

## ONE

Four-thirty on a Sunday morning is about the closest the City that Never Sleeps ever gets to turning its name untrue. Midtown Manhattan, in particular, is quieter then than at almost any other time except when it's snowed. But there was little chance of that happening today. It was the third of June, and though New York's wizards can do unusual things with their weather when the need arises, right now the busiest group of them had far more important business on their minds.

The light at the corner of Eighth Avenue and West Thirty-first Street changed from red to green, without any other visible result: no cars were waiting to move on either side of the intersection. In fact, nothing at all could be seen between Eighth and the River but various parked cars – not a single pedestrian, not even a stray dog. The only thing moving down that way, down at the far end of Thirty-first, was the Hudson River – seeming to slide slowly with the inward tide from the Great South Bay just now swinging, and the surface of the water gone the color and texture of tarnished beaten pewter in the pre-dawn twilight.

Sitting at the corner of Eighth and Thirty-first, watching the river, watching the paling sky, was a small black cat. To human observers, city cats often look furtive or nervous: but this one sat there like she owned the street. This morning, she did. The most senior worldgating technician on the East Coast of North America let out a long breath and turned her attention away from the placid slow roll of the river, looking uptown along Eighth.

The brash blue-white glare of the spots and the sheets of matte-mirror Mylar up there made Rhiow blink once again. Up at the Thirty-fourth end of the block, the intersection of the two big multi-lane streets was cordoned off with metal parade railings and pre-incident tape. Inside the cordon, and outside, many *ehhif* (or humans, as they called themselves) ran about doing inexplicable things with cables and props and big chunky pieces of equipment...or seeming to. Outside the cordon, endless more thick black

cables ran into the cordoned area from many high-sided plain white trucks parked all around the “shooting” area, up and down Eighth Avenue and into side streets made shadowy by contrast with the fierce lights at the intersection. Off to one side, leaning against one of the corner buildings, was the lone, stay-up-all-night, club-buzzed rep from the Mayor’s-office Film Board people, half asleep...which was all to the best, as it decreased to near-zero the chance that she might possibly recognize for what it was the quite extensive wizardry taking place right under her nose.

They had spent the better part of an hour, now, setting up the “shot.” The poor Film Board lady leaned in her dark blue autumn-season car coat – for the mornings had been cool – against the corner of the office building at the corner of Eighth and Thirty-second, blinking and bleary, without the slightest idea of what the “director” and the “producer” and all the “crew” were agitating about: the thing that was apparently not quite right, not quite ready. *Ehhif* ran back and forth with clipboards, consulted with one another, or seemed to consult; dragged cables around, repositioned cameras and wheeled carts full of computer equipment...or what *looked* like cameras and carts and equipment.

Rhiow, watching this performance from down the road, put her whiskers forward in amusement. *Well?* she said to Urruah. *When?*

*About two minutes. You know how unpredictable these things are when you cut them loose.*

*We both know. You’re just disappointed there are no oh’ra singers in the area.*

An annoyed hiss came down the connection to her. Urruah spent a lot of time hanging around with the backstage toms over at the Met, and had recently been torn between anguish and a sort of perverse delight when a great and seriously overweight Italian tenor had become involved in an incident involving a malfunctioning worldgate and a large number of giant saurians. His protests at having to patch that portion of reality so that an oversized terror lizard had *not* eaten the tenor in question were specious...but not as much so as they might have been, as from a Person-tom’s point of view, the tenor in question was in himself a whole vast sheaf of wasted opportunities. No tom could really understand how you could do anything to yourself (like get fat) that made you potentially less of a singer, and potentially less popular with the shes.

*Later for that,* was all Urruah said: and Rhiow put her whiskers even further forward at his tone, for he was a professional, that one, through and through. When there was a wizardry in hand, nothing could put him off the

hunt until what he wanted was in his claws. After that, it would be all food, song and queens: but not a moment sooner.

*One minute now. Is he in place?* she heard Urruah say to someone else in the connection.

*Ready to go,* said an excited younger voice. *He wants to know, isn't he supposed to eat something?*

*Oh, come on, he read the script breakdown with the rest of us!* Rhiow said. *He knows what he's supposed to do.*

*But he says dawn makes him hungry...!*

*Oh sweet Iau in a trashcan,* Rhiow thought. *Arhu,* she said "aloud", *tell your buddy -- excuse me; tell my honored Elder Brother the most excellent World-Senior for the Downside Ophidians -- that he should have eaten before he left. And tell him not to get confused! It's only wizards here, right now, and the cops and the Film Board lady. But if some street person or clubber coming home wanders in and he gets into his part too much, he could have to disgorge suddenly.*

There was a moment's silence. Seconded to her through Arhu's mind came the voice: *If that happens, you shall take me to the deli afterwards to compensate, and there shall be a great deal of pastrami bestowed upon me.*

*And a great deal of hot sauce,* Arhu said.

Rhiow let out a long, long breath. If there had been corruption going on among the wizards under her supervision, these last few weeks, it'd have been Urruah's fault. Ethnic food, popular culture, *ffhilm*— that strange twenty-four-frames-per-second artform so beloved of human beings — all these things had been dragged into the present project by Rhiow's senior project engineer; and Rhiow had been torn between disciplining him, which could have been problematic, and letting him get the job done without destroying half of Manhattan.

*Discipline later,* she thought. *Urruah,* she thought, *tell your protégés to shut up and concentrate. They can both have a whole cow's worth of pastrami later if this goes according to plan. Time check...*

*Forty seconds.*

Rhiow sat there on the corner, breathed in, breathed out. From behind her, away across the island and across the East River, the light of a clear New York dawn grew slowly; ice-blue and haze-blurred up high, soft as cold water on the eyes, the peach of the eastern side of the sky starting only slowly to show across the Hudson's sliding sheen. Few other eyes were turned that way. Indeed, humans were almost entirely absent from this scenario...this being why she and her team had chosen it.

“Her team”, of course, being a relative term. The arguments about the logistics alone of the worldgate move had seemed to go on for ages. “Why bother moving the thing at *all*?” the most senior of the Penn techs had demanded. That was Jath, always contentious, never happy to say “yes” at any moment when he could find an excuse to say “no”. Spending time around him always made Rhiow think that, on the off chance it might improve his mood, maybe there was something to the *ehhif* drive to get all stray toms neutered. *Terrible thought, shame on me...* “Rhiow, seriously, why should we *bother*? The *ehhif* have just spent umpty billion dollars on improving the miserable poor Penn they’ve got: Amtrak won’t move its stock over there after this. Nobody’s going to be running any significant rail stock over into that building except New Jersey Transit. Why are we being so traditionalist about this? The gates belong in the major railhead on *this* side of the Island. That means the Penn we’ve got *now*. Not this Moynihan thing, it’s a nice idea, they *mean* well, but the gates are rooted on this side, you *know* how gates are when they get used to the way things have been for a long time...”

*It’s not just gates*, Rhiow had thought, and then put her ears back just a little: for she’d heard this argument once every three days since the present project had started to become a reality. Jath’s father had been a gate tech, as he would tell you endlessly, and so had *his* father and *his* father and *his* father before him: and when *they’d* been running things and the *old* Penn station had been here.... And off he would go, singing the same old song -- and Urruah, dear staid Urruah, had finally lost his temper two weeks ago and sat down and actually started washing his *sth’uw* at Ffrihh during one of these perorations. There had been the inevitable reaction – a lot of hissing and tom-posturing, and very nearly some ears shredded, for Urruah was getting tired of having it thrown into his whiskers that he somehow had been allowed to work with the premier worldgates in New York, the complex that had the most senior area primacy, and nonetheless lived in a Dumpster – as if the two states of existence were somehow mutually exclusive.

Rhiow had finally managed to calm the wrangle down, for even Jath had had to admit that there was no point in trying to derail the project at this late date. The Powers that Be had approved it, the most senior wizards working in North America had already put their pawprints on Rhiow’s master timetable, and the concrete parts of the plan now had to be allowed to go forward before the *ehhif* builders and architects put any more of the new Penn Station in place. There was already too much infrastructure underground that could interfere with the hyperstring structure of the gate-

sheaf when it was being moved; that had been the thinking behind Urruah's solution from the start...

*Jath*, she said silently, *how is it down there? Are you ready?*

*I don't know*, the answer came back, sounding dubious as always. *It looks kind of frayed around the edges: I'm not sure the string structure is going to wind in tightly enough for what we're planning. I'm thinking we shouldn't let it up until we have a little more time to assess the power superstructure –*

*The superstructure is fine*, came another voice, younger and sounding extremely impatient. Rhiow let out another breath, as the speaker had good reason. *It's just as fine as it was yesterday when you pronounced it fine, and the day before that. Just get on with it, Jath!*

*Siff'hah*, Rhiow said. She tried not to sound too stern, because she agreed with what the youngster was saying: but at the same time, she needed her to be a little less forthright just now with a wizard who was very much her senior, and whose nerves were in worse shreds than anyone else's. *Hw'aa*, she said to Jath's most senior colleague, *how's it seem to you?*

*Stable enough*, Hw'aa said. Even though he was older than Jath, Hw'aa had for some time now been the counterbalance in the Penn team to Jath's conservatism; there were few new things that Hw'aa wasn't willing to try. *We're ready to pull the gate's roots up. Twenty seconds...*

*Good. Hunt's luck to you, cousin –*

*Luck to you too, Rhiow.*

She looked down the street to where the *ehhif* had mostly stopped running around, and where crowds of people were standing off to the sides of the street now, as if getting ready to see a shot start. Rhiow watched this almost absently, just being glad for the moment that Hw'aa was on site to keep Jath focused and reassured, and that she was herself dealing well enough with the tension not to get caught up in another team's infighting. *My own team's infighting is bad enough...* And there was always the temptation to simply win any given fight by throwing her weight around in her position as the most senior technician working this particular part of the world. But Rhiow knew better. *I will meet idiots today*, went one version of her after-waking meditation, *and one of them will probably be me. Iau Hau'hai, Queen of Life and of Making Things Work, grant me of Your courtesy the courage to shred that idiot's ears when I meet her, and then get on with work...for being right is nothing next to having things be right...*

*Fifteen seconds. Want oversight?* said Urruah's more voice in her ear.

"Just a quick look," Rhiow said. "As long as you're sure you can spare me the concentration –"

*No problem. Everyone knows what to do. I'm just making sure the timetable goes off by the numbers, now...*

And overlaid on the slowly brightening morning around her, she got a glimpse of the darkness under the streets – the track-cavern at the “old Penn” end, the west portal of the old North River tracks, and the bright stringing of the structure of the “ganged” Penn Station worldgate – two gates combined for the moment into one – shining in the darkness where it hung over the steel of the rails. These would be the gate complex’s last few moments in its old position, parked at the end of northern platform of Penn’s Track Twenty. Now the worldgate blazed unnaturally bright in that dark air, an irregularly-shaped, rippling warp and weft of blue and green and golden threads of light, pulled for the moment into full real-world visibility, its diagnostic mode. On one side of it, Jath, and Hw’aa on the other, were reared up with claws and teeth sunk into the gate-weave, pulling the gate into the right configuration for the dangerous work that was going to follow. At least there were no trains due down those tracks for another forty minutes: the *ehhifs*’ Sunday schedule had left the joint worldgating teams some time to troubleshoot anything that might go wrong with the separation of the gate from its power sources, rooted down into the ancient Manhattan of the Downside. But it wasn’t the separation itself that was most of the problem. It was keeping the gate live while it was cut away from its roots, and then moving it without damaging anything else, or itself –

*Five. Four. Hw’aa, let it go. Jath, claws out – !*

Hw’aa threw his brown tabby-striped self backwards, letting go the strings he’d been holding apart. As he did, gray Jath swept his claws through the near-invisible catenary strings that were all that now remained of the worldgate’s connection to the main power structures in the Downside, severing them. The gate-weft collapsed in on itself in midair, burning in a bright and alarmed-looking jumble of colors – wavering and wobbling in even Urruah’s view as the structure of space bent and twisted slightly around the deranging gate. Off to one side, a small Person-shape began to glow bright where she sat, white patches blazing, even the dark ones seeming to acquire extra depth, a darkness with power moving underneath it: and a shell of the same dark-and-light-patched fire appeared out of the air and clamped itself down around the collapsing, contracting ball of burning hyperstrings –

*Busy now*, Urruah said, and the imagery vanished. Rhiow looked down the street and saw a tall dark-haired *ehhif* in a parka and baseball cap and headphones nodding as he picked up the cue. He looked into his “camera” and gestured at another *ehhif*. “Lights!”

All the film lights surrounding the cordoned-off intersection burst into full ferocious fire, painting the buildings all around with long black equipment-shadows.

“Speed!” the ehif in the parka shouted.

“Got speed!” the answer came back from somewhere among the crew.

A young *ehif* boy held up an electronic clapper-board, snapped it shut for the sync: the red numbers on it started racing, and someone else yelled, “*Blue Harvest*, take one, scene sixty-five – *action!*”

A hubbub of thought broke out underground among the members of the amalgamated gate-tech teams. It was difficult for even Rhiow, well used to this chatter from their numerous rehearsals, to make sense of more than a scrap of thought here or there. *Is it cohering? Watch out for the secondary root – no, not like that – over here, over here! – okay, there we go, here comes the backlash. Too much expansion? No, wait -- !*

And up on the street, something unusual began to occur. A fizzle and stutter of a new light, like lightning, painted the buildings further up Eighth Avenue with a sudden multicolored glare. A great rumble, like an incoming subway train, but much, much bigger, shook the whole area.

There were not many people who actually lived in this neighborhood, which was probably as well. Rhiow looked up around her and was clear that any of the residents, if they were even conscious right now, would simply think that the one of the many subway lines under Penn was making an unusual amount of noise this morning...probably something to do with the construction in the new Penn building, which had been going on for months and was famously noisy. It was a mistake that Rhiow would have been happy to encourage. But after the rumble came something that even on quite a bad day could not have been attributed to subway trouble.

Down Eighth Avenue, several storeys above the sidewalk, a huge head peered around the corner of Thirty-fourth Street. Only a very alert observer would have been able to see that the terrible face – fanged, scaled, dramatically striped in blood-crimson and gold, the wicked eye glinting with a burning gold of its own — somehow looked a little uncertain. But then the face recovered its composure. Down in the street, several of the waiting cameras pushed in on it.

The huge jaws opened, revealing fangs like mighty knives. A roar issued forth from that gigantic maw, belling an awful challenge. Windows rattled for blocks up and down Eighth. The cops standing around the “director” goggled, impressed against their will, as the dinosaur –

bigger than any Godzilla or Gorgo, impossibly large – came striding out into the intersection of Eighth and Thirty-fourth, its clawed forelegs working, its long tail swept out behind it for balance.

Behind the “dinosaur” came a herd of his people – all smaller far than he: but then the Father of his People could afford the power to manifest himself in a variation of the form that had once destroyed the Lone Power that was gnawing at the roots of the feline world. Now that outrageous and gigantic form, and about fifty smaller “dinosaurs”, came rampaging down Eighth. The ground shook as they came. The cops stood there shaking their heads, impressed: the Film Board lady, in the middle of texting somebody on her mobile, stopped to stare, her mouth hanging open. The greatest dinosaur stopped about halfway down the block, directly between the Felt Forum and Madison Square Garden and the Post Office building, then put his tail briefly down and let out one magnificent roar that once again rattled all the plateglass for hundreds of meters around like a Space Shuttle landing – a histrionic and ferocious ophidian shout of defiance.

And slowly, up through the street, the Sun rose.

Or at least it seemed to. One of the many wizards managing secondary support for this operation had spoken the Mason’s Word to the street, adding one of the Word’s subroutines that affected metals as well as stone and stone derivatives. So, untroubled by the tangle of cable and piping that underlay every New York street, through the concrete and the much-patched asphalt, the sheen and burn of tightly wrapped hyperstrings rode up into the still pre-dawn air. The biggest dinosaur, reacting to the growing light and the new shadow cast from his tremendous bulk, looked over his shoulder at the rising, burning fury, turned, roared his own defiance, and made toward the ball of fire.

He reached out claws to it, sank them in deep, grappled with the great burning shape, and staggered back, striving and wrestling with the burden of it...lurching and stumbling with it backwards, down Eighth, toward Rhiow...and toward exactly the spot where they wanted it to go. Rhiow’s tail began to lash, for this was not a moment for Ith, or Urruah, or Arhu or Siff’hah, to lose their grip on the worldgates. Yet for the moment everything seemed to be working, and things could have gone so much worse if they’d tried to conduct this business underground. The complications of pushing this great deadly ball of energy along an entirely underground route, through meter after meter of *ehhif* high-tension power conduits and cable guides and pipes and tubes and steam ducts, would have been huge. But it had all become completely unnecessary, one afternoon, when in the midst of yet another too-contentious meeting down underneath Penn, Urruah’s voice

spoke up and said, entirely reasonably, “Why should we drive ourselves insane? Why bother hiding the move from the *ehhif* at all? *Hide it in plain sight.*”

It had seemed like such an insane concept at first. But even Jath, hard though he’d resisted it, had been won around to the quirky logic of it. And then the other wizards with whom the plan had had to be cleared had accepted it enthusiastically. *Is it just that it’s so odd?* Rhiow had thought at the time. Whatever the reason, here they all were, *ehhif*-wizards and People-wizards all together: and here was the whole Penn worldgate complex wrapped into one tightly-wound package. It was trying to unravel itself, but being prevented from doing so by Siff’hah as the spell’s power source, floating along invisibly beside it so as not to have to be distracted by the need to waste concentration on walking. The whole ball of yarn, as it were, was now apparently rolling down toward Rhiow, dominating the street and getting bigger by the moment, bearing down on the dinosaurs clustered around their gigantic chief, who looked to be losing his wrestling match. And right down at the bottom of it all, invisible to all eyes except feline ones, there was a single tiny, tabby-striped figure with his back to Rhiow, pulling the worldgate complex down Eighth Avenue....*with his teeth.*

The fur stood up all over Rhiow as she watched him, hearing Urruah babbling at her again, late one morning two months ago, as he walked home with her. “I would never have thought of it! I saw it on this *ehhif* thing on cable late one night, and the image just wouldn’t let me be, and I – ”

“Cable?” Rhiow had shaken her head as if all the fleas apparently living inside Urruah’s head were now trying to roost in her ears. “Your *Dumpster* has cable, all of a sudden?”

He gave her a look that said most eloquently how he was ignoring her attempts to derail his train of thought. “It was one of those big bull *ehhif*, all teeth and no brains, and he was pulling along one of those big trucks, they call them *semih*’s, and he was doing it with his teeth – ”

He *was all teeth and no brains?* Rhiow wanted to shout. She restrained herself for the moment, and paused in front of a dry-cleaners’ shop to wash an ear that didn’t need it. “Urruah,” Rhiow said, “if you saw an *ehhif* jump off a bridge, would you do that too? You and your ‘popular culture,’ whatever that is, I swear, because it changes every time you try to define it – ”

“It’s something *you* don’t get enough of, that’s for sure. Otherwise *you* would have had this great idea first. Anyway, the cable’s backstage at the Met; the scene guys have to have something to watch while the *oh’ra* singers are actually singing. So here he is, this *ehhif*, in one of these strong-

*ehhif* contests they have, where they lift rocks and throw trees around and Iau knows what all else, it's hysterical to watch them."

*Hysterical, that's going to be me in a minute*, Rhiow thought, as Urruah went on to describe the strange pulling device which had been built for this *ehhif* to use – something to sink his teeth into and pull this *semih'* the necessary distance. Yet all against her will she'd begun to see how similar his idea was to some of the handling constructions that a gate tech might build to deal with the most recalcitrant gating structures, old ones that were getting likely to shred themselves to bits if you moved them. All right, this *was* a brute-force kind of solution, completely unlike the more elegant and finicky kind of strategy that her old colleague Saash would have come up with. But Saash was somewhere else at the moment, helping Iau steer the stars in their courses, no doubt; and who knew whether, if you handed her a whole star or a whole gating complex to manhandle around, even she mightn't have said "the hell with the claws" and used her teeth instead? *Maybe it's time I got past my preconceptions about Urruah's potential as a gate tech*, Rhiow thought. *All right, it's just such a tom-sounding way to deal with something, but if it works...*

And now here she was watching this terrible rolled-up ball of fire come trundling down Eighth Avenue, while a huge and magnificent dinosaur struggled futilely with it. Rhiow sat there commanding her fur to lie down, and prayed, prayed to Iau the Queen of Everything that Urruah had not misjudged how much energy was required in his own version of the pulling device to keep that terrible thing under control. For that was part of a typical tom's solution, too: bluff. But you did not bluff a worldgate...or at least you didn't try bluffing it more than once. And as for a gate that you'd purposely cut loose of its moorings –

The huge glowing ball rolled on. That was not a special effect or an illusion. Urruah's "puller" was not fastened to the gate sheaf itself, but to the massive shielding construct that had been erected around it and which Siff'hah was powering. And atop the worldgate-bundle proper, the team's other tom – not to be in any way outdone by his more senior colleague – was riding the top of that ball of force, walking backwards on it as it rolled forwards. That was one piece of popular culture Rhiow had come in contact with one night at her own *ehhif*'s place: the image of some poor tiger in a forced performance of some kind, walking backwards on a big ball, while a strangely dressed *ehhif* flicked a whip at it, and music played and crowds cheered. And there was Arhu up there, as nearly invisible against the blaze of energies under him as Urruah was below, at least two paws in contact with that shield all the time, ready to sink his own teeth into it if he needed

to. Siff'hah, though, seemed to need very little in the way of help. Power simply streamed off her into the wizardry. That was her business, and she was good at it: sometimes a little too good for Rhiow's nerves. But as so young a wizard, she was always going to have more power available to her than the more senior practitioners.

*Here we go*, said Arhu, as Ith, wrestling with the ball, came up even with the corner of Thirty-first. Down that street, half a block behind the Post Office, was the place where the tracks running under the building and into Penn were exposed to the open air, a great wide pit half a block wide. *Sif?*

*Ready*, Siff'hah said.

*Ready*, said Ith.

Lightning crackled fiercely away from the moving ball of gate-strings, lashing out at the dinosaur who struggled with it. He squealed in rage and staggered back, the earth shaking under him. Then once more he rushed at the globe of strung fire, and once more was repulsed. The dinosaur shrieked renewed fury, attacked one last time: but this time the lightning that burst from the globe of fire was so violent that the king-dinosaur staggered back again, turned, and began an enraged flight down Thirty-first Street, off to Rhiow's left. The other dinosaurs, which had been milling around their leader, now broke away and began to flee down the side streets, vanishing from the shot and from sight.

Rhiow watched the lightning with admiration. This was probably the only real "special effect" in the whole production: it was the result of purposeful overfeeding of the worldgates' shield layer on Siff'hah's part, and was done merely for show, to support the backstory in the script which the New York Film Board had approved. Jath was acting as supervisor for this effect, making sure that it didn't get out of hand. But that was mostly what Jath was good for: at keeping things from happening. It was not anything Rhiow would ever have admitted to him, of course, but it was true. The real master of this whole business was down there at the far end of the street, behind the dinosaurs, with his teeth sunk in the "puller," still advancing toward her, backwards, steady and slow. *Urruah*, Rhiow said, *what's the word?*

*Ready for the turn*, Urruah said silently.

*Is the socket ready!* Rhiow said.

*All set*, said a new voice: Fh'iss. He was the third of Jath's team, and had been set completely aside from the "moving" part of the project to concentrate on the business of stopping it from moving at the end of the run. An elaborately constructed socket lay waiting off to one side of the New Jersey Transit tracks, near a freight platform. It was a temporary home for

the gate, only shallowly rooted into the subterranean master catenary: there would be time for short-distance repositioning later. *Drop it on me, Fh'iss* said.

*All right, Rhiow said. Here comes the drama. Arhu? Siff'hah? You ready?*

*Ready to go, Arhu said; but how would it not be, when I've been handling things?* From the sound of him, you'd think that nothing particularly interesting had been happening. Rhiow put her whiskers forward in amusement. For a kitten barely a year old, who'd been pulled out of a garbage bag floating down the East River, where he and his sibs had been thrown to drown, coolness had become his middle name.

*Oh really,* said his sister, endlessly unimpressed. But then, Rhiow thought, she had been in that bag too. She had come from a tremendous distance in miles, and had spent the beginning of a new life, in order to hunt her brother down and shred his ears – that being the best way she had of telling him she loved him. *Where would you be without me to remind you of what needs doing? And look out, you're steering it crooked.*

*I am not.*

*You are.*

*Am not – !*

*I'm going to turn now, Urruah said, so it would be really smart if you two went with me, and didn't fall off and let this thing blow up and eat half the island! Ith –*

*Ready.*

Slowly, the lightnings crackling around it again, the huge ball of worldgate-fire negotiated the turn into West Thirty-first. Ith, “enraged”, rushed at the worldgate-core one last time, apparently trying to grapple with it, but flailed away again by the crackling violence of the fire. Then the ball of fire seemed to speed up slightly, bumping into Ith, making him stagger, off balance, toward the edge of the great track-pit. *Fh'iss?*

*Ready. Not on top of me, cousin!*

*Not?* Ith said, sounding surprised. *But I thought in the script it said –* Theatrically he leaned backward over, clawed forelegs flailing, tail lashing for balance, finding it, losing it again. He toppled.

*Ith, really, not!*

Ith fell backwards, grasping at the ball of fire, sinking his claws into it in one last desperate “attempt” to keep himself from falling. The attempt failed. Giant rear legs kicking, he went over the edge in a tremendous fall. A disastrous roar went up, a bleat of terror and rage, as he clutched the

worldgate-ball to him and plunged into the pit. Like a star falling, like the Sun setting, he and the worldgate vanished from view.

There was a huge moment of silence, followed by an almighty crash. And then the light went out.

The echoes faded. Everybody, Rhiow included, looked intently at the “director”, who was staring at one of the video displays. Then he lifted his hand.

“Cut it!” he yelled. “That’s it, that’s a wrap! Thank you, everybody! Nice work, cousins!”

Applause broke out all around, from the film crew and even from the cops, who until now had probably thought they’d seen just about everything that could happen in the way of a shooting. The special effects would be the talk of the NYPD for days, Rhiow thought: two or three days, anyway. As people started picking things up and carrying them around, Rhiow went padding over to the “director”, who was drinking what was probably his tenth paper cup of a coffee locally famous for its strength and foulness.

“Har’lh,” Rhiow said to Carl Romeo, one of the ehif Area Seniors, “that stuff will ruin your health.”

“Only if I overdo it,” Carl said. He glanced around him, where the large team of wizards were already beginning to pack up the shot. Equipment was seeming to go into those white high-side trucks, where the cops – having recovered their original bored and jaded attitudes – and the dozy Film Board lady, were completely failing to notice that the equipment, once out of sight behind some genuine boxes and coverings, simply vanished. In the Holland and Midtown tunnels, out of sight of the security cameras – those that had not been spoofed with pre-laid wizardries already – the trucks would soon do the same. “We’ll be out of here in about twenty minutes. Nice work, Rhi.”

She shook her head. “I never touched a string,” she said. “I just coordinate.”

“Not as easy as it sounds,” Carl said, finishing the coffee and then tossing the cup into a nearby recycling bin, which another wizard picked up and carried off a second later. “My people have a saying about herding cats...”

She put her whiskers forward, knowing a compliment when she heard one. From behind the two of them, a huge-toothed head, zebra-striped in vivid red and yellow, but now reduced to its more normal three-foot length, pushed in to peer at the video display. “Did I look good?” Ith said. “I think I looked good.”

Carl chuckled. “Tim,” he said, elbowing the young *ehhif* wizard standing beside him, “roll the ‘video’, will you, and satisfy our Elder Brother’s vast bloated ego....?”

Rhiow put one ear back, sarcastic, as from behind Har’lh, Urruah came walking up Eighth. “And as for you,” she said to Ith, as the imagery which had just transpired started to repeat itself on the screen while he peered at it, “shouldn’t you be sidled? If enough people here see you for very much longer, we’re going to have a lot more explaining to do.”

“This is New York,” said Ith, turning one of those wise little eyes on Rhiow: it glittered with humor. “If anyone *does* see a red and yellow Tyrannosaurus walk down the street without a film crew, they will either ignore me – being New Yorkers – or assume I am some kind of advertisement.” He shrugged his long tail, looking back at the screen. “What should I advertise, do you think?”

Arhu walked up Ith’s back and sat on his shoulder, looking over it at the video. “Pastrami,” he said.

Rhiow gave Ith a clout in the leg with her claws in; though frankly he was unlikely to have felt every claw she had, through that thick hide. “See now, you’re teaching these kits bad habits,” she said.

“I’d say it’s going both ways,” Carl said, as Siff’hah walked up Ith’s tail to join her twin on Ith’s other shoulder. “Nice work, you two.” He unzipped his parka a little: the air was warming a little as the breeze started to run down Thirty-first from the East River side, the first touch of Sun on the river pushing the air their way. “And you, Urruah: you should be pleased. An elegant solution to a thorny problem. You go ahead, Rhi, ’Ruah: your folks did all the hard work here. Leave the cleanup to us.” He turned his back on her, clapping his hands. “Come on, people, let’s go, pack out the trash...”

Rhiow waved her tail in satisfaction, turning to Urruah. “Is it down and secure? Is it rooted?”

*It’s down, Fh’iss said, from down in the track pit. Our overacting cousin delivered it right on target: it fell straight into the socket, and he fell clear. Not that I won’t shred his puny ears later. ‘Not!’*

“It’s not rooted in tight yet, though,” Urruah said, sitting down with his tail now weaving slowly from side to side, the thing he always did when he was ticking off items on his internal to-do list. “I want to check out the catenary junctures. If there are any frayed hyperstrings in there left over from moving the sheaf, they’ll play merry hell with the restart synch when we initiate the sequence.”

“Oh, come on,” Arhu said, “you know it’s okay, let’s just blow this thing and go home!”

Urruah turned toward Rhiow, out of Arhu’s view, before rolling his eyes. The look in them, though tired, said plainly to Rhiow, *Please shut him down so I don’t have to. I can’t cope with any more right now.*

“Something’s making my whiskers twinge a little,” Rhiow said, looking down toward the track-pit where the gate-sheaf was presently resting. The “what” of it, of course, was Arhu, but she didn’t have to tell anyone that. “I’ll wait and have a look myself.”

“Aww, Rhi, come on, you know it’s fine!”

She got up, stretched fore and aft, and gave him a sidewise look. Arhu wasn’t yet nearly well-enough worked in with his team and his team leader to do the smart thing and avert his eyes immediately: he actually spent a second’s worth of staring at Rhiow before having the sense to look away.

“I’m not convinced,” she said. “But for your sins, *you* get to come down and convince me yourself. Line by line of the spell, and string by string of the gate. No, ‘Ruah, you stay up here and have a wash. A long night’s work you’ve had, and a long month’s work before that: you deserve a moment’s rest. And it’s your team leader’s pleasure, when she’s done with this wet-eared wiseass, to walk you home and see you eat pastrami before day’s Eye comes up. As for *you*,” she said to Arhu, “come on down here, O endlessly knowledgeable one, and enlighten me as to the status of *my* gate.”

Urruah turned away without comment, sat down and started washing, in silent hilarity: composure-washing at one remove, not for himself but for the kit. Arhu had the sense to put his ears back out of the way. *I’ll be along in a little while*, Urruah said. *You go sort him out.*

She flicked her tail in agreement. “Come on,” she said.

Access for them to the gate’s new lockdown site was the same as it had been for the gate itself, though far less spectacular. As they walked around the corner, Rhiow spoke the numerous syllables of the Mason’s Word, hearing the universe go still around them and leaning in to hear, then feeling the asphalt of Eighth Avenue go summer-soft underneath her. Along with Arhu, who had implemented his own incidence of the Word, Rhiow sank down through the street, into the substrate of the road, past the pipes and conduits, the bricks and stones of earlier layers of the street, the cold clayey earth under the stonework, the i-beamed iron ceilings of the track tunnel.

The New Jersey Transit North River tunnel was a bleak, plain, filthy place as yet: it would be months before the *ehhif* construction crews turned their attention to rebuilding it. The rails ran down toward Penn, off to

Rhiow's and Arhu's right, as they sank down through the ceiling and airwalked toward the platform; to the left, under the occasional naked bulb jutting out of the stanchions of the walls, the tunnels ran off at a downward slope, heading for their dive under the Hudson. Off to their right, ahead of the two of them, the worldgate could be seen hanging over the left-hand set of tracks, shimmering, its colors slowly calming after all the excitement.

Arhu walked over to the gate, reared up on his hind legs, and sank a single careful claw into the outer edge of the gate, catching one of the control strings and pulling it out. The diagnostic colors and status strings immediately leapt into brilliance, indicating where the gate's catenary structure – its main power conduit – had been provisionally re-rooted into the master catenary that ran under Manhattan, and from there into the more ancient world that was the source of the worldgates' power. "So the power levels are back up now," he said. "Ninety percent already, though the last ten won't come up for a while yet because of the reaction trauma. The unwrap went all right: see, the extra strings have lost their flail and are rewebbing themselves with the main structure – "

His debrief to Rhiow took surprisingly little time. Arhu appeared to have been actually listening quite closely to Urruah, though Arhu normally would have done anything to avoid having anyone get that idea. But the thing that left Rhiow wondering, as Arhu talked her through the rest of the details surrounding the reattachment of the severed gate, was how like Saash he sounded as he talked string tech. It was strange. Yet maybe not so strange: for it was Saash who had perhaps been kindest to him when he first came into the team, Saash who had overwatched him, made sure he ate well and slept clean and dry, and had a proper place to do his business. *Attachments*, Rhiow thought. *So odd. She never taught him a purr's worth of theory. Yet, style: style communicates itself. And linkages happen where you expect them the least...*

Finally she interrupted him in the middle of a long string of gate-tech jargon that would have impressed even Saash. "Enough," she said. "You did good."

Arhu flicked an ear at her, looking down toward where Jath and Fh'iss were now sitting together, looking with weary satisfaction at the unwrapped gate, watching its colors die back down from the excited state caused by moving it. "Wouldn't say that in front of *them*," he said.

"Maybe not," Rhiow said, quite softly. "But I'm not sure it's all that important to say it to them. To you, that's another story."

"They don't respect you, Rhiow," he said, and there was a touch of growl in his young voice.

“It’s not about respect, finally,” Rhiow said. “Getting the job done: *that’s* the issue. Let them be. It’s no fun for them to have someone come tailwaving her way onto their territory and start telling them how things are going to have to be. Soon enough they’ll settle in, when their gate does.”

“So can I go get my pastrami?”

She sighed. Urruah was to blame for this deli fixation on both the kits’ side, and for Ith’s as well: but at least they came by it honestly, asking *ehhif* for it rather than just stealing it from them. And watching Ith go through the wizardly gymnastics necessary to displace enough of his mass to disguise himself as a Person was always worth an evening’s amusement. “Go on,” Rhiow said. “Take a look around before you go: make sure Harl’h’s people didn’t miss anything.”

“Did that already,” Arhu said, flirting his tail at Rhiow’s slowness.

“Oh really? How, when you’ve been down here with me?”

“Sif’s doing it right now,” Arhu said, sounding smug, and vanished.

She twitched her whiskers forward in a Person’s smile, gave the settling worldgate one last look, and made her way back up the platform to Jath and Fh’iss. They turned on her a look of weary complaisance. There would probably be some minor recriminations from them tomorrow, during the debrief, but right now they just looked too tired.

That made this the perfect time to praise them: when they wouldn’t be able to summon up the energy to reject it. “Are we done?” Jath said as Rhiow came over. “Fh’iss was wrecked: I sent him off for some sleep.”

“We’re done enough for dawn,” Rhiow said. “The full debrief will keep: the gates need time to steady down, anyway. A long night, we’ve had. Jath, Hw’aa, you did a tremendous job. Please tell Fh’iss that too.” She wasn’t beyond leaving out, for the moment, how long it had taken them to commit themselves to make it a success. None of that mattered, now: they were done.

“Yes, well,” Jath said. “I’m still not sure whether we’ve really *needed* to do this. But the Powers wanted it done...”

“And you can restructure the gates into a better configuration for all the wizards who use the facility,” Rhiow said. “You’ve got so much more room to work down here now.”

“Yes, there is that...”

She waved her tail. “So we’re done. Keep me posted if anything needs my attention. I’m for my bed. Good morning, my cousins, and the Powers send that you sleep sound. No point in wishing you the luck of the hunt: you’ve had it...”

Jath actually purred. As Rhiow was walking away, behind her the first train of the morning came in, rolling towards Penn. A second before the train would have plowed through the airspace where the gate hung, the warp and weft of the worldgate shimmered away out of physicality, hanging hidden where it would remain until Jath and his team finished tweaking it.

*Done*, she thought. *Finally, really done. What a relief...* She made her way back up to street level, the same way she'd come.

When she came out onto Eighth Avenue again, the last of the police cordons were being taken down: the cops were heading off around the corner for coffee and donuts: and all the trucks and people, and the Film Board lady, were gone. There was no one left but a grey tabby, looking up Eighth Avenue to where the lights had changed, and a car or two were crossing the intersection from the side streets.

"Done?" he said.

Rhiow just purred. They sidled themselves, shifting out between the hyperstrings into the commonest kind of feline invisibility, and headed crosstown on Thirty-third. "Did you see those power levels settle?" Urruah said, in the same tone of voice as an *ehhif* saying, "How about those Mets?"

She put her whiskers forward, realizing she was going to get another half hour's worth of tech talk. Rhiow just kept purring, letting him have a monosyllable's worth of agreement here and there, until they were right back on the East Side again. Finally, well uptown and about halfway between Lexington and Park, Urruah just sighed. "A good night's work," he said.

"You have no idea," Rhiow said. "Urruah, I think someone should talk to the Powers about you."

He gave her a look. "I didn't think I did *that* badly –"

She paused long enough to cuff him upside one ear. "You thick-skulled idiot," she said. "Ruah, it's time you thought about doing your team-leader training. Someone has to handle this job after I move on..."

He gave her a shocked look. "Rhiow," he said. "What are you planning? Don't you feel well?"

"I feel fine," she said.

"Then what's the matter?"

They paused at the corner of Park and looked down the length of it toward Grand Central, watching the lights change in sequence, to no effect: not a car moved anywhere. The gold of the rising Sun caught the top of the Helmsley-Spears building as Rhiow looked at it. "Ruah, every now and then we all get tired..."

“Tired? *You?*” He jerked his tail a couple of times, dismissive, as they started across the street. “Come on. Your problem is that you don’t get out enough.”

“You’re going to tell me I need to be watching more *oh’ra*,” Rhiow said.

Urruah rolled his eyes at her. “You do. But that’s not the problem. You know what I mean.”

She waved her tail in a gesture of feigned non-understanding. “Maybe,” she said. “Let’s discuss it later. But either way, I think Harl’h needs to look into a change of status for you. An upgrade, anyway: and you need to start doing consulting work of your own.”

His own purr was surprisingly restrained. “Not sure I’m in such a hurry for that,” he said. “I like sleeping in my own Dumpster at night.”

She flirted her tail at him as they came to the corner where her *ehhif’s* apartment building lay. “Think about it, cousin,” she said. “And go get yourself that pastrami. I don’t think I have to watch you eat it.”

“We’ll save you a bit.”

She butted heads with him. “Don’t fret if you forget to,” she said. “Go on.”

For a moment she watched him walk down First Avenue, then turned to walk down her own block, past the brownstones and the parked cars. At the usual spot in the block, she stepped up into the air and activated the spell she kept ready for easy access to the building. The air, reminded that it had once been stone, or trapped in stone, now went solid under her feet, deconstructing itself as her pads left each “step”. Up to the terrace of her *ehhif’s* apartment she went, leaping up between the railings –

– and froze, blinking with shock. Her litter box was out on the terrace, under the overhang of the next terrace up. And there was another Person in it. Their eyes met.

Shocked, Rhiow held still, starting to fluff up in outraged reflex at the invasion of her territory. A tom: instantly she could see that. Black, though not as black as she was: you could still see the tabby markings through the darkness. Golden-eyed, a broad face, ears a little beat up, a shocked expression. He opened his mouth to speak –

Rhiow blinked. There was nothing there, no one in her box.

She stared: she shook herself. Slowly, her fur still halfway fluffed, she stalked toward the litterbox. She stared into it. No footprints. She sniffed. There was no scent there but the slight odor of the last time she’d made *siss*: no matter how her *ehhif*, *Iaehh*, tried to clean the box perfectly, and no

matter what the clumping little people claimed about their product's deodorizing powers, that scent was where she'd left it.

*No*, she thought, and shook her head until her ears rattled. *Just a tired mind playing tricks*. Very quietly Rhiow went into the apartment through the cat-door her *ehhif* had installed for her in the glass of the sliding door. *Meditation can wait*, she thought, her tail wreathing in bemusement. *How much good would I get out of it when I'm so tired, I'm hallucinating?*

She wandered through the darkened apartment, back into the bedroom. Quietly Rhiow jumped up onto the bottom corner of the king-sized bed, careful not to wake Iaehh up. He slept lightly, too lightly sometimes, since Rhiow's own *ehhif*, his mate Hhuha, had died in an accident.

She stood there in the dark for a moment, missing Hhuha one more time, and once again feeling sorry for Iaehh. *It's not good for you to be alone*, she thought. *How does one do matchmaking for ehhif, I wonder? How do you engineer it so they get out a little more, and meet somebody nice?* It wasn't a question of replacing Hhuha, of course: no one could do that. But at the same time, it seemed important to *ehhif* life to be paired. Almost as important as it was for People: though *ehhif* always seemed to keep their emotional lives so compartmentalized...

She sighed, and then yawned. The long night's work had caught up with her. *Let's get some sleep*, she thought. *Time enough in the morning to reorganize Iaehh's social life*.

She sat down and had a perfunctory wash; then her head jerked up as she started dozing right in the middle of it. *Enough*, she thought, and curled up nose to tail. A moment later she was dozing.

And out of the dream, golden eyes looked at her, thoughtful...

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