” she said.

“About what? The school?” he asked.

“You know about the school?” She sounded more than a little surprised.

“He offered me a job,” he said.

“I guess we’ll be working together then,” she said. She sounded a little excited about the idea.

“No,” he smirked. He pulled out his biggest jackass tone and laid it on as thick as he could. “Because I’ll be your boss and he told me to fire your ass for not killing me when you had the chance.” AC laughed wickedly into the microphone.

“Grow up!” she moaned.

“Ladies first,” replied AC.

“What? Are you thirteen? I’m serious. You are in some serious shit! There are people who will kill you for real. I was just trying to get you to a safe place,” she said.

“Right. With a sleeping potion and a gun!” he replied.

“AC, a half a dozen people are already dead. I’m serious. It’s in the news. Go look it up,” she pleaded.

“Tell me something I don’t know,” he said.

“If you know, then you have to realize we have to do something. We have to stop it. Mr. B. says he knows who is behind it and he’s trying to stop them, you have to help,” she said.

“Mr. B. obviously doesn’t think you are very smart,” said AC.

“What?”

“Look, obviously he doesn’t think you’re smart enough to have asked the question who is behind these deaths or why they are targeting the players,” said AC.

“Of course I asked, but it’s perfectly obvious, isn’t it? They found out about the game and they want to shut it down,” she said.

“They? Who?” asked AC.

Not it was BossGal’s turn to sound like she knew more than he did. “The fantastics. The Knights of Light or whatever they call themselves. They found out he made the game and they want to stop it.”

“KoL is a weak clan,” he said. He was playing for time, trying to think, and trying to distract her. What exactly had Mr. Bains told her, and what had she been able to figure out for herself?”

“Not KoL in Alathor, you idiot. The Knights of Light – they are a super secret organization that has been working to control humans for centuries,” she said.

“If they’re so super secret, then how do you know about them?” he asked.

“Mr. B. told me. He showed me lists of their activities,” she said.

“And where did he get his information? Who is he? Did you ask him that? What is he?” asked AC.

“He’s a wizard, obviously. He’s been researching this stuff for years. God, you are such an idiot!” she said.

“Maybe,” said AC. “But at least I don’t pull guns on people. I’m tired of this conversation, and I’m going to let you see what happens to people who mess with me.” He simultaneously crated three force cubes – one around BossGal, and one around each of her friends. She was screaming, but the cube was sealed tight – sound couldn’t get in or out. Then he teleported himself and all three cubes directly over clan H@VUCK’s fortress. Systematically he began detonating fireballs until the place was either entirely leveled or glowing red hot in

glorious video game animation. He left the force cages floating in the air over their ruined clan hall, each player completely helpless except to watch their avatar and rotate the camera, and teleported home.

“That was rather mean,” said Siria.

“It’s just a game. She’ll get over it,” replied AC.

“Mr. Bains doesn’t like people messing with his minions, AC,” she warned.

“And I don’t like his minions messing with me,” he replied.

She sounded angry when she responded. “I’m serious, AC. Don’t piss him off! You have enough trouble staying alive without doing things like that! You don’t know who you are dealing with here.”

“And you do?” he asked. She didn’t respond. She just crossed her arms and sat on the bed. “Exactly! You have no idea what you are up against here – and it scares you to death. And you are so worried that it’s going to me killed – oh excuse me, get you killed – that you are panicked. BossGal doesn’t know her ass from a hole in the wall, but I don’t need her poking around online and getting in my way.”

“Is that what you do to everyone who gets in your way?” she asked.

“What are you talking about?” he asked.

“Blow them up? Lock them in an invisible box and force them to watch their homes burn? You’re sick,” she said.

“Listen closely,” he said. He punctuated each word. “It. Is. A. Game.”

“No, it isn’t,” she said.

“Yes. It. Is. You here, on this bed in this bedroom are real. I am real, and somewhere downstairs Marcus flirting with Vicky is real, but there on that screen in that box is pure fantasy,” he said.

“But it could be real. It will be real – if you, or Mr. Bains, makes it real,” she said.

Finally AC was starting to see what was going on behind her clear, beautiful eyes. There was a sadness on her face the like of which he had never seen on anyone before. It was a sadness – not depression or anguish – just a sadness, like a pity over something horribly lost.

“Nobody is going to make that real,” he said softly. He reached out and touched her shoulder – the way he used to comfort his little sister when she cried after Dad left. She brushed his hand away.

“You don’t know that. You weren’t there before. You humans have such short memories – such short lives,” she said.

“Let me guess. Somebody a long time ago did something horrible – enslaved all the fairies or something and now you are here to make sure it doesn’t happen again,” he said.

“Don’t be so flippant.” Her eyes smoldered. AC was sure he saw the same fire behind them that he had seen in Mr. Bains’ eyes. “Thousands were killed. Thousands of enslaved. You act like it was some kid with a butterfly collection or something, but these were living, breathing, intelligent creatures. Whole communities were pillaged. Why? To collect pixie dust. To be ground up for parts like some recycled automobiles in order to feed one man’s lust for power.”

“He wasn’t the first and he won’t be the last. You see examples of it every day – all around us. Look at the dictators and despots of the world. People get a little advantage over someone and they play on it and prey on it until they squeeze everything out of that person. The

world is full of pimps and pushers, users and liars – and all of them are looking for power. I refuse to let them have it. Never again.”

Siria had reached that point of anger where she was nearly in tears. AC sighed and paced the room. He knew there was nothing to be said. Nothing he could say could console her, and he didn't even know if he wanted to console her. What had she done to make him happy or help him? Nothing. There she was. She looked perfectly innocent. Hardly as tall as his chest, with a smile that could captivate anyone and yet inside lurked a cunning and talented mastermind – someone fully capable of changing the course of history and with no compunction whatsoever about the death of a few humans.

“You act like it's yours to give or take. Your choice alone,” he said. “You talk as if nobody else matters.”

“It is my choice,” she replied. “It has been – mine for centuries.”

“Maybe it's time to open your eyes and realize that what you have been doing for all these centuries – all this planning and plotting – has made you just like him. In case you're wondering, between you and Mr. Bains, there's only one of you who has tried to kill me,” he said. He realized that he was looking across the room at the person who had ordered his murder.

Siria sat there looking at him. Tears had come to her eyes. He resisted the temptation to get out a test tube and try to collect them. Dragon tears are invaluable in potion making. Instead he handed her a tissue.

“That wasn't me with the demons,” she said finally. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She waited for AC to respond. When he didn't she eventually just kept talking. “There weren't originally supposed to be deaths. We just wanted to talk – find out what they were really

like. But Bains had already made his move. I didn't know it was him at first either. By the time I figured it out – well, you know about that part.”

“And me?” asked AC. “You sent Uji?” Siria nodded affirmatively. “And Marcus?”

“Yes. Marcus too. He came here to finish Uji's work, but you already had belladonna in your pockets. He was sick just talking to you. He did the smart thing and lied instead. Lycans have a natural talent for lying, you know,” she said.

“But now you can't kill me because I went and blood bonded us – lovely,” he said.

“You act like I'm the bad guy in this picture,” she said.

AC couldn't look at her. He just shook his head and turned away. He couldn't understand her motives. He couldn't understand her thinking. He couldn't even begin to picture the things that floated through her brain, but he was helpless. He hardly noticed when she walked out.

A minute later he heard Vicky calling up the stairs. She had dinner ready and Cindy was home. AC hesitated, mentally kicked himself, but went ahead and picked up the tissue Siria had left on the bed – dragon tears are still dragon tears; he might as well take what he could get.

Chapter Twelve:

AC sat next to Cindy, across from Marcus. Siria sat next to Marcus with Vicky at the head of the table. If only Vicky could guess who she had at her table dinner would probably not have been so calm. Instead Marcus put on all his southern charms and Vicky enjoyed every second of it. Cindy took turns alternatively giggling and gagging at her mother's silliness while AC did his best not to sulk or to think too deeply about his troubles. He hadn't had a home-cooked meal in so long he had forgotten how wonderful it was to just sit at a table with dishes and eat with friends or family.

"I saw Cammie today," he said. It came out of nowhere, but it was all he could think of and he really wanted to talk about her.

"I was going to go over there later. How is she?" asked Cindy.

"The same, I guess. Her dad was there. He recognized me. I don't know how. It's not like I've seen him that much," said AC.

"You've been in the news. Didn't you know?" said Vicky.

"No. I had no idea," replied AC. "I haven't had time for the news at all. What are they saying?"

"It just talks about how you were attacked. Of course mostly it was on Sunday, so you were out of it when they were running the story," explained Cindy. "Did you want to come with me to see her, AC? We can go after dinner."

"Sure, that would be great. In fact, I have something I want to show you," said AC.

"What about your friends?" asked Vicky. "Did you know Cammie, Marcus?"

"No, m'am, I didn't" replied Marcus. His voice was deep and sweet.

“She was in a terrible accident,” explained Vicky. “She’s in the hospital.”

“It wasn’t an accident,” said AC. “Someone went to her house and stabbed her.” He glared across the table at Siria. She met his gaze with a perfect poker face.

“That’s terrible,” she said, and the anguish in her voice sounded completely sincere. For all he knew, maybe she was genuinely torn apart because of what had happened to Cammie.

They ate in silence for a while until Cindy suddenly spoke. “I just remembered I’m meeting Chuck tonight.”

“Where?” asked AC.

“At the mall – downtown,” she said.

“That’s not too far from St. Mark’s. Just have him meet you at the hospital instead,” said AC. “I’ll take you and he can drive you home.”

“I thought you were done with him,” interrupted Vicky. She was clearly disgusted with the idea of Cindy meeting Chuck anywhere.

“Lay off, Mom. He’s a good guy,” she said.

“Uh, yeah,” said Vicky.

“Whatever. We’re just hanging out for a bit. He wants to talk. It was a rough weekend all around,” said Cindy.

“He was drunk,” persisted Vicky.

“I’m not doing this right now,” replied Cindy. She stood up and left the table, leaving a seat full of anger to fill the sudden shocked silence at the table.

AC stared at his plate. Vicky took a mouthful of food and chewed dutifully. Marcus and Siria exchanged a confused look but politely kept eating until everyone felt enough time had passed they could safely end the meal without appearing rude. Each of them dutifully expressed

their gratitude to Vicky for the work she had put in preparing the food and she graciously accepted their thanks. It had been a long time since anyone had appreciated the work she could do at home.

“Are you guys just going to hang out here or what?” asked AC as they were clearing the table.

“We had hoped to talk with you,” said Siria.

“We already talked,” replied AC. His tone was calm, but definitely not friendly.

“I haven’t said my peace yet, kid,” said Marcus. “You should hear me out.”

“Look, you can come to the hospital or you can wait. It doesn’t matter to me either way. But I’m going to see Cammie. There’s something I need to do there. In fact it might interest you to see. We can do whatever you want later,” said AC.

Cindy appeared next to the dining room table. She had freshened her makeup and now wore perfume. The smell of it nearly knocked AC over. She had her car keys in her hand and her arms crossed impatiently. “You in a hurry, honey,” asked Vicky innocently. Cindy just glared back.

“Whenever you’re ready, AC,” she said.

“Let me grab my coat,” he replied, and headed back upstairs.

He did want his trench coat. Not only because it was cold outside, but also because he didn’t want to be far from his gear. So far he had been attacked every time he left the house and he didn’t like the odds on this trip either.

Very carefully, he took the tissue out of his pocket. Dragon tears don’t absorb quite the same way as human tears do, but the tissue had soaked up quite a bit. AC found one of his little plastic test tubes and held it next to the tissue. Very carefully he began an incantation, focusing

his energy on the dragon tears. Methodically he separated the liquid from the paper and levitated the thick liquid carefully into the tube. Hopefully it had remained pure or at least pure enough to be used – only time would tell now.

As he worked he heard raised voices downstairs. He had heard Cindy complain about how much her mother didn't like her boyfriend before, but had never witnessed the tension first hand before. He heard the front door open and slam. He replaced the tube in his coat pocket and came back downstairs. Marcus was already putting on his leather jacket. He smiled calmly. "That gal is in a hurry to get someplace," he said, nodding toward the front door.

Cindy was standing next to her car, jangling her keys. "Better take my car if we're going to meet up with Chuck," called AC.

Cindy rolled her eyes and shrugged, but walked over to AC's Subaru. She had never liked his car – not that AC blamed her. It wasn't the nicest car on the planet. It wasn't like he couldn't afford a better car – at least that is what people told him, but he liked it. It got him where he needed to go and usually didn't give him any trouble. Plus, it was paid for. Chuck might drive a Mustang, but he had a payment the size of the Grand Canyon to go with it – not that AC ever brought that fact up to Cindy. You don't make your only friend mad if you want to keep them.

"We'll just follow in our car," suggested Marcus.

For some reason AC just laughed at the idea. "Don't be silly. Nobody's driving," said AC. "Come here. Huddle up," he ordered.

They all put their hands in and stood in a little circle. An instant later they were standing in a secluded spot outside the hospital.

"Whoa, that was awesome," said Cindy.

“Takes some getting used to, but it beats the hell out of fighting traffic,” said AC.

“Beats riding in that thing you call a car,” said Cindy.

AC was happy that her voice had a hint of jest to it. Getting her out of the house and out of her mother’s path was definitely a good thing. With everything else that had happened lately, the last thing that she needed was to be worried about problems with her boyfriend and mother. Wasn’t it bad enough to have one of your best friends in the hospital?

Cindy led the way through the hospital. She had been there the most, and Siria and Marcus were content to just hang back quietly. AC knew Cindy must be curious about their sudden appearance in his life – he had always been a loner, but for now she was just too preoccupied with other things to ask.

“I think I’ll stay in the waiting room,” said Marcus when they reached Cammie’s floor.

“Suit yourself,” said AC.

“I don’t know her either, maybe I should just wait here too,” said Siria.

“I think you should see this,” objected AC. “I think Cammie might be more important to you than you think.”

Marcus slumped into one of the chairs and relaxed. “I’ll be here when you get back,” he said.

Cindy had already gone ahead to Cammie’s room. Cammie was still resting comfortably, but had not regained consciousness. When AC arrived Cindy was talking with Cammie’s sister, Allie, who was explaining the latest developments with her prognosis.

“She’s developed a blood clot,” explained Allie. “They are going to take her in for surgery pretty soon. They had expected her to wake up by now. Usually this type of wound isn’t that serious, but apparently there was some chemical on the knife or something. They

haven't been able to pin it down, but that is their best guess – that there is some poison working on her nervous system.”

“We just wanted to stop by and see her a minute,” said Cindy.

AC kind of waved a little when Allie saw him. They had never met before.

“This is my friend, AC,” explained Cindy. “He was there during the attack. I don't know if anyone told you.”

“Oh, hi,” said Allie. She looked a little uncomfortable at AC, but didn't say anything or object. Nobody offered to shake hands or anything.

“AC, this is Allie, Cammie's sister,” said Cindy.

“I just wanted to see how she's doing,” said AC.

“The doctors are really worried now. They try to put a positive spin on everything, but things got worse in a hurry. Mom and Dad are supposed to be coming. They want to be here before they take her away to surgery. In fact, I want to call and make sure they are on their way. Why don't you guys visit while I step out and make a call.” Allie stepped out of the room.

AC noticed that Cammie was still wearing her father's CTR ring. Someone had taken the time and effort to brush her hair. Flowers and gifts had arrived, but had been pushed into corners or out of the way places to make room for visitors. A paperback lay open, face down, on a table. Someone had been spending a lot of time in this room.

AC stepped next to the bed, and got out his test tube.

“What are you doing?” asked Cindy in a harsh whisper.

“Just watch the door,” pleaded AC in an equally desperate whisper.

He unstopped the tube and held it over Cammie's head.

“What is that?” asked Cindy, still whispering.

“Dragon’s tear,” explained AC as the drop of viscous liquid slipped out of the tube and onto Cammie’s head. The drop landed with a soft explosion of golden sparks. Cammie took in a sudden sharp breath. Her body began to glow softly with a silver light. Cammie’s breathing became rapid and all the machines in the room began to alarm. AC stepped quickly back and Cindy and Siria edged into the corners.

A nurse rushed into the room. “You need to leave,” she ordered. Cammie’s breathing was still coming fast, but the glowing had faded. AC, Cindy, and Siria quickly left the room. Allie was running back up the hall.

“What’s happening? What’s going on,” cried Allie.

“The machines alarmed,” explained Siria. There was that soothing tone to her voice that instantly calmed Allie. “The nurse is in there now. Everything is going to be okay.”

Another nurse rushed into the room, but already the alarms had stopped. Then they heard Cammie’s voice.

“What’s going on? Where am I?” she pleaded.

AC realized that he had been holding his breath and let it out suddenly.

“What in the hell?” stuttered Cindy.

“Just be with your friend. She’s going to be fine now. Chuck will be here soon.” AC left them all in a little huddle of confusion and walked back to the waiting room. Cammie had never liked him. He would certainly not be on her list of people to see right after waking up from a coma.

Marcus was still waiting in his chair, but seemed anxious about the sudden ruckus. His face turned suddenly angry when he saw AC. At first AC was confused, but then he turned and saw that Siria was fuming. The anger on her face seemed to seethe out of her body.

“You stole my tears,” she said. Her tone was as icy as the cliffs near her lair.

“No,” corrected AC with a smile. “You gave them to me – of your own free will. I took what you threw away and I used it to save a life – a life you nearly destroyed.”

“You had no right,” objected Siria.

“I had no right?” responded AC exasperated. “I had no right? You want to talk about rights? You want to talk about destroying lives and saving lives and all your little bullshit about taking this and that? Look – you have no right!”

Their argument was drawing attention, and AC wanted out. He felt like the hospital walls were closing in around him. He walked to the elevator, but then found the stairs. He had no patience to wait for the stupid elevator right that second. Behind him he heard Marcus’ boots on the stairs.

“Wait up, kid,” growled the cowboy.

AC kept walking.

Suddenly Marcus sprang forward, locking him in a steel grip and tackling him to the ground. They rolled down, onto the landing where the stairway turned. “I said, wait up,” he growled, and this time his fangs showed, white and deadly.

AC held his peace until Siria told Marcus to let him go, then he said, “Last time you lost your temper Marcus, you blood bonded me to your girlfriend there. Better be careful. You never know what you might lose next.” AC rubbed his neck. He had hit his head and felt a sore spot on his arm.

Marcus growled. He was already partially transformed. Hair had sprouted along his hands, arms, and face.

“It’s okay, Marcus,” soothed Siria. Like an obedient dog, Marcus relaxed instantly. He slowly resumed his normal form and positioned himself behind Siria.

AC slumped in the corner. The floor was cold and dirty. He glared up at Siria. He knew the restraint she must be using to control herself. Every legend of dragon kind – every story he had ever come across – told of the pride and majesty of dragons, how they viewed themselves as gods among children rather than fellow creatures with humans. At that moment – more clearly even than when she had flown, fully transformed, over the mountains of Alaska – AC recognized her true nature. She looked down at him with terrible, powerful eyes and spoke to him with unquestionable authority and power.

“You had no right,” she said. Her words conveyed the shame of being hunted and derided, sought after but not desired, for countless centuries. He grasped the briefest glimpse of the depth of her feelings – how no creature, no living being in a thousand lifetimes had ever been able to look upon her and her true nature and see beyond it to the personality inside. Only through lies and deception had she survived and in one moment of weakness AC had taken from her – had used her for his own purposes.

AC realized he must be coming under the dragon’s spell. Siria’s very force of will radiated like a magical aura out to him, bending his desires to hers, creating a well of empathy for him to drown in. This was not a conscious effort of Siria’s. AC understood this. It was a natural evolution of her own need to be understood and a part of her overall majesty and power. AC focused on thinking, on evaluating, on surviving the situation.

He rolled onto his knees. He could teleport away – escape to deal with this later, but he needed to have this conversation and he wanted it over and done with. On his knees he presented no threat. He lowered his head and tried to appease her.

“You need to calm down,” he mumbled. The physical effort of speaking came with difficulty, so overpowering was her presence.

“What?” she asked, her tone condescending.

“I said, calm down,” he repeated. This time he spoke loud enough to be sure that she heard him.

“You want me to calm down, thief?” she cried. The contempt in her voice smacked AC with the force of a whip. He raised his head and looked directly into her eyes.

“If you want to finish this conversation then you had better calm down,” he said defiantly. “My patience with you is gone.” He recognized that he could be pushing her rage to new heights and that if she allowed her dragon instincts to take over this building and probably a large part of the city would suffer the consequences.

“Stupid human, you don’t even know the meaning of patience. You lose one little friend and suddenly your world falls apart. You save one tiny life and feel that now you carry the entire universe on your shoulders. You know nothing,” said Siria, but even as she spoke her voice was softening. Though still haughty, she was beginning to regain her composure. “Let me guess. You think that just because I threw away a tissue I give up my rights to my personal self. You think that because I choose not to help every dying person that I am some sort of monster – that because I have the power within me to end many of humanity’s ills and yet I refuse – I must be evil?” She paused, though AC was quite sure she didn’t actually want him to respond and he had nothing to say anyway.

“I have the same rights any government has that refuses to feed its own. I have the same rights that any business has that chooses to earn a profit. I have the same rights that any person

has who sits on their couch refusing to send their fifty cents a day to Africa. It is my right – given to me by nature or God or whatever you choose – to be me.”

She stopped talking. Still AC waited. He made sure she was done and then he slowly and carefully stood up. He brushed his knees and stretched his back.

“You gave up those rights when you sent someone to my house,” he said flatly. “You brought the fight to me – now you just have to live with the consequences.”

“You don’t want to fight me,” laughed Siria, but her laughter was silenced by the walls of a force cage that appeared invisibly and instantly around her. Desperately she tried to teleport, but the antimagic field inside prevented all escape. Behind her Marcus leapt, but crashed against an invisible barrier.

AC opened a series of small holes in the force cage – just enough to let in air and sound. “No, you don’t want to fight me,” he said sternly. “You may hate me, and for good reason, but always remember that you started this. You came to me. How did Mr. Bains describe you? Ruthless? That’s how he described himself – a ruthless killer. And you know what? I believe him. He is evil. He told me there were three kinds of fantastics – those who want to kill humans, those who want to ignore humans, and those who want to help humans. You told me the same thing. Well guess what? You are both wrong. There are only two kinds – those smart enough to ignore us and those stupid enough to get involved.”

Siria raged against the invisible barriers. She beat her tiny fists but then partially transformed and raged with her claws against her cage. “You fool. Let me out, now!”

“Or what?” asked AC. “Leena and Trina who you’ve been using all these years? When they figure out what you really are you’ll never see them again. The Fey Queen has a long history with dragons, as I understand – a long, unhappy history. Or maybe your werewolf

friend? The only way out of that cage is if I let you out.” His voice was calm when he said the last sentence. Then the cage was gone.

Siria nearly fell forward with the sudden absence. “What happened?” she asked.

“I brought you here to talk, not to fight,” he said, and began walking down the stairs again.

AC deliberately ignored both Siria and Marcus. He didn’t want to have a conversation in a stairwell. He didn’t want to be in the hospital. Somewhere upstairs Cammie was getting her life back. Somewhere upstairs Cindy was figuring things out with Chuck. Out there everywhere people were going on with their lives and he was stuck here in a stairwell with two people – two creatures – that wanted him dead. He was glad when he reached the bottom floor and was able to walk through the lobby and out the front doors. The October air hit him soft and solid and filled his lungs with cold life.

“Where to?” asked Marcus, his voice stolid.

“I don’t know,” replied AC. “Somewhere private I guess.”

“The Colorado house is empty,” suggested Siria.

“No dice. Look, from here on out it’s neutral ground or nothing,” said AC.

“There’s a restaurant up the street,” said Marcus.

Nobody had any better ideas, so AC let Marcus take Siria’s hand and lead the way.

“So are you two together or what?” asked AC – he knew the question, and his voice, was impertinent, but he was beyond caring what they felt at this point.

“None of your business,” replied Marcus.

“Whoa, now. If I’m blood bonded to someone I sure as hell think I deserve to know who they’re sleeping with?” said AC.

“Dragons don’t have sex,” said Siria with her best school teacher voice. “At least not like you think. In our natural forms we have no reproductive organs, so sex is simply not something we care about. Marcus is a very dear friend – not that it’s any of your business.”

“That’s just creepy. I’m sorry for ya, bro. Puts a whole new spin on ‘let’s just be friends.’” AC really couldn’t help himself. He knew he wasn’t scoring any points with either of them, but somehow he couldn’t stop himself.

Marcus stopped and turned to face him. “Kid, I may just be a cowhand from the wild country, but at least I have manners. I can look myself in the mirror and like the person I see. You want to feel the same you better learn to keep that mouth shut.” He turned and began walking again – leaving AC shaking his head. AC couldn’t figure out who he was angry with – himself or them.

The Denny’s was fairly busy, but not so crowded they couldn’t get a booth. Nobody was hungry, but they ordered drinks out of politeness – just sodas.

“So what did you want to talk about?” asked Marcus. His tone told AC that he was done playing around.

“Who is Mr. Bains?” he asked.

“He’s just some wizard. Why do you want to know?” asked Marcus.

“He isn’t just some wizard, and I need to know,” answered AC. “Back in Colorado you said you thought the Necromancer was the one opposing your efforts. Do you think Mr. Bains could be this necromancer?”

“The necromancer is dead,” said Siria. “Mr. Bains is NOT the necromancer. Necromancy is death magic – always. Whatever else the necromancer was he always had an

obsession with death and undeath. Mr. Bains has some twisted motives, but I refuse to believe he is the necromancer. He is a wizard, without doubt a powerful one.”

“Where did you find him?” asked AC.

“I first met him about twenty years ago. He was a grad student at MIT,” said Siria. “We try to keep track of magical activities, and some pixies spotted auras on the campus. A general panic sort of spread, so I paid him a visit. He had discovered some interesting interactions between certain magical auras and magnetic fields. Apparently in his spare time he dealt a lot with the occult, and had discovered fairies as a child. It isn’t uncommon for humans to have some limited interaction with magic, but he had figured out how to work genuine spells. He’s one of the more gifted magicians I have known over the centuries – and one of the more persuasive.”

“Just the kind of guy you’ve been trying to avoid developing all these years,” suggested AC.

“Precisely. But he hadn’t done anything terrible that I knew of. He came by his power honestly enough – at least there was no evidence to the contrary. Usually the fey are the first to make contact, but they said nothing,” said Siria.

“Then where does he get his power?” asked AC.

“It is possible, though very rare, for a human to be born with magical gifts,” said Siria.

“No. Don’t be naïve. The odds of that are low. The odds of anyone figuring out what he has all alone are even lower,” said AC.

“Then what are you suggesting?” asked Siria.

“I’m suggesting that either he has a teacher someplace or that he has secretly been milking fairies in his basement, or that he has spent more than one lifetime studying magic,” said AC.

“All of those are impossible,” said Siria.

“The surest way to lose a war is to underestimate your enemy,” said AC.

“There isn’t any war, AC. There hasn’t been any conflict between fantastics and humans for a very long time – at least not any major conflict. Sure there are isolated incidents that are quickly resolved, but nothing like a war,” said Marcus.

“He and I simply disagree about how to proceed with Alathor. I admit I was wrong to take human lives. I’m sure we can be reconciled,” said Siria.

“Look, I just want to know where he stands – where all of you stand,” said AC.

“You are overreacting, and it is pointless. What you should be worried about right now, is your own safety – and making preparations for your own future,” said Siria.

“I am. Look, he wants me to come work for him, and I want your advice. Is it a good idea?” asked AC.

“Oh, I see. Still not trusting anyone,” said Siria. “You really are going to have to get over that, AC. You can’t go through life not trusting anyone – especially when it comes to magic. There are balances of power everywhere. We’ve all agreed to help you – some of us with more reservations than others. I took you to Alaska today, remember? I’m on your side, and I’m sure Mr. Bains is too. Everyone just wants to go back to the way things were. We’re going to shut down Alathor soon – pretend none of it happened.”

“Pretend those people didn’t die?” asked AC.

“That was a mistake. A horrible mistake. Alathor was a mistake. As soon as we can get through the legal stuff – and it might take a while, we have international contracts – we are shutting it down. I’m sorry about what has happened, AC, really I am,” said Siria.

AC just shook his head. How could she sit there and talk so calmly about mistakes – mistakes that had ended lives? Could blood bonding be undone? He wanted no part of this person inside of him.

“AC, I think you need some time, and some distance. I wanted to make sure you were okay today, but I don’t think I’ll be seeing you that often in the future. You have a lot of things to figure out still – a lot of things you can’t learn just with my telling them to you. Call my gold agent tomorrow. I told you I would help you out and I will. Get yourself set up someplace – anyplace. You don’t have to tell me or anyone else anything about it. Then settle back into life. Get through school. There will be time to figure out all of this later,” said Siria.

“So that’s it? End of story. We all live happily ever after?” asked AC.

“Don’t be trite. Of course not. There’s plenty to do. Now the real work starts. You text me where you want things sent and I’ll get them to you. You are going to need supplies, and along the way you may be able to do me some favors. Like I told you before, we’re tied together now. You don’t have to like it. I don’t have to like it, but we are stuck. You’ve shown me today that you can take care of yourself. You’ve taken a huge worry off my mind,” said Siria.

“Have everything delivered to Vicky’s. I have work to do,” he said. He put a ten dollar bill on the table and stood up.

“AC, I’m sorry. I wish none of this had happened,” said Siria.

“You have my number,” said AC. He waved good-bye, walked to the restroom, entered an empty stall and teleported back to his room at Vicky’s house.

Chapter Thirteen:

Vicky was downstairs watching television. He could hear it from his bedroom. AC decided he should give her some sense of normality. He looked out the bedroom window, checking to see if anyone was on the street. It looked clear, so he focused on the sidewalk and teleported himself outside so he could come in through the front door.

“Oh, hi, AC,” Vicky greeted him as he came in. “That was pretty fast. I didn’t expect you back so soon. Where are your friends?”

“They had to go,” explained AC.

“They seem like nice people. Cindy always told me you didn’t have any friends. Sometimes I wonder where her head is,” said Vicky.

“I don’t really have many friends,” said AC. “I have some work to finish. I’ll be upstairs if you need anything.”

“How’s Cammie?” asked Vicky.

“She’s doing a lot better. She woke up. I think she’s getting better,” said AC.

“That’s wonderful,” said Vicky. “Things can get back to normal for you guys soon, I hope.”

AC mounted the stairs feeling confused, angry and tired. He felt like he was riding an emotional rollercoaster with no brakes. Mr. Bains made it sound like the end of the world was about to happen and Siria shrugged that off while nearly ripping his head off because he took a used tissue. He hoped she was right that he wouldn’t have to see her or deal with her again for a while. He had about as much of her as he wanted for a long time.

AC turned on his tablet and game console. He flipped through the photos on his phone, looking for the ones he took at the Bains Academy. What were those street names? Madison Avenue? Okay, there had to be a thousand of those in the United States. Not a lot of help. What was the other one? The photo wasn't super clear, but he could make out Sterrett. He couldn't tell if it was a street or avenue or what. He brought up google maps and typed in sterrett and waited for the auto fill list to drop down. It had streets in Pennsylvania and Virginia and Avenues in Ohio and Kentucky. It didn't take long for him to figure out that Sterret Avenue and Madison Avenue crossed in Covington, Kentucky just south of the river – just south of Cincinnati. Somewhere in that area was the front for Mr. Bains' school.

AC logged into Alathor and went to work. He had about a million death threats from clan H@VUCK. He expected that. It wasn't the first time he had become involved in a clan war. Usually they died down after a few weeks and things went more or less back to normal. He wasn't worried. The bigger question was what was the Alathor version of Mr. Bains up to? Where was he? What was he?

AC thought about what he already knew of the man. He had ties to Siria, which meant he was part of her inner circle of fantastics. There were a few secretive groups of fantastics he had encountered in the past few years in Alathor. Some were more high profile and visible, like Mr. Smytheson, the dragon. He had been relatively easy to spot because he enjoyed his wealth and didn't much bother to hide it. Siria wasn't that way. That would make finding her group of friends more difficult. Marcus. He admitted his part in the Thompson clan, in real life. There was a Thompson clan in Alathor – a real life clan that had made a bid deal about their alliance with the lycans. Could it be that obvious?

The Thompson clan had more or less disappeared, though. Clan warfar had dropped their popularity ratings, despite the fact that they often did have werewolves fighting on their side. AC did a quick search of the public clan listings. Each clan had a symbol, and sure enough their symbol matched the bite marks on Marcus' arm. AC could start there. The clan leader was listed as BadBear29. AC went ahead and sent him an inquiry about joining the clan. He didn't look super active, so he might not hear back for a few days. Clan headquarters were pretty well guarded secrets and they tended to change after major events, so he couldn't be sure where they were located, but Marcus had mentioned a ranch in Texas.

Thayerstown, a fairly remote area in Alathor was known for its relative density of lycans. AC fast traveled his avatar to Thayerstown and began poking around. The place was full of large, mean looking cowboys. He parked himself at a local bar and waited. These were usually welcome hangouts for players and computer characters alike. The waitress – a skankpire, completely obvious – took his order. He flashed his crucifix and watched her try to hide her reaction. She would poison his drink – these low levels lacked subtlety, but they were effective against newbies.

A big man walked in. The four bite marks on his left arm were stark white and visible almost across the room. He sported a thick black beard and wore dark sunglasses and a black cowboy hat. The bites were fresh. Some players converted to lycanthropy or vampirism voluntarily – usually a short lived but fun mistake to make. Other players became free to attack them directly if they did – and of course most of them didn't survive the process. Newborn vampires had so many uncontrollable cravings they were almost impossible to manage and fresh lycanthropes spontaneously changed form under almost any emotional strain so they became easy targets very quickly. Was this character a player or an AI?

One tedious, but sure way of identifying a character without drawing too much suspicion was to simply follow them. All AIs had a specific pattern of behavior, and players all eventually logged off. Follow them long enough and you could discover a lot. The big cowboy ordered a drink and AC kept quiet and watched. After about five minutes a woman took a seat next to the cowboy and they began a conversation. AC took the opportunity to walk past them to the restroom. As he did he quietly dropped a tracer – a magic spell on the cowboy's hat that would allow AC to know its location anywhere in Alathor. The tracer could be detected relatively easily by anyone who knew the right spells or had a potion to detect magic, but a lot of players forgot to check for them.

On his way back he noticed the woman's bite marks. She was definitely a clan member as well. She was wearing jeans and a tank top that showed off her belly button ring and tattoo on her lower back. AC went ahead and cast a second tracer – this time on her belly button ring. Then he walked out of the bar. All he had to do now was wait and watch.

Most players lacked patience. AC had learned to sit and watch rather than jump into action, and he had learned to listen much more than he talked. Over time patterns always emerged, and from the patterns he could develop plans. AC placed a recall marker behind the bar so that he could teleport back to that same spot. Then he teleported across the continent to New Flavins, a city near the ocean. It had become an open secret rather quickly in Alathor that the best organized of the fantastic mercenary guilds operated out of New Flavins. All cities had mercenaries of some sort, but most were operated rather inefficiently by goblins. Most mercenary guilds fronted as private detective agencies or independent security contractors. AC had discovered that a surprising number of mall security guards were actually fantastics in disguise.

AC opened the door of the Longstreet Detective Agency. The gal behind the reception desk smiled broadly. AC had a regular account with the agency and he knew she would recognize him (the AI in the game was surprisingly adaptive). “Hello, Mr. Johnson, did you need to see Mr. Myers?” she asked.

AC knew she was fey, but he hadn’t been able to place exactly what type. Her eyes were unnaturally large and she had a habit of unconsciously floating off of her chair if you watched her long enough. Hair dye and makeup covered the rest, although AC was positive she was perfectly capable of creating a permanent illusion if she chose.

AC selected the “yes” option and moved his avatar. It was getting late. He couldn’t spend all night in the game and still function in the morning. He took out the card Siria had given him for her gold broker. Obviously he couldn’t stay here at Vicky’s forever, and he couldn’t set up a base in that apartment. It was probably being scryed anyway – which reminded him, he hadn’t checked for tracers on himself since he woke up. He had to start thinking like he was in the game. AC quickly scanned for auras. Two tracers. He was getting sloppy. His apartment definitely would have a scry on it – a spell that let the user watch it with a crystal ball or magic mirror or something similar. There was a tracer on his cell phone and another on his watch. Clearly many people were interested to know where he was at all times. He would have to deal with these tracers eventually.

Back in Alathor AC was going through the menu options to hire the Longstreet Agency to follow the people he had put the tracers on. He needed to know who they associated with, where they went. Any clues that would lead him to the Alathor version of Marcus could lead him to the Alathor version of Siria and then to the Alathor version of Mr. Bains. He used the free input dialogue option to explain his needs more clearly – now that he knew the game was

magical he could input anything he wanted and the game could make its own decisions. He explained to Mr. Myers – the head of the Longsteet Agency that he wasn't interested in the two he put the tracers on, but that he really wanted to find associates of the clan – a powerful but innocent looking woman and a powerful but innocent looking man.

Siria said she wanted the game shut down – how long did he have? But Mr. Bains had the program, would he cooperate?

Chapter Fourteen:

AC woke early. He had a lot to get started on. He had managed to get a good jump on his homework last night – at least enough to get him through the day though he usually liked to get all his assignments for the week done early so he would be ready to work all weekend. This morning he had work to do. He left the house early. AC drove his car up to the university. Everything was dark and still and he knew that nothing was really going on yet.

AC parked in the university parking lot, but teleported onto campus. He needed to practice his teleportation. More than once it had been the difference between life and death in Alathor. Fortunately the science building was open, but the labs were locked. AC teleported to the other side of the lab door. He needed a lab this morning. He didn't have the equipment to mix potions at Vicky's house. AC worked quickly, mixing herbs he had purchased at Betty's Boutique while chanting quietly. In Alathor all he had to do was select the correct options and watch his avatar. Now he had to remember the correct sequences and perform them himself. Don't break the rhythm while stirring – three more to the right, now six to the left. Now add heat. AC lit a Bunsen burner. Unfortunately with this concoction he might never know if it had worked. An ointment for seeing invisible things only revealed what was invisible, and if you saw someone who was invisible they would just look normal, so in reality unless they were truly fantastic – with wings or something – then you couldn't tell the difference, but whoever was following him (and somebody had to monitor the tracer) was probably invisible or at least covered in a heavy illusion. This mixture would reveal both.

AC rubbed the ointment on his temples and forehead, working it completely into the skin. He looked around carefully. Nobody. Either it wasn't working or nobody was there. Buildings

might be open or closed but classrooms would still probably be closed. The library would be open, though, with access to the computer lab. Also students would start coming in to study. AC decided to head to the computer lab – he had plenty he needed to take care of on the computer.

He realized for the first time that he could literally choose to live anywhere he wanted on the entire Earth. He brought up google maps and began randomly picking places to look at. With teleportation on his side he could choose a place as remote as Siria's cave – if her lair could be called a cave, or with the gold at his disposal he could purchase a penthouse somewhere. For now he would need someplace local. He logged on to a real estate site and looked at houses in Salt Lake. He found a couple in the avenues between 3rd East and 14th East – all inexpensive – and sent an email to an agent with his phone number.

It was time to get rid of the tracers, but not without sending a little message to whoever had put them there in the first place. AC wandered down to the open study areas of the library. Another group of students had come to the library. They were studying biology together – apparently there was a test coming up. They were several tables away, but AC walked to a shelf close to their group and pretended to look at the books. AC quietly placed his own tracer on the cell phone, but left the existing tracer in place. AC chose a backpack at random that he could see and quietly teleported his phone and watch into that bag.

He still had two hours before his first class. Hopefully whoever had been assigned to follow him would show himself soon. AC found a stairway and turned a corner in the stairwell where he wasn't likely to be seen and turned himself invisible. Then he began quietly backtracking. If he was being followed they would need to follow the tracer now. AC teleported back to the study area. The group of students was finishing up, but sure enough two new

students appeared from the direction of the stairwell. One of them was a short guy with what looked like a bad skin condition, wearing sunglasses. The other was a lithe, athletic looking guy who held his nose high. AC recognized that posture – he was trying to pick up AC’s scent. These two were his marks.

AC teleported his phone and watch back to his own hand and then teleported himself from the library to his landing spot outside the science building. He left the backpack under a tree and teleported himself to the top of the building where he could watch. It would take them a few minutes to figure out he had teleported, and then a few more to locate him. The tall one showed up first. He must have a better read on the tracer, and he clearly had superhuman scent – probably a weredog. AC did not hesitate. He created manacles of pure force and bound the guy’s hands, feet and mouth. In an instant AC teleported to his side, touched him, and teleported them both back to the roof. A minute later the guy in sunglasses also came looking. AC trapped him in the same way.

Back on the roof AC checked them for magical auras. The tall one was wearing shoes that radiated magic and the short one’s sunglasses radiated magic. He had the right people – not that there was any doubt before. The small man struggled against his invisible bonds, but the large man rested patiently.

“I don’t have a lot of time, so please answer my questions quickly and honestly,” said AC. He released the bond on the short fellow’s mouth.

“Who hired you,” he asked.

“Excuse me, but you know we can’t do that,” explained the short man. He had the gruff, gravelly voice of a goblin.

“Correction. I know that you shouldn’t do that. The consequences can be dire for one who betrays his mercenary oath. Of course the consequences will be horrible if you don’t tell me,” menaced AC. He removed the bonds on the tall one’s mouth. “What about you?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he scoffed.

“I see,” said AC. He grew thoughtful. Of course in Alathor if someone had him followed like this he would have exacted harsh and immediate revenge. In the real world he couldn’t do the same things, not if he wanted to stay sane and avoid being arrested. He carefully searched them again for any signs of enchantment and then went through their pockets, and searched them for identifying marks. He took a moment to dispel the tracers on his phone and watch and then took a picture of the smaller man’s tattoo. The tattoo was clearly enchanted. AC guessed it might be a type of gease – a spell binding his will to his organization, or it might give him some protective powers.

Neither of his pursuers spoke during the search. They waited patiently for him to finish. Both had driver’s licenses, and AC took photos of their identification, including their licenses as private investigators. Interestingly enough they had both been hired by the same agency – Altruistic Inc., out of Long Beach, New York. Well, at least now he knew where the big mercenary guild was in the real world. AC gave them back their things and removed their bonds.

As he searched them, AC noticed that each of them had a very distinct odor. Before, when he smelled Marcus, he had noticed the smell of dog on him, but now this slender man had the same scent. The smaller man smelled of dirt – the same smell he had noticed when his mother had made him dig in her garden, long before college. He didn’t usually notice odors on people, but these smells came to him distinctly.

“Were you just to follow and spy or was there more to it?” asked AC. This was usually a fair question. Most reasonable mercenaries would tell you if they had been ordered to kill you – it was a point of honor.

“Just tracking,” said James, the slender man. “Someone wants to know real bad where you go and where you stay.” His accent was definitely not New York. California maybe?

“After Cleaver, I didn’t even want the job,” said ‘Bob’ the small man. AC had guessed he might be a goblin, but wasn’t sure until he mentioned Cleaver. “I was supposed to follow and report – that’s the truth.”

“The same person hire you that hired Cleaver – eh, Bob?” AC asked.

“Bob’s just a cover. You can call me Crush, and I don’t mind telling you yes. That much you would’ve guessed yourself anyway. Not as many goblins in the business as there used to be,” said Crush.

“I presume, then, that you can guess who hired me. You obviously knew there were two of us,” said James.

“I don’t know for sure who hired you. There were two aruas, so I assumed two trackers. But let your bosses know it’s bad business for your agency to send anyone else,” said AC.

“I’m quite certain they can decide for themselves what makes good and bad business,” replied James coolly.

“No, they can’t.” AC spoke sternly. “Something new has happened here that they know nothing about and I can promise they don’t want to get involved. Neither of you was prepared today – and nobody in your organization is prepared to deal with what’s coming. Trust me when I say you don’t want anything to do with me again – ever.”

AC teleported to the janitor's closet near to his classroom. Those two were professionals. They wouldn't be intimidated, and he didn't want to hurt them or make enemies of their guild, but if he could convince them to turn down the next offer to follow him he would be one more little step ahead of the game.

Class was much smoother today than yesterday. He generally felt better – healthier than he had yesterday. Perhaps Siria was right – all he needed to do was settle back into his own life and not worry about it too much. Fantastics were just like everyone else, weren't they – just trying to live life and be happy. Until someone did something to disrupt their balance, then why should there be any problems. But someone had disrupted that balance, and now he was caught in the middle. AC had a feeling that Alathor wasn't going offline as quickly as Siria had assured him.

During his second class he received a text from Cammie. She wanted to see him. After class he called her back.

“Hi, Cammie, I'm just calling you back, how are you?” he said.

“I'm great! In fact the doctors are all amazed. Cindy said you did something – she wouldn't say what – but I wanted to thank you. Why don't you come for lunch – my treat,” she said. AC had never heard Cammie so excited about anything before.

“Um, okay,” he said. “I finish class at noon today. Where did you want to meet?”

“Wherever you like – I can pick you up,” said Cammie.

“Do you know that Chinese place on State Street near 13th south?” asked AC.

“Uh, yeah, café something or other. I know the one,” said Cammie.

“I'll see you there about 1:15, okay,” said AC.

“Yeah, sure.”

AC hung up, a little surprised. What would he tell her? The truth? This was way out there for someone as conservative as Cammie. Okay, it was way out there for anyone. It was her life, maybe she had a right to know.

His phone rang. It was the realtor.

“Hi,” said AC.

“This is Tracy from Remax,” said a woman’s voice. “I got your email about some houses.”

“Uh, yeah. I’m pretty new at this, but I want to buy a house. Something kind of close to the U, but inexpensive,” said AC.

“Do you have your financing already?” asked Tracy.

“Uh, financing?” asked AC. He knew he sounded stupid.

“Your loan. Do you have a loan yet?” she asked.

“I don’t need one. I have the money already,” he said.

“I’m free this afternoon to go with you to take a look if you want. How does your schedule look?” she asked.

“I’m free after two. Where did you want to meet?” he asked.

“Well, why don’t we meet at two at the address you marked over on Kensington?” she said.

“Oh, sure. No problem,” replied AC.

He hung up and his phone buzzed again. It was a text from Cindy wanting to know how he was doing. He had to get to his next class already. He texted her back quickly and then put his phone away. Was anybody looking? No. He teleported closer to class. No point walking if he didn’t have to.

His phone buzzed again. The caller ID didn't recognize the number. "Hello," said AC.

"AC, how are you?" asked Mr. Bains. His voice was all business.

"Fine. Look, I can't really talk right now, I have to get to class," said AC.

"Of course. I just wanted to let you know I spoke with Samantha this morning. She's quite upset, AC. What you did to her in the game was really unpleasant," he said.

"It's a game – she'll get over it," replied AC. "I really have to go."

"I know it's just a game, AC, but would you mind just playing nice for a while? As a favor?" asked Mr. Bains.

"I have to go, really. Look, tell little Samantha that if she can't handle the heat she needs stay the hell out of my way. Call me later if it's that big of a deal," he said.

"Oh, I assure you, it is that big of a deal," said Mr. Bains, and something in his voice had gone from casual to sinister. AC shuddered and hung up. He walked into class right behind the professor.

Chapter Fifteen:

AC had to drive down to meet Cammie. He hadn't memorized a good teleport location near there just yet. Cammie was already waiting for him when he arrived. She was sitting at the table drinking a soda when he walked into the restaurant and the waiter pointed him to her table.

Cammie looked as if she had never been hurt or in the hospital at all. She was wearing what AC had decided was a purely Utah fashion – a red and blue polo and blue jeans. Her hair was pulled back into a pony tail with a pink scrunchie.

AC picked this place because the food was amazing, and it was very affordable. He loved Chinese food – especially dim sum, and they had the best in the city. It was one of those places that had been around forever, but that it seemed like nobody knew about even though everyone should.

AC had no idea how to start a conversation, and didn't really try after saying hello. They just didn't have anything in common. They ordered.

“Cindy said it was you that cured me,” said Cammie suddenly.

“Cindy shouldn't be telling stories,” replied AC.

“She doesn't lie. She said you were there at the hospital. They were going to take me in to surgery because I had a blood clot and they were going to put this filter thing into me and it was really serious. Then you took her to the hospital and then I got better. My sister was there. She says I was dying one minute, but then she went out to call my parents and the next thing all the alarms were going off. She thought I was dead, but by the time she got there I was completely better. The doctors still have no idea what happened. So tell,” said Cammie.

“You don't want to know,” replied AC.

“Don’t treat me like a kid. I was there, remember? I remember that freak with the sword – everything. Detective Hartley already talked to me. He told me you were into some weird stuff, but he wanted to hear from me what happened. I told him the whole story. He didn’t even bat an eye when I told him. I remember the garlic, and being hypnotized or whatever by that guy. I have no idea who they were, but it was really strange, and I want some answers,” she said.

“What do you think it was?” asked AC. His question was serious. He wanted to get her opinion before he decided what to tell her.

“If it wasn’t for what happened at the hospital, I would just assume it was some whacked out friend of yours on drugs,” she said.

“I don’t have any friends that use drugs,” he said. Ugh, she could be so exasperating and judgmental.

“You asked what I thought. Besides, that doesn’t explain how I’m miraculously here. I don’t have any idea what’s going on, except it can’t be explained,” she said.

“Nothing is going on. Yeah, it was a guy from that game I play – Alathor Online – but I never saw him before. I don’t know how he found me and I don’t know what he wanted. All I know is I’m alive and your alive and everything can go back to normal now, okay,” he said. Part of him wanted to just lay it on the line for her if for no other reason than to just put it right in her face that all the stuff she made fun of was real, but he couldn’t do that. Life was complicated enough without all that.

“Hogwash,” she replied. “There’s more to it than that.”

“Prove it,” he said.

Suddenly Cammie became very serious – scared serious. “I’ve been having dreams – the whole time I was in that coma. I haven’t told anyone else,” she said.

“What kind of dreams?” asked AC.

“About him?”

“Who?”

“That guy – the one with the sword,” she explained.

“Shit!” said AC.

“Shit? What do you mean shit?” asked Cammie in confusion.

“I mean shit – as in damn – as in you are officially screwed, and it’s my fault,” said AC.

The food arrived but they hardly noticed.

“Explain,” said Cammie in a very serious “mom” voice.

“He’s a vampire,” said AC.

“I knew it!” said Cammie, as if she had been holding back a secret she couldn’t wait to share.

“Don’t be so excited. This isn’t some goo goo love story where vampires are all hot and sexy and just trying to live their own lives. He wants power and he wants thralls and he has been paid to kill me – and you invited him into your house,” said AC.

“What’s a thrall?” asked Cammie, throwing AC off track for a minute.

“A mindless slave that will do his bidding without being able to resist. High level vampires, like Uji, can do that sort of thing. Pretty much all you have to do is invite them in and then they take over your life,” explained AC.

“What are you saying? That I’m his slave now?” asked Cammie.

“No. It’s not that simple. He still has to get to you again. He couldn’t while you were at the hospital, but he will as soon as you go home – you can count on it. He can’t touch me so he’s going after you. That’s why he’s been in your dreams. You don’t have to tell me about them – I can guess. They were probably pretty sexy – though you won’t admit it, and despite your best efforts you can’t shut them out,” said AC.

Cammie blushed. “Yeah, okay,” she admitted.

AC finally realized how hungry he was and began eating. Cammie didn’t know what to say and just ate too. AC kept talking between bites.

“Look, I thought you didn’t believe any of this stuff,” he said.

“I don’t – I mean I didn’t. I have no idea what to believe, but the fact is you saved my life and you know exactly what’s going on with my dreams. I don’t want to believe it, but I think I have to,” she said.

“Well, look, there are a few things you can do, and I’m serious about this. You screw up just one detail and your done. Understand? Done – as in vamp slave girl for eternity,” he said.

“Like what?” she asked.

“First you have to move. Today. Get your shit and get out. Don’t go back to that house again. Tell your parents to get your stuff. Don’t ever go back – especially not at night,” he said.

“What? I can’t move. Cindy will kill me. She can’t afford the rent all by herself,” said Cammie.

“Hey, you asked. I was just going to let it slide until you mentioned the dreams. Look, you want to know what happened in the hospital? Dragon tears. That’s what happened. I used a dragon’s tear and I healed you, okay?” he said.

“What are you talking about? Dragons? Vampires? You are nuts,” Cammie was sulking now. She pushed the food around on her plate.

AC ate in silence. The food was excellent and he was starving, besides there was much else he could do unless she was ready to listen. He didn't want to believe what was happening, and he hadn't had much of a fixed belief system before. Cammie was set in her religion, in her habits, and in her whole life. This would put her way beyond any comfort zone.

“So what else?” she asked finally.

“Don't ever take off your CTR ring,” said AC automatically. “Don't leave your house at night – ever. I mean keep the ring with you all the time – shower, sleep, the whole works. Plant garlic – lots of it – all around your house. Wear the flowers in your hair or something. Put some flowers in your room and keep them fresh – change them every few days. If you or anyone around you starts to notice any changes in your health then tell me right away. That's pretty much it.”

“For how long?” she asked.

“The CTR ring? Forever. Write it in your will. Have them bury you with it. The going out at night and the flowers? At least until the dreams stop completely. After that – just don't go out alone. Make sure you have someone with you always. Oh, and no pets – especially not dogs – ever,” said AC.

“Seriously? How long do you think the dreams will last?” she asked.

“Couple of months – maybe a year, maybe more. Depends on how much he wants you,” explained AC.

“A couple of months?” exploded Cammie. “No dating or night life or movies for a couple of months?”

“Or years.” AC’s voice was unsympathetic. “Look. You opened the door to pure evil and invited it into your house, not me. You’re going to have to deal with the consequences.”

“But I didn’t know. I didn’t mean to,” she complained.

“Nobody ever means to and yet here we are,” said AC.

“Is that it?” she asked.

“You would be smart to tell someone you trust. I mean explain to them your situation – at least so they know what to look for and can get a hold of someone who understands vampires. Probably the best advice I can give you at this point is stay away from me. This is just the beginning for me and I don’t think you want to get involved any more than this,” said AC.

“You saved my life. I owe you. I can’t just walk away from that,” said Cammie.

“I almost got you killed in the first place. I cleared a debt. You don’t owe me anything and over the next few weeks you will come to hate me, I’m sure. One way or another your life has changed because of things you had no control over. Walk away now and you might have a normal life.” AC stood up and got out his wallet.

“My treat,” Cammie reminded him.

AC shrugged and vanished. If there had been any doubt before in Cammie’s mind, it was gone now.

Chapter Sixteen:

AC didn't teleport far – just outside. He still had his car parked at the restaurant. He had to meet the real estate agent. The house wasn't that far away – only a few blocks, but he wanted to make sure he found the right place. He drove over and found it easy enough. She wasn't due for another fifteen minutes, so AC dialed the number that Siria had given him.

“Hello, this is AC Jones. Siria gave me your number,” he said.

“Yes, this is Harold Burbanks. I was expecting your call. I handle quite a lot of business for Siria. In fact we began processing some accounts for you yesterday. I would be happy to sit down with you and explain what has been arranged. When can you come in?” Harold was polite and professional – just the kind of person Siria would like to associate with.

“Uh, I'm not sure when I'll be done. I'm kinda looking at houses this afternoon,” explained AC.

“No problem. I usually work late anyway. Just give me a call when you're ready. If I don't hear from you by six I'll head home, but this is my cell so you'll reach me anyway, okay,” said Harold.

“Thanks. I'll call you as soon as I can,” replied AC.

The realtor drove up a few minutes later. AC nearly fell asleep waiting. It had been such a hectic few days that just sitting with nothing to do caused his body to just want to shut down. Tracy, the agent, drove a silver SUV. She wore black slacks and a white blouse with a navy blue jacket. Tracy was a smiling brunette in her mid thirties. AC immediately liked her easy going personality.

“So what exactly are you looking for, AC,” she asked.

“Just something simple and inexpensive. Closer to the U is better, but not necessary,” said AC.

“Three bedrooms, two bedrooms?” asked Tracy.

“Um, doesn’t really matter, I guess. Two is fine if it’s less,” said AC.

“Well, I brought some profiles of a few other houses. We can take as long as you need, and you don’t have to decide today. If we don’t find something you like we can always keep looking, okay?” she said.

AC had no idea what he was looking for, but Tracy answered all his questions and actually asked a lot of questions he had never thought about before. She explained all about inspections and the things that he should be looking for and considering. What were his future plans? Truthfully he wasn’t sure. Did he plan on continuing to work from home? He might want to consider having a home office. AC had just been thinking he wanted a temporary landing pad – a place he wouldn’t have to worry about enchanting or modifying so that he had a private place to be while he still had to live in Salt Lake – until he could set up something more permanent to operate from elsewhere. He didn’t want Mr. Bains or Siria showing up unannounced anytime they wanted, like they did at his apartment.

Tracy took him to a half dozen different houses and was extremely patient at each one. AC felt that he might have finally decided on a little two bedroom at the end of a side street. The place didn’t offer much in terms of curb appeal, and the interior looked like it hadn’t been updated since World War II, but it was priced right and definitely offered the privacy AC was really interested in. The house was on a small lot at the back end of an old neighborhood. The neighbors’ trees overshadowed much of the lot, and there was only room to park one car at a time. Apparently the last owner was an old lady whose children were now trying to sell the

property. The lawn was not very well kept and there were no flowers or other frills to attract attention.

“Let me think it over. Can I come back and look at it again tomorrow?” he asked.

“Sure, no problem,” replied Tracy. She was still smiling despite having to drive AC around all afternoon and walk through all these houses.

After Tracy dropped him off, AC sort of slumped into his car and sighed. He needed to talk to Harold, but he also needed to get back in touch with Alathor. As far as he knew he wasn't carrying any magical tracers anymore, but he still felt that somehow he was out of his depth. There was so much he still didn't know. What if they were still able to track him? How important was he to Siria or to Mr. Bains? Who else might be involved that he didn't know about? A few times that afternoon he thought he saw a shadow moving out of the corner of his eye. He was pretty sure it was nothing, but he couldn't be absolutely sure.

AC dialed Harold. He sounded happy that AC had reached him before closing time. AC checked his watch. Rush hour traffic was already starting. Harold gave him the address. It was only a few blocks from the hospital. He could walk those few blocks faster than he could drive if he teleported to the hospital first. He hung up the phone and took a picture of his surroundings. He would need to study this place if he wanted to teleport back, then he teleported to the hospital.

AC took a step after he arrived and realized he was not in the right spot. It looked the same at first glance, but the parking lot that should have been just past the sidewalk was overshadowed by tall trees, and the air was distinctly warmer than in Salt Lake City. He had misteleported. Sometimes if a wizard didn't focus exactly or was tired, a teleport could go wrong. It was darker here – later in the day. He was somewhere on the east coast probably. At

least he hadn't accidentally placed himself inside the wall or something – that would have ended his future in a heartbeat. AC focused again, concentrating very hard, and teleported to his spot outside the hospital in Salt Lake City. This time he made it without a problem.

AC reached the office building and entered nervously. Everyone around him was wearing suits or at least dress shirts or skirts. His t-shirt, jeans, and old converse sneakers didn't quite seem to fit in. When he reached Harold's floor he discovered that nobody cared what he was dressed like. Apparently this was a law firm of some kind, but AC wasn't really sure exactly what they did. There seemed to be a lot of lawyers in this building. The receptionist, a guy about AC's own age greeted him with a friendly smile, and asked, "How can I help you?"

"I'm AC Jones. I'm here to see Harold," said AC.

"Oh, of course. Harold said you'd be here." He picked up the phone and dialed Harold to let him know that AC had arrived. "I'll show you where his office is."

AC followed the receptionist past a slight maze of cubicles to an office. The door was open and AC entered.

Harold got up from his desk and greeted AC with a handshake. "I'm glad you found us without too much trouble. Do you make it downtown very often?" asked Harold.

"Not really. I pretty much just go to the U and then home or whatever," explained AC.

"Never take a job downtown. The commute is killing me. Go ahead and have a seat. I'll explain what Siria has arranged," said Harold. AC sat while Harold opened a file and began spreading out some papers for AC to look at. "Now, by law I am required to inform you that you are entitled to have your own attorney look these over or to have someone else you trust advise you. I represent Siria, so there are questions I can't answer, but I'm not allowed to lie or mislead you either. Any questions you ask will be answered honestly."

“I thought you were a banker or something,” said AC.

“Our firm handles a lot of legal matters for businesses. I don’t normally do this type of work, but Siria is a special case. I handle a number of things for her, including setting up various types of trusts and corporations. In this case she has asked me to create a couple of accounts for you. First, a sizable amount of bullion is to be transferred over to you. She says she will handle the physical transfer, but this is the documentation proving ownership. If, for whatever reason, you aren’t able to take ownership or if you die or become permanently incapacitated, it will revert back to her estate. Basically it is a gift for as long as you are alive and sane. You aren’t allowed to sell the bullion, but you can do whatever else you want to it – melt it down or whatever. She just wants it back when you’re done with it. It is a bit of an unusual arrangement, but those are the terms,” explained Harold.

AC read through the documents silently. Specifically he was looking for wording he had come across in Alathor that might trigger magical effects. Otherwise what could he complain about? Siria was lending him precious metals for as long as he would need them (though the bit about becoming incapacitated bothered him). She was being quite generous; although, one might argue that she had a selfish interest in his survival. AC scanned the document for auras, held it up to the light to check for hidden runes and then whispered a dispel magic spell on it, just to be sure. Harold seemed slightly amused by AC’s behavior.

“I assure you everything is above board here, AC. Our firm wouldn’t stay in business long if we allowed our clients to pull any shenanigans. Integrity is still a big part of what goes on in the business world. I’m just here as a middle man – to make sure my client’s wishes are carried out,” explained Harold.

“I have to be sure,” replied AC. “What’s next.”

“Next is a lease for a small piece of property in the mountains just east of here. Again it is for the duration of your lifetime or while you are physically and mentally able to use it,” said Harold.

Once again AC found no hidden problems with the document. Harold waited patiently for him to read it and to perform his ritual. He didn't seem that surprised by AC's odd behavior. Of course AC had no intention of using the property that Siria was giving him. The last thing he wanted to do was set up a base that she could find some legal loophole to take away from him later.

“Finally there is a cash account. A one time opening balance of one hundred thousand dollars with additional deposits of about ten thousand a month. Taxes and administrative fees will be handled by our partner firm one floor below. They are excellent accountants and I'm sure you'll find them very easy to work with. Of course if you would rather have your own people handle these things I would be happy to make any arrangements you need. Also, there was this.” Harold handed AC a handwritten note.

The note read, “I realize that your life has been torn asunder. I am sorry. Nothing I can say or do will ever bring back the innocence you once enjoyed.”

The note was not signed, but there was an ornate drawing of a dragon's tear on the bottom of the page.

“You'll need to sign these documents, and then I can give you these.” Harold held a debit card and a checkbook.

AC signed. Harold handed him the card and the checks. “The account is with Wells Fargo. You can visit any branch here in town and they will take care of you. I assume you already are familiar with bank accounts,” said Harold.

“Yes. I already have a bank account,” replied AC.

“Well, that’s pretty much it, unless you have any questions,” said Harold.

“If you see her or hear from her, I said thanks,” replied AC.

They shook hands. AC put the checks into his backpack and the debit card into his wallet. There was a sealed envelope that had his PIN on it. AC read the letter, memorized the pin, and then put the letter into his backpack. Well, at least he definitely had enough to buy that little house. Harold showed him out of the office and then AC found a hidden corner and teleported back to his car.

Chapter Seventeen:

Rain began to drive itself forcefully to the earth before AC reached Vicky's house. The sun set early in October anyway, but tonight it was pitch black by six in the evening. Vicky was home but looked very tired. There was no fancy dinner waiting – not that AC cared that much. She forced a smile at him when he came in, but AC recognized the look. It was the same look his mother wore day after day of working hard to raise three kids by herself. AC sympathized.

“Looks like a rough day,” he said.

“Yeah. Busy. My boss is an ass. Have you heard from Cindy?” she asked.

“Uh, no, not lately. She texted me this morning, but I've been super busy,” said AC.

“Okay. You hungry? I can cook something,” she offered.

“I'll just make some ramen. No worries. I have to get to work anyway,” said AC. He really didn't want to get involved in any family drama. Something told him there was something going on here between Vicky and Cindy that he didn't want to get mixed up with. Something else told him he might not have a choice except to get involved at some point.

AC took his cup of noodles upstairs. He flipped on Alathor and his tablet. His spies had worked out better than expected. He had a complete report waiting for him. The people he had put the tracers on were in fact werewolves of the Thompson clan. Both were computer generated characters and followed a specific routine. Their pattern was easily discernible and they had a fairly short list of associates. They had led the agents to their headquarters – a ranch just outside of Thayerstown. The ranch itself was heavily guarded, though the guards appeared to be simply cowboys and the ranch had a section open to the public – a dude ranch for vacationers.

AC realized that the real Thompson ranch was probably very similar. How similar? Where was the line between fantasy and reality in Alathor? Just how much of these peoples' lives had this computer program replicated and how much had it invented?

The agents had been able to pass the guards and had discovered that several powerful fantastics visited the ranch on a regular basis. One was an attractive, slender woman with grey eyes that commanded a great deal of respect though she showed no outward signs of magic. Another was a young man, bald before his time, who likewise commanded a great deal of authority although he was clearly not a lycan or member of the clan. This young man was seen casting a detect magic spell and wore several enchanted accessories or articles of clothing.

AC was almost positive the woman had to be Siria. The eyes were a dead give away. Dragons' eyes are unmistakable in any form. It is the one thing that they cannot hide, and in fact are probably not even aware of. Their commanding presence stems largely from their strange and always memorable eyes. AC could never forget Siria's eyes.

Both the man and the woman were staying at the bed and breakfast on the dude ranch. AC teleported his avatar to Thayerstown. He called the bed and breakfast and requested a room. They had one available. He hired a cab to drive him out to the ranch and checked into the room. All around him were the tell-tale signs of werewolves. The muscular bodies and agile athletic movements together with thick glossy hair and cunning eyes marked nearly everyone he saw as lycan. In the real world this place could pass as a resort for the young and athletically minded or for those interested in hunting. The ranch advertised several different hunt packages that visitors could purchase – all very expensive, but with success virtually guaranteed – everything from deer and antelope to species imported from other parts of the world. The ranch maintained its

own stocks of various quarry and with a werewolf's nose leading the hunt it would be difficult not to find them.

AC checked into his room. The staff at the bed and breakfast were very accommodating and recommended to him all sorts of activities. He asked about the other guests but learned nothing. The ranch was a large enough place that without a tracer he would have some difficulty finding them. The report from his agents had indicated that the large ranch house – not the bed and breakfast seemed to be the hub for activity on the ranch. In his room AC checked his gear. He placed a recall marker in his room – so he could teleport back without having to focus – and then teleported quickly back to his headquarters.

He had gone into the ranch underprepared. Of course, now that he thought about it, the guards would probably have been much more suspicious if he showed up with his specially designed gun – a Desert Eagle 9mm with silver coated bullets, each designed to explode on impact releasing a lethal dose of holy water. He also grabbed his silencer.

AC took the gun and two extra clips. AC also grabbed a belladonna plant. If he walked around with his belladonna infused paintballs and paintball gun – which were actually more effective than silver bullets – the lycans would be able to smell him much easier. The scent of a curious human is one thing. The scent of a curious human carrying lethal doses of belladonna is an invitation to war, and AC didn't want to start a war with these people, at least not yet.

Finally, before leaving AC visited the upper floor of his lair, where he kept his fairy slaves. They varied in size from tiny as an insect to as large as Leena or Trina. For a moment AC wondered if one of these was Leena or Trina in real life. He had tricked each of them into a life of servitude and bound them here to his house. He didn't have to torture them, but they could not leave and were forced to obey his every whim. He realized just how psychopathic this

must appear to anyone outside of the game. Physical contact of any kind could transfer their fairy energy, but exchange of body fluids like through kissing was much more effective. Before he teleported back to his room on the ranch AC filled up on fairy power.

In the game AC had learned to be ruthless. He had no qualms whatsoever about sniping a werewolf if the need presented itself. Back at his room in the bed and breakfast AC set the belladonna plant on the end table. AC hid his gear beneath his trench coat and wandered outside. A large, empty yard spanned the distance between buildings and corrals. A few sparse clumps of grass sprouted up in the dirt. The pavement ended in front of the bed and breakfast. Guests were more or less allowed to peruse any portions of the ranch not specifically marked, so AC headed to a line of trees that made a perimeter around the ranch house and the bed and breakfast. As he got nearer he heard the sound of running water and realized that this must be the stream that the hotel advertised for fishing.

AC stepped into the shadows of the trees and then created an illusion of himself sitting near the stream, dangling his toes in the water and enjoying the afternoon. Then he turned himself invisible and made his way to the back of the ranch house. He didn't bother to try the back door. Locked or not he didn't want to touch it. He looked through the window and teleported himself to the other side. AC wandered through the house until he found stairs going up. Upstairs he heard faint voices and followed the sounds until he found a room with a closed door. If Siria or Mr. Bains were on the other side they would certainly be able to see invisibility. AC stepped around a corner and found another empty room.

Carefully he cast a spell that created an invisible floating eye. The eye could pass through walls – like a ghost. In fact it was in essence summoning a minor ghost to do his bidding. Temporarily he would be able to see through the eye. He moved the eye through the

wall until it just reached the edge. He didn't want it sticking out too far. If it did, anyone in the room that could see invisible things would be immediately alerted.

There, in the room was the woman his report had described. She was tall and beautiful with long black hair streaked with silver and those indescribable dragon eyes. In many ways she was completely unlike Siria, but she had that same expression of unquestionable authority and that same hint of childlike innocence to her face. Around a large wooden table sat a group very similar to the one he had met in Colorado. There was a tall man with antennae and that same person wrapped in dark clothes as well as a fairy princess – decked out in black leather and a dyed Mohawk. That had to be the Alathor version of Leena. A few werewolves were present, but AC couldn't guess which of the two men might be Marcus, if either of them was. The ghost eye allowed him to see but not to hear.

AC didn't really want to spend the time waiting for these people to finish whatever they were discussing – not that their plans in the game mattered much to him. All he really wanted to know was where the guy who he suspected was Mr. Bains would be going. Nobody in the real world seemed to know anything about him and nobody seemed to care. AC was going to find out. The next bit of magic AC performed was difficult and time consuming. Even in the game it took several minutes and the actions needed to be performed exactly – not to mention he had to acquire some silver thread. One of the problems with performing magic was finding the necessary focus items – most were very expensive to make and they had to be perfect, and it wasn't like you could just drop down to your corner drugstore and pick them up. AC unwound his silver thread and tied one end around the leg of a chair behind him and then wrapped the other end around his wrist. Then he performed the incantation and floated upwards, through the ceiling.

In essence he had turned himself into a ghost. Unfortunately if anyone found his silver thread they could sever the line and trap him in this form permanently. He needed to work quickly. AC moved until he could just see through the ceiling and look directly down on the meeting. He could hear them clearly now. They were discussing a possible business venture involving importing animals from Africa for the ranch. Apparently the woman had connections there that the ranch was interested in.

AC quietly cast tracer spells – one on the woman’s scarf, which was already enchanted, so she would probably wear it everywhere. Then he quickly withdrew from the room and undid the spell. Entering the ethereal realm was dangerous and difficult, but also highly useful. He recalled himself to his room at the bed and breakfast and cancelled all of the spells he no longer needed. He had expended quite a lot of magical energy. The mana bar at the bottom of the screen was below half way. AC decided to play it safe. He quickly teleported back to his base and patted a few fairy bottoms to recharge on power.

By the time he returned to the bed and breakfast the signal on his tracer had moved. AC was able to flip through the menus and locate the signal on the man he suspected was Baines. He had teleported to a place in Shrevportal – a smaller, less frequented area noted for the large numbers of undead, including powerful undead capable of draining a person’s life force with a single touch. AC didn’t have a landing point in Shrevportal so he had to return to the mercenary guild and pay them more gold than most players would make in their careers to get a quick teleport to Shrevportal. AC was pretty sure that in the real world he wouldn’t be able to hire anyone to do that at any price.

Shrevportal was a city of darkness – another effect of the game, AC was pretty sure. The sky had the perpetual tint of autumn, or perhaps it was the fact that every time he had been to

Shrevportal it had been raining. Hardly anyone was ever on the streets, and it was dark enough that even during the day AC suspected undead could roam more or less free. AC took a moment to set yet another magical anchor point so he could teleport back here if he needed to.

Theoretically there was no limit to the number of anchors like this that he could create, but each one drained his magical reserves slightly.

The tracer signal pulled him gently towards a place near the edge of the city. A few cars rolled past along a wide suburban thoroughfare. AC could more or less gage the distance by the strength of the tracer signal. It was still too far away to approach quickly by walking so AC began teleporting himself ahead as far as he could safely see. The signal grew stronger. AC turned himself invisible. This would drain his power reserves some, but he didn't want to be caught surprised by whatever might be ahead.

Suddenly AC stopped abruptly. He recognized the street. The names were different. The shops were different, but the street was somehow the same. Just ahead was a tree blocking his view of the rest of the street but behind that tree would be the school – Mr. Bain's school. AC walked on. He was right. The sign read school thirty eight, but the door was the same and from behind the door AC could feel the pull of the tracer signal.

AC began his routine for checking magical traps. All of the auras had a slightly different look to them – the colors were subdued like diluted watercolors or colors mixed with a little gray. He didn't recognize the curses that he would trigger by entering. The illusions to disguise the school he could bypass, but he wasn't sure he wanted to activate whatever defenses this wizard had put in place.

Suddenly the tracer moved. It hadn't disappeared although the signal strength was suddenly very weak. It felt like it was coming from the other side of the world. AC could sense

the distance and the direction. He brought up a map of what he had explored of Alathor. There was a region known as Jungaloo that was basically a wild region – a forest full of fantastic creatures. The tracer had landed there. AC hadn't explored Jungaloo for a few months, but he still had a teleport point set there. It was a good area to visit if you were looking for contact with wild fantastic creatures and were prepared to be attacked. A lot of the clans farmed potion supplies in Jungaloo.

AC activated his teleport and found himself standing in a musty patch of fading sunlight beneath tall evergreens. Of course he couldn't feel or smell his surroundings onscreen, but the animation showed his avatar's breath freezing as it breathed. The tracer signal was relatively close now, but it was underground. Was there a hidden cave somewhere nearby? Had he teleported directly to an underground chamber? Enough people came to this region that it was unlikely to be a hidden cave entrance – it would have been discovered long ago.

AC followed the guidance of his tracer. A few fairies flitted by, but he ignored them. They wouldn't bother him if he ignored them. They would just fly away if he tried to get close anyway. They had learned to avoid human intrusion and he had a special reputation among them. Soon he was standing directly above the tracer.

Once again AC performed the ritual to turn himself ethereal. He attached the silver thread to a twig on the forest floor and then covered it with dirt and debris. This time he sank slowly and carefully into the ground. The sensation of complete darkness always bothered him. He was standing inside of thick stone, and he had to focus on the silver thread that anchored his being to the real world and on the tug of the tracer. Without the silver thread he would never find his way back to himself. AC turned himself head down. He wanted to be able to see

whatever there was to see before his legs suddenly appeared in some underground chamber. He would be invisible, of course, but why take unnecessary risks?

The blackness continued but then a faint light appeared. After the deep gloominess it seemed as bright as the sun. A wide chamber opened beneath him. A few scattered candles illumed the darkness. Their flames burned low, but they burned steadily. The place held oxygen. AC paused, his face barely protruding from the ceiling. He watched, not daring to move.

Beneath him the chamber extended at least a hundred feet in all directions, but to his left he could detect the beginnings of a set of stairs going up. All around the room were innumerable corpses standing with vacant eyes at crisp military attention. The recovered bodies of hundreds of men and women in various states of decay stood in rigid silence. Their eyes didn't blink. No muscle moved, but AC knew with certainty that these were neither statues nor wax figures, but a vast zombie army carefully manufactured over a very long time. Most of them wore modern clothes, but some were mere skeletons now and either had no clothes or wore fashions AC had only ever seen on television or in the movies.

AC heard the sound of something moving to his right. The sound was distant but he thought it was something being dropped. He couldn't see the source of the noise, but moved his body carefully closer – always careful to expose as little of his face as possible to the room.

There he was – the young man with AC's tracer. He stood next to a chute. Bodies appeared at the top – out of thin air it seemed – and then slid to the bottom where a zombie would place a bracelet on a wrist or ankle and then pass the body through a shimmering aura of sickly green. Then the body would rise as a reanimated corpse and walk stiffly to stand in line with the others.

Something was coming. A warning appeared on screen. A presence was approaching from above. Some other ethereal creature was coming. Of course there had to be undead patrols – ghosts or specters of some kind that could pass through walls and that would be able to see him, invisible or not, intangible or not. AC raced back along his silver thread – rushing as fast as his non-existent body could move. As he reached the surface – and his own body – a pair of ghastly claws emerged from the ground behind him, accompanied by an angry wailing. AC didn't wait to see what the rest of it looked like. One touch from that creature – probably the imprisoned ghost of some long-dead necromancer – could mean instant death. AC teleported himself back to his headquarters.

Chapter Eighteen:

Did Siria know? Did anyone know? Mr. Bains – it had to be Mr. Bains – was the freaking king of unholy undeath, raising a zombie army to overthrow the world. At least he was in a video game. Did Samantha know? Did she realized she had signed a contract to work for the dark lord of the dead?

AC slumped in his chair, and switched off the television, though he left the game system running. Okay, maybe the zombie army was just cheap labor for the ranch in Texas. Maybe he was overreacting. AC took out his cell phone. He should probably call Siria and find out what her opinion was.

His phone was off. The battery had died and he hadn't realized it. Not normally a big deal, AC didn't use his phone that much, but then normally he didn't have quite so many things to worry about. He hunted around until he found his charger and plugged the phone in. It took a few minutes to get enough juice to power up, and when it did he had about a million messages. Apparently it had been off for quite some time.

Siria wanted to talk to him. The last message read simply, "Colorado, now." That was fifteen minutes ago. He still had the stone she had given him before they went to Chicago. Apparently it still worked. He figured it was a one-time spell, but it looked like he was wrong about that. Whatever was happening she wanted to see him, and with what he had just seen online he really thought she should be aware.

AC grabbed his gear – trench coat, backpack, water guns. He wasn't sure what he was going into. AC held out the stone and said the words, "Colorado house." Almost instantly he regretted it.

The front room of the Colorado double-wide glowed with an eerie green light. On the couch Trina slouched in an unnatural waxen pose. The green light originated with her and spread through the room – as if her skin were evaporating visibly noxious fumes. The room radiated tangible power. On the little coffee table lay a large piece of quartz crystal. The strands of energy were slowly gathering themselves to the crystal and were absorbed by it. AC didn't need a tutorial to realize that her very life force was being purposely and methodically drained and captured into the crystal.

In the large easy chair sat Mr. Bains. AC only barely noticed him before the pale man raised a hand in sudden command and spoke words of magic AC knew all too well. His hands and feet and mouth were bound instantly by invisible bands of force. “I had almost tired of waiting for you,” explained Mr. Bains in his most cordial voice.

AC struggled reflexively against the same invisible force bonds that he had used so many times online and only just this morning against the agents sent to track him. Either Bains had been watching his signature moves or else AC wasn't as original as he thought he was. The bonds didn't move, of course. The invisible force was smooth and hard, but didn't chafe against his skin. The bonds at his wrists pinioned his arms awkwardly behind his back.

Mr. Bains looked at AC, smirked, and then they both teleported. AC wasn't sure what to expect, but he had enough presence of mind to realize that maintaining the force bonds during a teleport is difficult at best. He shifted his chin upwards, hoping that the bond would not fully cover his upper lip when they landed. The bonds could not teleport with them – not without expending a tremendous amount of energy – so essentially Bains would have to replace them instantly as soon as they arrived. If he wasn't adept at using this little trick, then AC might have a fighting chance after all.

It worked. Bains had obviously not practiced this sequence of spells enough. AC was able to just move his upper lip, though he moved it only a tiny amount. He didn't want Bains catching on just yet.

They teleported into a large, lavishly decorated room that was only dimly lit by large collections of candles piled on top of tables placed in regular intervals around the room. The place smelled and tasted musty – like a cellar or basement where the air hadn't been circulated properly in many years. AC looked carefully and slowly around the room. To his right, AC saw Siria. Her arms and legs were pinioned spread eagle out from her body. She was chained tightly to the wall with chains made of some black metal. Her life force was being drained into a large quartz crystal on a small table a few feet in front of her, just like Trina. From each wrist a tiny, but steady drip of blood dropped into little glass vials for collection.

About six feet from her, along the same wall Marcus was bound with regular chains, though AC guessed from the shine on them that they had been covered in silver. The lycan slumped against the wall – obviously uncomfortable. Across the room Leena sat miserable in a large metal birdcage that was suspended from the ceiling with long chains. Her skin had lost its glow and her hair much of its shine. She seemed barely able to move. Beneath her another quartz crystal glowed, but there was no life energy flowing into it.

A force slammed into AC suddenly, and he was pushed roughly against the wall. His hands and arms hit first, and pain shot through his body, beginning with his elbows as they smashed into the stone walls. Bains was busying himself at yet another table. AC couldn't quite tell exactly which components he was using, but clearly he was putting the finishing touches on some important concoction.

“I see you caught the little prick,” said a voice AC had a hard time placing. For the first time AC noticed that Samantha was in the room. She was much better dressed than when he had seen her in Chicago – like she had taken a page out of somebody’s steam punk diary. She had the high boots, puffy mid-thigh skirt, and a leather bodice that accentuated her curves nicely. In many ways she had emulated her in-game avatar – though she hadn’t cut her hair short or dyed it darker.

“Yes, of course. It wasn’t difficult. Now be quiet a minute and let me do my work. It isn’t as simple as mixing one of your potions to steal someone’s mind. He has information tucked away in that brain that will save both of us a lot of time – but if it isn’t exactly right it will just kill him and I don’t want that,” said Mr. Bains.

Samantha crossed the room to where AC was crouched against the wall. She kicked AC as hard as she could with a heavy boot – right in the nuts. AC slumped to the ground. He gasped in pain – unable to breathe effectively because of the force bond on his mouth. A bead of sweat formed on his forehead. “You don’t mind if I abuse his body a little, do you?” she asked.

“Nothing permanent, please. I might have a use for him. I haven’t decided yet,” replied Mr. Bains.

AC flexed his fingers behind his back. He had never tried magic in real life without being able to see his hands. His head was spinning and he could feel vomit trying to crawl its way out his throat. Samantha primed her foot for another kick but Bains cut her off. “Careful or you’ll mess up the diagram.”

AC realized that the floor in front of him was covered with a diagram very similar to the one that AC had used in the game to bind the dragon. This diagram, however, had been drawn with something the color of rust – perhaps slightly redder. AC cringed to think what it might be,

but knew that life blood was a powerful source of energy and could amplify most spells to otherwise impossible proportions if one was willing to steal the blood of unwilling victims.

Bains was right. If Samantha smudged the diagram he would have to spend hours repairing it, and time was not something he had – not if AC had anything to do with it. Samantha turned away. AC moved his fingers cautiously and whispered the words to dispel the force bonds. Would Bains notice the dispel? Yes.

Bains head jerked up and AC reacted instantly. Their binding spells clashed with each other and dissipated in a flashes of blue light. AC altered tactics and threw up a wall of force from floor to ceiling, effectively sealing off his section of the room, which included the diagram on the floor as well as Siria. Bains' spells bounced ineffectively off of the invisible wall. AC had time, but how much?

Siria. He had to get her free. He tried breaking her chains with a shot of magical force, but they remained unmoved. Damn – they were enchanted. Of course they were enchanted. She's a dragon and Bains isn't an idiot.

Suddenly he felt the room grow colder. Shit! Where was it? AC quickly cast a see magic and see invisible spells. Sure enough a specter was lowering itself through the ceiling. The room took on an icy chill and the candles seemed unable to give off enough light to penetrate the sudden oncoming darkness. The creature emanated a cloud of despair that took AC's breath away. He fell to the ground, almost unable to breathe as the shade purposefully lowered itself over him, preparing with a single touch to draw out his very soul.

Then it dawned on him – the creature had been in the ethereal realm in order to pass through the ceiling, but it had to enter the physical world in order to touch him and drain his life. AC lashed out with fire. The creature burned in rage. It stopped its approach and for a moment

AC held it at bay. His force wall was still in place, but AC knew that Bains had thousands if not tens of thousands of reinforcements at his command. Sure enough, AC saw that Bains was concentrating – a focus required in order to communicate telepathically across distances. More undead would be arriving – ghosts, zombies, skeletons. AC would be overwhelmed. He could teleport out, but if he did Siria was still bound here and when her life finally dripped out his would end as well.

AC threw down his force wall and ripped a ball of fire at Bains. The fire engulfed and surrounded a cube of invisible force that the man was protecting himself with. Shit! Nothing that simple would work. Fine. Time to get creative. The specter was retreating. It had already dissipated into the ethereal once again, but lingered just nearby. Bains was still concentrating. AC couldn't break his force barrier – not without more power.

Where was Samantha? AC didn't see her anywhere. She wasn't invisible – he could see invisible. There she was. She had ducked out of the way of his fireball and had just removed the stopper from one of the many vials of liquid he carried about her person. AC said the words and moved his hand, but too late. Already her body was turning into vapor. She would float away as a cloud of harmless dust – and then be back to annoy him some other time.

AC slammed Bains' protective barrier once more with a ball of fire, but already a shimmering portal of blue was beginning to open at the other end of the room. Soon hordes of the undead he had been amassing for God only knew how long would come pouring into the room.. AC looked at Siria. Damn. If only he could get her out of here, but Bains had the only key. Or – and the thought brought the bile up in his throat – he had more power. AC shook his head and took a deep breath. He hoped she would understand. He grabbed one of the collecting

vials from beneath her wrists and slurped her blood. He choked it down. He gritted his teeth and thought about cute puppies to keep from vomiting it back up.

Power rushed through his body like a wildfire. The rush of energy was a tsunami compared to the tingling wave of energy he got from Leena's stolen kiss. Nothing in Alathor had prepared him for this. He felt that fire was shooting from his eyes – and in truth his eyes now glowed with a grisly red light. He spoke words of power and as he spoke the voice that came out of his mouth did not sound like his own. It was a deep, powerful, horrible voice – the voice of a demon come to life, but he commanded that voice.

Two zombies stepped from the portal and he crushed them with a blast of fire so intense it left nothing but ash where two tables had been. He reached out his hand and clenched his fist. Invisible forces crumpled the portal the way anyone might crush a piece of paper. Then his mind settled enough he could concentrate on tactics. Carefully he built a powerful anti-magic zone surrounding Bains' protective cube and then the cube imploded. Bains was covered in a wave of magic suppressing energy, completely unable to resist the overwhelming power AC wielded at the moment. Carefully and cautiously AC built a cage to hold the necromancer by simultaneously reducing the anti-magic zone to fit a cell of invisible force lines about six feet square – a prison that Bains couldn't escape and inside of which he couldn't use magic.

“Any chance you'll just hand me the keys to their chains now?” asked AC.

“Uh, no,” replied Bains. His voice was still casual despite his position.

“Expecting more backup soon, then?” asked AC.

“I don't think I'll need it. I just have to wait for your little energy boost to wear off. You can't keep these spells going forever,” explained Mr. Bains. He still smiled.

“I could just kill you. You know, something as simple as a gunshot to the head,” said AC.

“You could, of course, but then you would be just like me, and nobody here wants that, now do they?” said Mr. Bains with a smirk.

Unfortunately he was right. Even if he had a gun, he would never have been able to take the shot. Where was his backpack anyway? Colorado – shit, and Trina was still there dying too.

“What if I promise to let you go?” offered AC.

“Then one of us would be a total idiot,” countered Bains.

No point talking to that psycho.

Cold forged iron, silver, and other metals with magic suppressing properties couldn't be directly affected by magic, but there were always ways to work around them for the creative mind. AC looked around the room. Finally he found just what he was looking for – an old sword. It looked Roman. A quick glance told him that there were no enchantments on it – just a really cool antique that Bains had collected somewhere. AC looked at Siria. She was still unconscious – her power still being siphoned off by that crystal. Duh! AC took the sword, and with a word of power smashed the crystal. The trapped life energy leaped back into the room with a convulsive wave that blew over AC like a gale force wind. Oddly the energy divided itself between him and Siria as it settled back down. Must be something to do with the dragon blood. When AC smashed the crystal beneath Leena the energy just flowed directly up to her.

Siria snapped back to consciousness and then raged in pain against her manacles and against the continuous open wounds in her wrists. She snarled at AC.

“Calm down, please,” said AC. “I'm trying to rescue you.”

“You smell like dragon's blood,” she snarled.

“His fault.” AC pointed at Mr. Bains. “Now hold still. I’m going to try to break those chains.”

Siria fell sulkily silent, but the glow of rage still burned behind her eyes. Apparently she had no memory of her captivity here. Her senses must have been completely dulled during her entire captivity.

“These are cold iron chains,” she whispered. “They were designed to hold fey, not dragons.” She took a deep breath and then, with a roar that swept the room, blowing out most of the candles she ripped the chains from the wall and shed them like tin bracelets.

Across the room Mr. Bains paled. Siria brushed AC aside as one might move an errant child that tried to step out of line. She swept up the bronze sword and strode towards Bains.

“That child might be too weak to do what is necessary, but I am no child,” she said. With a deft and perfectly practiced movement Siria brought up the sword and sent it like a javelin the few feet between her and Mr. Bains. The dull blade slammed into him and shattered his rib cage, piercing through and carrying him with sufficient force to crush his body against the invisible bars on the other side. AC felt the impact against the barrier and realized that superheroes had nothing on dragon strength.

Mr. Bains slumped to the floor. No blood came from his wounds. The body wilted like a poisoned weed and a harsh, disembodied moan filled the room. The moaning faded slowly as the body finally withered into dust. Among the clothes Siria fished out a ring of keys.

In the semi darkness they freed Marcus and Leena. Marcus had suffered a great deal and even after being released could barely move. “His chains have been designed specifically to hold lycanthropes, just like Leena’s cage was designed perfectly to hold fairies” explained Siria. “It will take a few days before they are back to normal. In Leena’s case, I just don’t know.”

Leena, though conscious, had said nothing. She glared angrily at Bains' ashes or dust or whatever it was, but had a blank look on her face whenever she looked away. Something in her eyes told them that her mind was working, but nothing they could say would evoke a response.

"There's another crystal in Colorado. He has Trina trapped there," said AC.

That got Leena's attention.

"Are you okay on your own, AC?" asked Siria.

"If you mean, can I take care of myself after saving your sorry butt, yes?" he replied.

"Stupid question," she said. Siria stepped closer. She spit on the sleeve of her shirt and cleaned a smudge of blood around his face. "Thanks." She smiled and in her eyes AC saw a true smile – more than just gratitude for being alive or for being with a friend, something he couldn't say he recognized, but it warmed him from head to toe.

"This isn't over," he said.

"It is for now," she replied. Then she took Leena and Marcus by the hands. "I'll be in touch. Take care." They vanished. AC didn't need a tracer spell to know that they had gone to the safe house in Colorado. He didn't need a crystal ball to know that neither Leena nor Trina would have anything to do with humans or dragons again – ever – if it could be helped, and he didn't need a detect evil spell to know that Mr. Bains was into some seriously deep shit.

Had Siria left a tracer here? AC checked. Nope. Nothing. Did she know about this place? Probably not. Otherwise she would have leveled it centuries ago. Well then, either she was a complete idiot or she expected AC to handle it. Cleaning up the lair of some evil necromancer – just the way AC wanted to spend his weekend. He set a recall point and barred the room on all six sides with walls of force. That should keep things from getting in until he could come back. Then he teleported back to his room at Vicky's.

What time was it? Midnight? Downstairs there were voices. Loud ones.

AC didn't want to get involved, but he went downstairs anyway. He wanted to know the time, and he wanted to see Cindy. He hadn't talked to her since yesterday and she needed to hear about this. Downstairs he saw Cindy with puffy eyes and a red face standing near the front door. Vicky, with tears on her face was standing a few feet away. In the doorway stood Chuck. He was a few inches shorter than AC and more than a few pounds heavier. He was about AC's same age, maybe a year or two older, but already his hairline was receding.

"I'm going, Mom, and that's it," screamed Cindy.

"Cindy, please," replied Vicky, frantic.

Chuck stepped back to allow Cindy to exit and then he pulled the door closed. AC heard car doors slam and then the sound of Chuck's hot rod pulling away. Vicky had moved to the living room couch, where she sat sobbing a little and staring at the window.

She finally noticed AC. "She's gone," Vicky said simply.

"Gone?" asked AC.

"As in not coming back to this house, ever," explained Vicky.

"Tomorrow's a new day," said AC, trying to cheer her up a little.

Vicky smiled a little smile. "That's true. I haven't seen you all day. What have you been doing?"

"Oh, you know," replied AC, "just saving the world from a zombie apocalypse."

THE END