

TWO

Afternoon seemed to come just a breath or two later. Rhiow rolled over and stretched out long, blinking at the bronzy light coming in through the bedroom's Venetian blinds. From outside, she could hear faint clinking sounds; Iaehh was moving around out there. She heard one of the drawers in the little kitchen open, and then the clatter of *ehhif* eating utensils being taken out.

Rhiow sat up, gazing around the bedroom. As always, it was hard to avoid a pang of sadness; there was still a faint scent of Hhuha hanging about all the furnishings in the place. She was sure that Iaehh was oblivious to this -- the *ehhif* sense of smell was hardly capable of such delicate detection -- but every morning, before she was fully awake, Rhiow had to disentangle that faint scent of her own *ehhif* from the reality of the present physical world, in which her Hhuha was no longer present.

She let out a long breath, wishing that just once more she might hear that small, strange purr-like sound that Hhuha had used to make when she picked Rhiow up and held her, upside down, in the crook of one arm. But there were some things that not even wizardry could do. Hhuha was in her own place now, the right place for an *ehhif* to be after physical life was done, wherever that might be. And Rhiow, for her own part, knew that the sorrowful moments were the price she paid for keeping the memory of that relationship green. If she tried to reject them, soon she would have no true memory of Hhuha left, but merely a simulacrum, colored by wishful thinking and the desire to avoid pain, not by truth or life. As a wizard, it was with truth and life that her loyalties lay; so she suffered the pain gladly enough, the way you suffered the pain of biting a thorn out of your paw, though the thorn grew back every day. *All you can hope*, she thought, *is that each day the thorn gets a little shorter...*

Rhiow stood up, stretched fore and aft, and jumped down from the bed. She padded across the carpet, paused by the bedroom door to pull it a little further open with her paw, and wandered out into the living room-dining room area. Iaehh was standing in the tiny kitchen, bending over the stove and stirring something in a small pot. Rhiow stood there under the

dining room table, sniffing. *Noodles again*, she thought. *Iaehh, my kit, there's more to life than ramen! Or there should be.* But there had not been much heart in him for cooking since Hhuha died. That had become another of life's little sorrows for Rhiow. The good smells that had once been part of life in this little den now hardly ever happened anymore; Iaehh's life had become an endless round of takeout food in sad cardboard cartons. Rhiow found herself worrying about Iaehh's heart in more than the strictly emotional sense, for half the time the dreadful stuff the delivery men brought smelled more of chemicals and fat than of any honest meat. *Here's an intervention it's time I started working on in earnest*, Rhiow thought. *A poor sort of thing it is if you can save the city, save the world, but can't even save your own eh-hif.*

She came up behind him to where her water dish sat in front of the oven next to the refrigerator. The name-charm on her collar tinkled against it as Rhiow put her head down into it for a good, long drink. Iaehh turned, looked down at her. "So there you are," he said. "I thought you were going to sleep all day. Where were you all last night, huh?"

For the moment, she just waved her tail and kept on drinking. Iaehh had slowly come to terms with the concept that Rhiow was able to jump down onto the roof of the building next door. He'd gradually become less troubled by that, as he couldn't see how she could possibly get anywhere *else* from there. Had she been a cat like any of the other cats in the neighborhood, of course he would've been right. But that was a misconception of which Rhiow was not going to be able to disabuse him, as the protocols of wizardry forbade her to speak to *eh-hif* in any way that could be understood unless she was actually on errantry concerning them at the time. There had been times, and would probably be again, when she would desperately wish that she had just ten seconds of time to make herself understood; just enough time to say, *I have to be out for a few days on an intervention, don't worry about me, I won't miss any more meals than I have to...* But there was no way. She simply had to try to keep her interventions as short as possible: yet another inconvenience in a life that was already busy enough. And now she had to wear the name-charm he'd bought her as well, in case she got lost somehow...and the jingling of the thing drove her crazy.

Rhiow sighed, and finished her drink, and went over to give Iaehh a friendly rub around the ankles. "Oh," he said. "And now you're my friend, because I've got food, huh?" He reached up toward the cupboard where the People food was kept.

"I'm always your friend," she said. It did no harm to answer him in Ailurin, as he couldn't hear it -- very few ehhif could; the subvocalized purrs and trills of the language were usually out of their hearing range -- and it kept her from feeling as if she was stuck in a monologue. "Cat food has nothing to do with it." Then she caught the scent of what he was opening. "Except sometimes. Is that salmon? Oh, you really *are* observant sometimes! You saw I liked that brand last week -- "

"Haven't heard you shout like that for awhile," he said. "Come on, let's see you do your little dance, like you used to do for Sue -- "

Rhiow reared up against his bare leg, patting it just above the knee, with her claws just barely in. "I'll pull your kneecap right off," she said, "if you don't stop waving that dish around over my head. Like I can't reach it if I really want to! Oh, put that *down* --"

She took a couple more swipes at the dish with her free paw, letting him play the you-can't-have-it-game for a little longer. Finally he put the dish down, and Rhiow buried her face in it. After last night's work, she was starving; and she was relieved to see the way Iaehh was dressed, in his shorts and singlet and running shoes, for it meant that he would be out for at least an hour or two -- plenty of time for her to head over to Penn and check with Jath and Fh'iss to see how the gate had bedded in. *Probably*, she thought, *I'm worrying for nothing. Probably the gate's fine. Otherwise I would've heard from them by now.*

All the same... if there was anything she'd learned in the years since she had ascended to the rank of senior technician for the North American worldgates, it was that it was rarely wise to assume that things were going to go correctly. Gates were one of the most finicky and complex kind of spell structures that a wizard dealt with on a regular basis. Anything that could be imagined going wrong with them usually did, on a regular if not daily basis. This meant that Rhiow and her teams were some of the busiest wizards in the Metropolitan area. But it was interesting work, mentally stimulating -- especially since a worldgate rarely failed in the same way twice -- and due to its very nature, a wizard involved in it routinely met some of the most interesting people on the planet, or off it.

"Now where did I put those keys," Iaehh was muttering under his breath as he rummaged around among the paperwork piled up all over the kitchen table. It was routinely a clutter up there, these days; Iaehh rarely sat down to eat there, as if afraid to be reminded of who in the old days had always sat opposite him at the table, poking him with her chopsticks over the take away cartons.

"They're up on the counter," Rhiow said, straightening up from polishing the cat food dish clean. "You remember. You were going to try to make a new place for them, where you would always remember where you left them. Except you can never remember. Oh, come on, IaeHH, strain your brain a little!"

"I've really got to get this table cleaned up," IaeHH said. He kept on turning over papers, stacking them up, shoving them around.

Rhiow sat down in the middle of the kitchen floor and started to wash her face. "Yes, you should," she said softly, "but you say that every day. And it never gets done. IaeHH, do hurry up, I have things to do, and I'd rather not leave while you're here watching..."

But he kept right on hunting for the keys in the same place, again and again, even while Rhiow finished washing both paws, and under her chin, and started in again on the left ear, even though it didn't need it. Finally she lost her patience. She glanced over her shoulder, up on the counter, where the coffee machine sat. There were the keys, right on top of it. *And of course, since he just had his coffee,* Rhiow thought, *he could have left them just a little too close to the edge of the machine. He could have... and that's all he needs to think.*

Would you do me a favor? she said to the apartment keys in the wizardly Speech, and to gravity in that very small area. It was only a minuscule change of position that was needed, and as a result Rhiow had to pause for a moment to consult in her mind with the Whisperer to get the exact coordinates.

They came through. In her mind, using the Speech, Rhiow described a little circle around the coffeemaker to limit the locus of gravitational change, and indicated the spot where she wanted the keys to go. *Right there, if you would --*

Everything in a gravitational field likes to fall, and even more so if you ask it nicely. The keys dropped down onto the counter with an obligingly noisy clash of metal. IaeHH jumped, looked over his shoulder, and then laughed at himself. "I keep forgetting," he said. "I have a brain like a sieve, these days..."

That was a thought that had occurred to Rhiow, as well. Probably just stress, she thought. IaeHH had unexpectedly been promoted at his job, and was now managing a whole department. This had made it easier to keep the apartment he had shared with Hhuha, but he was now twice as busy as he had been before his loss. *One more thing to worry about...* Rhiow thought.

Rhi?

Rhiow changed position slightly and pushed out a hind leg to wash it. Iaehh had pocketed his keys, and was unlocking the apartment door. *You're up earlier than I expected*, she said to Urruah.

I couldn't stay asleep, Urruah said. *Wanted to go over to Penn and check things out.*

See, isn't that what I said? What a professional you are. Especially since I'm the one who should be doing that.

"Okay," Iaehh said, coming back over the Rhiow and bending down to stroke her head. "You have a nice day, plumptious puss. I'll be back around dinnertime."

"Yes, but your dinnertime or mine?" Rhiow said, resigned but affectionate, as Iaehh went out the door, shut it behind him, and started locking all the locks. *Sorry, 'Ruah. He's running behind today, and so am I.*

There's no big rush, Urruah said. *I haven't been there either, yet. But I didn't want to call you just to make you feel guilty. Jath was asking for you.*

Oh, sweet Iau, said Rhiow, *standing up in a hurry, what can it be now? Tell me nothing's gone wrong with the gate –*

If it has, he didn't mention it, Urruah said. *It was something about L.A.*

L.A? Rhiow said. *The Los Angeles gate? Now what on earth --* Immediately her mind began to fill with all kinds of terrible visions of something they had done wrong with the Penn gate that had affected the Downside connections of the L.A. microcomplex.

It's nothing to do with our intervention last night, Urruah said, *or at least not as far as I can tell. Anyway, Aufwi is on his way over. He and Jath are going to come up here; Jath wanted to sit tight and watch Aufwi's transfer, to make sure the Penn gate is behaving itself.*

All right, Rhiow said. *'Up here' where? Are you at home?* She had to pause for a moment to think where that was this week: Urruah intended to change dumpsters without warning, but normally he could be found somewhere in the west Seventies, near the better uptown food markets.

No, he said. *The Met.*

Fine, Rhiow said. *Give me half an hour to make a swing through Grand Central -- just to check our own gates to make sure there are no untoward side effects -- and I'll be along. How did Jath seem you this morning?*

Pleased, Urruah said. *You'd swear this whole thing had been his idea.*

Rhiow stood up and shook herself, putting her whiskers right forward in an expression of rueful amusement. That was how things usually went with Jath. He would protest and obstruct and dig in his claws, and in every way make getting a job done as hard as it could be -- and then one sleep and one meal later, it was his own personal success, and could never have happened without him. *Well, the latter may be true*, Rhiow thought. *But, Powers that Be, I pray You, don't make me have to admit to it out loud. I suppose I could bear it, but he'd swiftly become unbearable, and both our teams would suffer.*

On the other side of the apartment door, the last locks snicked closed, and Rhiow could hear Iaehh's footsteps heading off down the hall. *'Ruah*, Rhiow said as she went over to the door, *give Jath him my best, and let him know that I'll be along shortly.*

By the door, Rhiow sat up on her haunches, putting her front paws against the painted metal. There had been a rash of burglaries in this building a couple of years ago, and she had seen how, no matter how many locks and bolts other *ehhif* in the building put on their doors, the burglars were in no wise deterred. She had therefore become a bit proactive. The wizardry she had laced into the structure of the front of her *ehhif's* den was a variant of that old favorite, the Mason's Word; it took the very minimal stone content of the plaster on the outside of the wall, and the metallic content of the door, and convinced them both that, as they once had been in the ancient day, they now weighed about a ton and were still part of the insides of a mountain. The burglars whom the police had caught trying to break into the apartment most recently -- a few months ago -- had been found practically weeping with frustration, their sledgehammers shattered, and the wall and door looking innocently unconcerned by the whole operation. There had been no break-ins since; the word seemed to have been going around among the local criminal fraternity that the building was haunted. But there was no telling how this salutary state of affairs would last.

Now, pads against the door, Rhiow spoke the necessary words in the Speech and gave up the necessary energy to refuel the spell. Her workload of late had left her no time to consider how she might expand the spell to the other apartments on this floor. *Something else that needs to be handled*, she thought, watching the way the subtle fire of the recharged wizardry fled away from her paws and sank deep into the structure of the wall and door. She eyed the underlying structure of the wizardry critically, looking for any weak spots or places where the spell was fraying. But there were none: Rhiow prided herself on doing thorough work that was meant to last. It was a habit you got into when you worked routinely with worldgates. The Grand

Central gates had been there for hundreds of years, a wizardry rooted in the depths of time, and placed there, so the whispering said, by one of the daughters of Queen Iau herself. No wizard in his or her right mind would want to hang substandard workmanship on such a construction.

She looked the wizardry over one last time, then turned and made her way back to the sliding door that let out onto the terrace. Out the little clear plastic flap she slipped, onto the painted concrete of the terrace, and stood there for a moment looking around at the golden afternoon. The terrace was near the corner of the building, on the 70th Street side; off to Rhiow's left, it was an easy jump down to the concrete parapet and flat, graveled roof of the building diagonally behind theirs. *Maybe I'll go down 69th today*, she thought.

And then the litter box caught her eye.

Rhiow stared at it. There were still no footprints in it but hers. *So weird*, she thought. *I really need to get some more rest...* And then she laughed a cat's silent laughter at herself. *Like that's going to happen.*

She used the litter box, scratching perhaps a little more enthusiastically than usual to kick away the memory of those strange eyes looking at her. It would've been a rather challenging look in reality; people meeting for the first time didn't stare so. There were proprieties of gaze to be observed, degrees of intrusiveness that were permitted later in a relationship but forbidden early on, and emphatically discouraged at a first meeting. *Just stress*, she thought, *externalizing itself at the end of a long day....* Rhiow hopped out of the box, shook the inevitable sticking kitty litter off her feet, slipped between the bars of the terrace, and jumped down onto the roof of the building to the left.

The concrete was warm under her pads; it had been sunny all afternoon, to judge by the residual heat. *Did Iaehh bring his water bottle with him?* Rhiow wondered, as she walked down the parapet, making for the garden-courtyard tree that grew near the far corner of that building. *He's going to need it, running on a day like this...* At the far corner of the building, she paused at the edge of the parapet and looked down into the branches of the tree, a tall, handsome maple. The branches up here were very thin, much too much so to bear her weight. She could always have air-walked it, but she'd had little enough exercise in the last few days, and her muscles were itching for a good stretch. Rhiow crouched, her tail lashing, and then leaped down into the branches.

She saw the branch she was heading for, flung her forelegs around it and sank her claws in. Rhiow just hung in there for a moment, breathing hard, digging her hind claws in as well and getting her bearings. She

glanced over her shoulder, then down along the big branch toward the tree trunk. Some of the people in this building had *houiff*, mostly little dogs that were all yap and no guts; but there was no kindness in making some poor *houiff* crazy by letting it see her when it couldn't get at her. *Like they'd be able to do that either...* she thought, putting her whiskers forward.

As Rhiow shinnied down the trunk, she sidled, insinuating herself between the hyperspatial strings whose effect on matter determined whether it was visible or not. By the time she paused a few feet above the ground, reversed head for tail, and jumped down, only a wizard or another cat could have seen her. There, at the shade-starved corner of the little scrap of lawn behind the building, she stopped once more to glance around and see if there were any People around. Her block had about fifty, most of them held captive inside buildings by *ehhif* too afraid of the city's dangers to let them out; the rest were more fortunate "pets", or People unaligned with *ehhif*...some of them even nonaligned with other People, "out of pride". *But on a day like this, probably most of them are holed up somewhere cool. In the evening, some of them may come out for a bout of hauishh... when things cool down. But not right now.*

She strolled away from the tree, around the corner of the building, and down the narrow little alley that led to a locked and barred wire covered gate giving onto 69th Street. Garbage cans were lined up there against the blind brick wall of the building. They were not as tightly closed as they could have been. Rhiow's nose wrinkled as she went past; there had been rats here -- she could smell their *siss* trail running up and down the wall and near the base of it, a nasty, thin, acrid reek. *Something else to deal with when there's time*, Rhiow thought. Her work in errantry had not taken her so far from her feline roots that she would forget that most basic of enmities between her kind and the things that had gnawed at the roots of the world since time began. *But who wants to get all messed up with rat-smell on a pretty day like this?* And indeed it was a nice day, despite the heat; there was a steady, soft breeze coming in off the river, taking away the worst of the city stink.

Rhiow crouched at the bottom of the wired-up gate, leapt up onto it, pulled herself up claw over claw to the top of it, teetered for a moment on the topmost iron bar, and jumped down onto the sidewalk. There Rhiow stood for a moment, staying close to the gate so that no *ehhif*, unable to see her, would come wandering into her before she saw them. But the street was quiet enough for the moment. Down toward Third Avenue, she could see a couple of *ehhif* dams pushing their kits in strollers; nearer to her, a tall dark tom-*ehhif* with that strange twisted head-fur they seemed to be going in for these days came wandering down toward her with his arm around a shorter

ehhif, a queen. Rhiow let them go by before she headed down the sidewalk herself, and put her whiskers forward a little at the look on their faces. She was sure she was reading it right; she had seen it often enough on Iaeheh and Hhuha before, and usually just before they went into the bedroom, closed the door, and began to do what Hhuha had routinely referred to as "the cat-scaring thing." *A nice sort of day for it*, Rhiow thought, as she ambled down the north side of 69th Street, past the stairs of the mid-street brownstones; *assuming you're interested, of course*. It had been quite awhile since she had been -- her *ehhif* had had her spayed before she was old enough to understand what was happening. But she had never particularly regretted it. Freedom from that particular physical imperative had left her with that much more time to concentrate on the business of being a wizard. *Possibly a good thing*, Rhiow thought, sidestepping into the stairwell of the basement apartment to let a couple more *ehhif*-dams with strollers go by. *Since, over the last couple of years, if I hadn't had that spare time to concentrate, for all I know, I'd've been dead a couple times over...*

Rhiow came to the corner of Third Avenue and 69th and tucked herself as flat as she could against the corner wall of the apartment building there. *Ehhif* walked to and fro before her while she sat there waiting for the light to change, and wondering what in the world could be wrong with the L.A. gate. It wasn't a heavily used portal; no interplanetary traffic went through there at all, and mostly just short jump traffic off the North American continent toward Asia. As the light changed, she wondered once again why the L.A. gate had never budded off any associated microgates in response to the city's population's growth over the last century. Normally, worldgates were a direct response of the fabric of local space time to the fraying pressure of millions of sentient minds concentrated into a small space. Rather than rip right open under the desires of all the beings living crammed together there, spacetime usually tried to conserve itself by producing a sort of semipermeable membrane through which beings who knew the portal's location could pass. *And normally*, Rhiow thought as the light changed and she got up and trotted across Third Avenue in company with all of the other pedestrians, but well to one side, *a given gate complex isn't shy about budding if the local population's large enough. Look at Tokyo: how many gates are there in that complex now? Fourteen? Fifteen? I lose track; this last decade, it's like the thing's in heat all the time. It no sooner has one gate that it hauls off and has another...*

Rhiow patted the problem around with the paw of the mind for a while as she made her way down 69th toward Park Avenue. But the air was too soft and pleasant, and for once, nice-smelling, for her to find it easy to

concentrate. Rhiow crossed Park Avenue, pausing once another crowd of *ehhif* had gone by to take a moment to smell the flowers there, yellow delphiniums and yellow and purple pansies. The lights went red and green together, and Rhiow scampered across again, heading for Lexington Avenue.

She had a standard covert entrance to the Grand Central complex down at 50th and Lex, but there was no particular need to go straight underground and quickly blot out the scent of that summer air. For a change, Rhiow simply trotted down the west side of Lexington Avenue like any other sightseer or Sunday shopper, until she came to the brass-and-glass doors of Grand Central Market. *Urruah's beginning to contaminate me too*, Rhiow thought, amused, as she walked invisibly down between the stalls of beautiful meat and hot breads and shining fruit, sniffing appreciatively, and then out into the food hall full of coffee smells and frying smells. On the far side of the food hall, she paused just long enough to gaze over toward the glass-paned arch of the Oyster Bar restaurants, closed this early on a Sunday. But to a cat's nose, such closure was a relative thing. Behind those doors, Rhiow could smell oysters being shucked, and her mouth began to water. *I'm going to get him for getting me hooked on those things*, she thought, and ran up the stairs to the Main Concourse.

Sunday in Grand Central merely meant that there were fewer commuters among the crowds walking that wide shining floor, and many more people out for a pleasant day in the city -- *ehhif* parents towing along kits who in turn towed along bunches of bright balloons; shoppers with fat carrybags full of tasty-smelling loot; tourists gawking at the beautiful, newly cleaned sky-ceiling and the great down-hanging striped flag. There was no escaping the scent of food here, either; the station's recent renovation had placed a restaurant at each end of the great Concourse, and from one of them the smell of grilling meat floated most appetizingly. But for the moment, Rhiow had other business. She headed across the floor toward the north-side archway labeled Track 32.

There were a couple of *ehhif* walking down the long, fluorescent-lit platform ahead of her. Rhiow put her whiskers forward at the sight of them, for though there was no train at the platform, and there wasn't scheduled to be one there for at least another twenty minutes, they didn't move like *ehhif* who were waiting for something that wasn't there. Rhiow wandered along behind them, saw the two *ehhif* stop at the end of the platform and look into the dark, down where the overhead lighting stopped and the great broad spread of tracks began to draw together. One of them, a tall young tom with long blond hair and a shockingly loud Hawaiian shirt, pulled out a book and

began to page through it. His companion, a she-*ehhif* even taller than he, though much darker and much more quietly dressed, looked over his shoulder at what he was reading.

They must have had their access spell pre-prepared, for barely a tail-flick later, the gate manifested itself. In the darkness, hanging in midair about a foot from the left edge of the platform, the portal matrix that Rhiow kept anchored by Track 32 shivered into visibility -- at least for Rhiow and the wizards. Theoretically, a non-wizardly *ehhif* could have seen it. But the gate was edge-on to any other *ehhif* who might have approached up the platform; and it would have been unlikely that a non-wizardly *ehhif* could have seen a wizardry even if they were looking straight at it. Nonetheless, these two were being careful. The tom-*ehhif* glanced back down the platform, saw Rhiow, and hesitated -- then said, "Cousin, we're on errantry, and we greet you --"

"I can see you're in a hurry," Rhiow said in the Speech. "Don't let me keep you, cousins." She strolled over to them, peering through the gate. Past the rainbow shimmer of its edges, Rhiow caught a glimpse of a reddish landscape, rocky and stark, under an indigo sky. "Mars?" she said.

"Morocco," the queen-*ehhif* said. "That earthquake."

"That *attempted* earthquake," her companion said. "We're going to go talk it out of it."

"Go well, cousins," Rhiow said. "And Iau on your side!" -- for the many variables associated with quakes made working with them a chancy business at best. The young woman waved at her; they stepped through.

A second later they were gone, and the worldgate snapped back into its normal configuration, the familiar interwoven structure of tightly laced hyperstrings, glowing and rippling in the darkness of the tunnel like a silken tapestry of light. This gate, at least, was behaving correctly -- serving its proper purpose of helping wizards get around without having to waste the universe's precious energy on individually-constructed transport spells. Rhiow sat up on her haunches and beckoned the gate a little closer. Obediently it drifted right to the edge of the platform, and Rhiow reached out, hooked her claws into the control-weave at the edge of the gate, and pulled it out taut.

The gate-strands caught in her claws glittered with light and symbology in the Speech, the worldgate's real-time diagnostics. It was working fine; the relocation of the Penn gates seemed to have had no effect on it all. ...*At the moment*, Rhiow thought. Worldgates were full of little surprises... but then, when you were dealing with a wizardry so complex, and one that got so much use by wizards other than the ones who maintained

it, this was only to be expected.

She took a moment to query the other two Grand Central gates via this one's control structure, but found nothing to concern her: all three were behaving as well as they ever did. *All right*, Rhiow thought. She let most of the hyperstrings snap back into the body of the gate structure, but kept a claw in one of them. This one she pulled toward her, twisting it to bring up one of the configurations she had long since laid into the gate for casual use.

The surface of the gate shivered again, paling away except at the bright-burning edges. The view was uninspiring -- a pocked, pale-beige travertine wall, shadowy even on such a bright day. Rhiow let that last string snap back into the gate-weave, gathered herself, and leapt through in the second and a half before the gate would revert to its standby state.

She came down at the foot of that wall and huddled against it for a moment, looking quickly to right and left. Distracted *ehhif* sometimes came tearing along here in a desperate hurry, running up from the nearest of Lincoln Center's many ticket windows and plunging around the corner ahead and to her left, making singlemindedly for the front doors of that high-arched and beautiful building where *ehhif* gathered to hear and sing astonishingly long and involved songs that were usually mostly about sex. *And then after five or six hours of it, they sit there and applaud even though there hasn't actually been any*, Rhiow thought, heading up around the corner herself. *Ehhif are so odd sometimes...*

At the moment, though, there was little traffic in the area. Rhiow got up and made her way down toward that corner herself, standing there for a few moments to enjoy both the breeze that came down through the ticket-window overpass, and the view. Before her the big circular fountain in front of the Metropolitan Opera danced in the westering sun in an ever-changing liquid-gold glitter, and many *ehhif* of both sexes sat on the broad rim of the fountain's basin, trying to get themselves as wet as possible. Rhiow looked right and left again, and couldn't see Urruah in any of his favorite places -- at the top of the steps in front of the Met's doors, out in the fountain plaza, or over by the plaza-side café on the ground floor of Avery Fisher Hall, where he liked to cadge goodies from the more cat-friendly tourists at the outdoor tables. *He's inside, then.*

Rhiow retraced her steps past the ticket window and under the overpass connecting the Met to the New York Public Library's music annex. Once out on the Amsterdam Avenue side she hung a left. There she found the big steel backstage doors predictably open, in this weather, regardless of security precautions, and the usual crowd of stagehands hanging around outside it with lit smokesticks in their hands, working hard to breathe in

more foul fumes than the City already thoughtfully provided. She flirted her tail in annoyance at one more example of human peculiarity as she stalked past them into the cool airy shadows of the backstage area. *If they had more than one life to waste, I could understand it, I suppose. But they don't.* Ehhif...!

The big backstage “fly” area, nearly four storeys high, was as usual full of scenery containers being pulled out of huge trucks and pushed back into them. Even an unsided Person could have found it easy enough to hide back here – and indeed, there were a number of People wandering here and there, either being chased or studiously ignored by the workers -- but Rhiow had neither need nor desire to unsidle in this stir and bustle of *ehhif* pulling the contents out of huge crates and stuffing them back into others. She glanced around.

“Up here, Rhi,” Urruah shouted. Rhiow looked around and up, as did numerous of the ehhif, who then shrugged when they couldn't see anything where the meowing noise seemed to be coming from, about thirty feet up against one of the backstage area's sheer concrete-block walls. But Rhiow could see where Urruah and Jath were waiting for her up on an outward-jutting structural I-beam. Rhiow spoke her “skywalking” variant of the Mason's Word spell and went up a stair of air to where they waited, meanwhile ignoring the shocked or annoyed glances of some of the other People in the area. It had taken her a while, early in her career, to get used to the idea that some People didn't approve of wizardry, or see the point in it, and some didn't even believe in it. She'd learned eventually not to allow this to affect her work, but sometimes she still found the weight of other People's regard on her fur an unwelcome addition to the day's burdens. Even now there were eyes looking at Rhiow from the shadows, behind crates or under tarpaulins, thoughtful, or angry, or filled with other more complex, more unwelcome emotions...

She flirted her tail carelessly and jumped up onto the beam, dismissing the wizardry. Jath was crouched down into a compact bundle of silvery gray, looking relaxed, and as self-satisfied as Urruah had warned her. She bent down to bump noses with him. “Are you rested, cousin? That was some work you did...”

“Rested enough,” he said. “Thanks, Rhiow. But business takes precedence, as usual...” He glanced behind him.

Aufwi was sitting there in front of Urruah, his tail curled up neatly around his toes, and maintaining a posture probably more formal than he strictly needed to use with a wizard who was simply acting in a supervisory capacity in his specialty, and not as an actual Advisory or Senior. It was a

courtesy in someone his age, only one life on and a few years into that, but there was really no need for it. To defuse it she went straight over and breathed breaths with him. “Aufwi,” she said, “long time no smell, cousin!” Her lips wrinkled back at the agreeable scent of fresh tuna. “Can that be *sushi*?”

“I had time for a snack before I came,” Aufwi said.

“Some snack,” Rhiow said. “The Eye can’t have been up more than an hour or two in LA, cousin! I wish more of *my* breakfasts were like that – “

“I moved into a hHaha’hnese restaurant,” Aufwi said. “They had a vermin problem...I solved it.” He looked smug. “And apparently my coloring’s lucky for them.”

That interested Rhiow. Aufwi was shorthaired and mostly white-furred, but also wore the occasional patch of red-brown or gray. “You need to tell me more about that when you have time,” Rhiow said. “But first tell me what brings you out all this way.”

“Well,” Aufwi said, “at first sniff, anyway, I’d say that the L.A. gate is finally trying to spawn.”

Rhiow blinked at that. “Iau’s name, I thought Great Rhoua would wink before *that* happened! Though I can’t say I mind being wrong. When did this start?”

“Just a few weeks ago,” Aufwi said. “At first I thought it was just another ‘false labor:’ you know how many of those we’ve had over the years. All these little shudders and discontinuities in the main gate’s function, they build up, they build up some more, and then...nothing!” His tail thumped in mild frustration, and some embarrassment: he’d reported quite a number of these “fleabites” to Rhiow over the past year and a half.

“But this has been different, I take it,” Rhiow said.

“A lot,” said Aufwi. “There hasn’t been anything small about *these* discontinuities. The gate’s connection to its power sources in the Downside starts wavering, as if something’s pulling power off it – “

“Which is impossible,” Urruah said, “under normal circumstances.” He gave Rhiow a look over Aufwi’s shoulder. Together they had lately been through some very non-normal circumstances involving their own gates, and power-loss or diversion had routinely been a symptom.

“But it always comes right back again,” Aufwi said, tilting one ear back at Urruah. “Then, right after that, you get a spacetime tremor somewhere in the neighborhood, never outside a thousand-meter radius. And never very big: just a little shallow gravitational dimple -- exactly the kind of thing you get when a new gate’s about to manifest. It even displays the right

kind of offset.” That was a peculiarity of new gates when they opened: they often pushed themselves a little off to one side of the largest local population concentration, rather than appearing right in the middle of it. “And then – “ His tail started to thrash.

“Nothing?” Rhiow said.

“Repeatedly,” said Aufwi. His green eyes narrowed with his annoyance: it was as if he thought this was all his fault somehow. “I can’t get rid of the idea that I’ve been doing something wrong at the management end.”

Over Aufwi’s shoulder, Urruah gave Rhiow a look that was half irony, half sympathy: once upon a time, he’d been full of such complaints himself, before Saash whacked him into some kind of confidence in his own abilities. “So far,” Urruah said, “it all sounds like it came right from the Whisperer to your ear. You can’t hurry a gate; especially not this one. We all know it’s had a peculiar developmental history. I can’t see any way you’ve misstepped.”

“You’re kind to say that,” Aufwi said. “But this last time – the day before yesterday – the pattern changed a little, and I started to get concerned. It took the main gate something like an hour to get back to normal – in terms of the power conduit to the Downside re-establishing itself – and that could have been big trouble, if I hadn’t been able to shut it down before anyone started a transit through it. Also, the gate jumped out of its normal position.”

“But it’s *always* doing that,” Urruah said.

Rhiow waved her tail in agreement: the LA gate was famously peripatetic for any worldgate associated with such a large population center. “It’s just that Los Angeles has never had enough people concentrated tightly enough together to convince the gate to put down a permanent spatial root,” she said. “The city’s so spread out...”

“Believe me, I know,” Aufwi said. “It’s the story of my life. Is the gate in Union Station today, or has it rolled over to Olvera Street again, or jumped over to Wilshire? I get a lot of exercise.” This time Aufwi at least looked amused as well as annoyed. “But this time it jumped a lot further than usual, right into Chavez Ravine. And it was *active* when it jumped.”

Jath abruptly glanced up, looking interested. “Were they playing?” he said.

Urruah blinked. “Playing what?”

“*Vh’aiss’svhall*,” Jath said.

Rhiow knew about the game, but only vaguely: it was something Iaehh often watched on the imagebox in the apartment. For the moment, though, her eyes widened as she thought of a live worldgate falling into a

stadium full of unsuspecting *ehhif*. “You caught it and brought it back, of course....”

“Sure. The gate’d gone quiescent again by then. But they could never find out what happened to the ball that the *ehhif* at bat hit into it—”

“How did they score that?” Jath said, actually sitting up as if the proceedings were now of some interest to him.

“A strike,” Aufwi said. “Foul tip.”

“Oh, now *that* doesn’t make any sense,” Jath said. “Was the gate in the *ss’hahium* when he hit the ball into it? Then it’s an *ihhn-hhark hhome-rrhun* – “

Rhiow closed her eyes briefly. *I will meet the seriously obsessed today*, she thought, belatedly starting the meditation she really should have done as soon as she got up. *I will meet toms intent on strange interspecies crosscultural activities, an intention mostly meant to distract them from the fact that they’re not having sex right this minute. They will sink the teeth of distraction into my scruff and seek to drag me places I have absolutely no desire to go, being fond of my sanity. Nonetheless I will keep my mind on my business and avoid slicing their ears to ribbons...at least until they’ve forgotten about my scruff and my potential butt, and started discussing oh’ra singers and pastrami and vh’aiss’s vhal scoring again.*

Down on the main floor, there came a small *bang!* of displaced air off to one side. Rhiow’s head snapped around, and so did many others of the *ehhif* down there; but after a moment all the *ehhif* who’d noticed went back to what they were doing, since what they’d heard had simply sounded like something being dropped on that hard concrete floor. When the second *bang!* happened, no one but the People in the room even bothered to look. A moment later Arhu came wandering around the back of one of the huge scenery-crates, and Siff’hah from behind another. Rhiow let out an amused breath. *But this was inevitable. I thought about pastrami...*

“Sorry,” Rhiow said, turning back to Aufwi. “Aufwi, forgive me; so strange a day we’ve had, my brains are still rattling inside my head as if the Queen had boxed my ears. You got the gate back into place – “

“Yes,” Aufwi said. “Fortunately it’s not hard to move, being so mobile by nature. But, Rhiow, these energy surges and displacements are starting to come closer together. If this gate’s going into real labor rather than these little contractions, we ought to shut it down for through transits until it gets on with its business. But I don’t have the authority for that.”

“I have,” Rhiow said. “But I should go have a look first: so you did right to bring the problem to me.” She glanced over at Urruah. “If we do need to shut it down,” she said, “San Francisco’s complex could take the

extra load for the time being, I'd think."

"They're not that busy up there," Urruah. "It should be no problem: and if it started to become one, Vancouver or Yucatan could assist."

Rhiow waved her tail in assent. "Let's go, then," she said. "Ruah?"

"Sure," he said, and got up, slipping past her and starting to walk down the air. "I've got a place over there in the back where I keep a little transit circle set up – "

"Not where any of *these* poor creatures can stumble onto it, I trust?" Rhiow called after him, trying not to sound too desperately concerned.

"Not more than one at a time," Urruah said. "Follow me, please..."

He went on down the air, with Jath after him. "Aufwi," Jath said over his shoulder, "when you're done there, come on back, I want to talk to you about this scoring thing..."

"I'm so sorry to have bothered you when you should have been resting," Aufwi said from behind Rhiow, sounding unnecessarily apologetic. "The Whisperer gave me a precis of what you were up to: I can't believe you're up and walking around after a piece of work like that..."

"Cousin, please, no more of it," Rhiow said, putting her whiskers forward. "You did exactly what you should have. And we don't see enough of you over here! Jath's right too – you should come and spend some non-business time with us...get to know our own gates a little, and work with the local teams. You haven't met Arhu and Siff'hah yet: come greet them. Urruah, where are we *going*, exactly?"

She got no immediate answer, for once down on the floor there followed a few moments of mixing and mingling, breaths being breathed and noses being bumped. Rhiow stepped away after a few seconds and let her team get on with it, thinking that she really must make sure that Aufwi came out to do a brief internship with one or another of the New York teams, preferably her own. His previous senior, Fefssuh, had been easygoing and knowledgeable, but so very senior and set in his ways – Aufwi had come to work with him when Fefssuh was almost twelve – that Aufwi had had too little time or opportunity to develop much in the way of initiative or self-confidence. And those were qualities vital in a gate technician. *A week or two with Arhu will sort that out*, Rhiow thought. *Maybe when summer's done and we've settled his gate down –*

"You slept in today," Arhu said, falling beside Rhiow as she went after Urruah, toward the back of the fly area.

"You could have done the same," Rhiow said. "For a change."

"I hate to miss anything," Arhu said, glancing around.

"Nothing much to miss," said Siff'hah, slipping around to bracket

Rhiow on the other side. It was a game of theirs, Rhiow had been noticing: each of them would get up close to one of your ears, and then they would start passing their opinions back and forth through your head. “Look at this crowd,” Siff’hah said, glancing scornfully around. “They all think we’re *fflah*.”

It was one of many words Rhiow had never heard until she started listening to Arhu and Siff’hah trying to verbally or physically shred one another’s ears. Ailurin, like any other language, had slang, but these days it seemed to be changing faster than Rhiow could keep track of. This word, at least, she could tell wasn’t complimentary.

“Not all of them,” Arhu said. “Rhi, you have fans.”

His tone, on the surface, was teasing: but there was something a little uneasy about it as well. Rhiow flirted an unconcerned tail at him. “Around here I wouldn’t be too concerned about that,” she said. “I daresay they’ve got more than enough shes to keep them busy in this neighborhood, and not *sth’heih* ones, either.” It was the Ailurin word that best translated the ehhif concept “spayed.”

“Not all of them care,” Arhu said. “Looks like some People don’t care whether a queen smells *shaih* or not – “

She turned around in mid-step and cuffed Arhu hard, then instantly regretted it. *I might have slept in, but not enough, perhaps...* “Mend your language, kit,” she said, turning back to continue following in Urruah’s wake: but as she turned she caught the glance that Arhu had caught, from the darkness deep inside one of the unloaded scenery crates. Pale eyes, wide, looking at her with an expression she could make nothing of: as if she was some kind of bizarre alien creature, dangerous but nonetheless peculiarly desirable –

She looked away, walked a little faster. “Like I said,” Arhu said under his breath.

“Don’t judge,” Rhiow said under her breath. “We have comfortable enough lives, and we know what we’re for, and have work to do that we enjoy. Who knows if *that* Person does? Who knows what he suffers, or enjoys, without talking to him? There’s more to a life than the way it looks. Don’t make decisions about him just because he stares.”

Arhu flirted his tail at her in that I-don’t-care way he had when he *did* care, but didn’t feel like pressing his case with her. She rolled her eyes and went on along behind Jath, following him and Urruah over to the far back corner of the fly area, down a little low-ceilinged concrete-walled hallway, and through a small open door.

Rhiow stopped there, looking in shock at the furnishings of the room,

which consisted of two ceramic receptacles, one on the floor and one on the wall. “Urruah,” she said. “In their *toilet*?”

“No fear of a crowd of them walking into *this* transit circle, is there?” Urruah said, cheerful. The wizardry blazed up through the white square-tiled floor as they watched.

“Your ingenuity knows no bounds,” Rhiow said, and this was true, though the Speech itself didn’t necessarily have to convey her sarcasm as well. “Aufwi?”

Aufwi stepped on the circle and spoke to it briefly in the Speech, laying in the required coordinates. “Let’s go...”

All it took was a step, and then everything was changed: from the harsh white glare of a single downhanging bulb, and the strange decayed-violet smell of old *ehhif siss*, to the glare of bright direct sun under a peculiarly open-seeming sky, and a wind laden with the sharp bimetallic taste of city-by-the-sea, as well as a brown hint of smog. Rhiow glanced around her to see if someone was about to trip over her, but no *ehhif* were anywhere near: the plaza in which they all stood was a near-empty desert of blazing white paving.

Without warning, Aufwi began to curse. Rhiow looked at him in surprise, and Arhu and Siff’hah stared, for his vocabulary was starting to resemble theirs in both filthiness and vehemence. He caught Rhiow’s look, though, and tried to restrain himself. “It’s just not fair,” Aufwi said, his tail lashing furiously and his ears down near-flat. “Where’s the *vhai’d* thing gone *now*??”

“What?” Rhiow said. “The gate? You didn’t leave it out *here*, did you?”

“Of course not! But I can feel that it’s not where I *did* leave it!” Aufwi stared all around him, as if expecting the gate to pop up through the ground. “It was inside the station, down by the Red Line tracks. I’ve been trying to train it by putting it back in the same spot every time it jumps...”

Urruah laughed, that ironic sound of his again. “Might work with a gate that’s part of a complex and has some rootedness associated with it,” he said, “but not with one that hasn’t spawned yet. Nice try, though. Take a breath and see if you can feel where it’s gone.”

Aufwi glanced over at Urruah and then relaxed, his ears gradually coming up and his whiskers going forward. Rhiow found herself wondering how easygoing Fefssuh had actually been with his protégé when his

supervisors, of whom Rhiow was merely the latest, were not around. *How many times has this kit had his ears boxed for something that wasn't his fault, I wonder? I really must see about that internship...*

Aufwi had gone a little unfocused for the moment, hunting in mind for his gate. Rhiow left him to it, turning to look around the plaza. Here, too, the *ehhif* weekend meant that few human commuters were around, and there was leisure to admire the broad handsome vista of new buildings spreading back from the central, old one, a massive white stucco structure with its peaked roof done in red tile, accompanied by a massive white campanile clock-tower. This place had become nearly moribund once, years before Rhiow's time: it had actually seen a time when only two trains a *day* came through it. Then the city's *ehhif* saw sense and started to rebuild their local rail system, routing it through here and awakening Union Station from its long slumber.

"It's all right," Aufwi said then. "I've got it. It's as I thought: it's slipped over to Olvera Street again. It likes it there," he said, turning to Rhiow. "That's the oldest part of the city, and it seems kind of torn as to where it wants to be – over there, or over here in the oldest transport center."

Rhiow put her whiskers forward, for here once again was fuel for that oldest debate: were gates alive? Wizardries so complex often started to display some of the characteristics of life – they required energy, they reacted to stimuli, they reproduced – and, especially in the case of worldgates, they seemed to start to acquire some sense of what they were for. "Is it far?" she said.

"Just across the street," Aufwi said. "Come on."

He led the way across the plaza to where it ended in a drop-off space for cars and buses, and a set of traffic lights. The distance was what for Rhiow would have been more like four or five short city blocks: but out here, *ehhif* built their roads on a larger scale than Manhattan would ever have allowed. They waited for the traffic roaring by to cease, and then trotted hurriedly across the six lanes to the long line of handsome white buildings on the far side.

There were far more *ehhif* over here, even at this time of the morning; Aufwi led Rhiow and the group in the wake of some of them, under a high wide white-stucco arch and through into a long pedestrianized space, itself like a small street sheltered on both sides by a double line of stucco buildings, mostly low and red-tiled, though much older-looking than Union Station had been.

"This looks like it's been here for a while," Urruah said, glancing up and down the pedestrian precinct, and sniffing. Down to their left, a long

line of little stalls in the middle of the precinct stretched down toward its far end: and some of them, to judge by the scent of grills firing up, were getting ready to open for business.

“A few hundred years,” Aufwi said. He was sniffing too, but for something else. “A long time, as *ehhif* here reckon it – they don’t seem to have been able to keep much else from that period around. Torn down, or buried, or just worn out and forgotten... Aha! There we are. Same as last time – “

He led them down toward the center of the pedestrian precinct, past shops hung with bright-colored ornaments, past splashing fountains and old adobe houses festooned with lush green grapevines. In a mostly-paved circle at the heart of it all stood pedestals bearing statues of formal-looking *ehhif* of ancient days: these alternated with tall handsome trees whose downsweeping branches and leaves gave off a spicy fragrance. There, under one of the biggest trees, on the south side of the circle, Rhiow caught the daylight-subdued shimmer of a sheet of interwoven hyperstrings. The worldgate hung there apparently from a branch of the tree that was outthrust about eight feet from the ground, looking for all the world like some *ehhif*'s laundry hung out to dry.

“Now *there* you are,” Aufwi said to the gate, stalking over to it, and then walking slowly around it and looking it over carefully. “How am I supposed to take proper care of you when you misbehave like this? Huh?”

Rhiow turned her head away so that Aufwi wouldn’t see her put her whiskers so far forward that they were in danger of falling right off. “Aufwi,” Urruah said, and Rhiow could hear him struggling to keep his own laughter under control, “maybe you could take a moment off from scolding your problem child to pull out the diagnostic structures and take it offline. Then we can have a look and see what seems to be biting it.”

It was Aufwi’s turn to laugh, then. “Sure,” he said, and reared up on his haunches, reaching up to the downhanging gateweave –

Something kicked the world, *hard*.

At least that was Rhiow’s first sense of what was happening. It was like being in a building that had been hit by a truck. But they were not in a building, and there were no trucks, and the shock nevertheless went right up through her legs and jolted her so that she nearly fell over where she stood. Half in panic, she staggered and tried to get back her balance, staring around at the others. Arhu and Siff’hah were crowded together, half supporting each other, their ears back and all their fur standing on end: Urruah’s tail was fluffed out to easily five times its normal size: Jath’s eyes were so wide that Rhiow thought they were going to pop out of his head.

“What in the Queen’s Name was *that*?” Rhiow said, shaking all over as she managed to stand upright again.

“Just a little one,” Aufwi said. Not only had he not fallen over, he was still up on his haunches with his claws in the gate’s strings: as she watched, he pulled out the “master function” hyperstring and twisted it until the weave of the gate faded to nearly nothing in the bright air, signaling its deactivated mode. “No problem.”

Rhiow’s eyes went wide. “That was an earthquake? A *little* earthquake? Powers that Be preserve us from a *big* one!”

“That’s what we’re working on,” Aufwi said. The sheerly unruffled quality of his demeanor astonished her. *He gets nervous about being yowled at a little, but the world moves under him and he just shrugs his tail?* Rhiow thought. “Seriously, Rhiow, that one wasn’t bad. I’d make it no more than, oh, a four point five.” His face was as casual as that of a Person asked to rate a given brand of People food. “These little short-sharp-shock ones are no big deal: one bang and it’s all over. You want a *quake*, you want one of the ones where the ground sort of rolls underneath you, the ones with the big transverse waves—”

“I do *not* want them,” Rhiow said, “*any* of them, thank you very much!” She looked all around her. “I thought I heard some things falling—”

“Oh, sometimes a piece of stucco’ll fall off down here,” Aufwi said. “But not much more. The *ehhif* who built these houses down here, they were smart – they knew what they were dealing with. Nothing more than a storey or two high, small windows, long low buildings that hug the ground so there’s not so far to fall—”

“They’ll have felt this where the buildings are a lot taller,” Urruah said, glancing westward to where the towers and spires of “downtown” Los Angeles rose.

Aufwi put his head to one side, listening to the Whisperer. “No serious damage,” he said after a moment. “Some cracks in walls, some minor injuries from things falling on People or *ehhif*. And things look all right around here.” He looked up at the bright sky, waved his tail. “Just another day in Paradise...”

Rhiow had her doubts that this was anything like Timeheart, either the *ehhif* version or her own, if such occurrences were commonplace. And without warning, the hair stood up all over her again. *Oh, stop that, what’s the matter with me today –*

Something kicked the world again: and this time, the kick felt *much* harder. Rhiow’s heart felt like it was seizing inside her. Knowing what was happening wasn’t making the experience any easier to deal with: it was

making it *worse*. Rhiow wanted to yowl in terror, and just managed to restrain herself as she staggered for balance. *Iau Queen of Everything, help me hang on --*

“Aftershock – !” Aufwi said, as Rhiow and the others tried to keep from falling over. “Don’t worry, just four point one or so that time – “

In front of them, the near-invisible gate shivered all over like the back of a Person who’d been bitten by a flea. The gate’s weft writhed, puckered, writhed again –

Someone came through and fell to the ground.

They all stared.

It was a Person. He was black all over, nearly as black as Rhiow, but exposure to much sun or the natural cast of his coat was letting all the usually-concealed tabby markings show through the darkness of the fur. He was dusty and rather thin, a long-faced, long-legged tom with tilted brass-yellow eyes. “Oh, thank Iau,” he said, gasping as if with exertion as he picked himself up, “I got it right. I didn’t want to keep you waiting. I didn’t, did I? There’s no time to lose – “

He had the air of a Person hanging on with every claw to keep himself from going frantic. His tongue went in and out over his nose three or four times in a row as he tried to get his composure, staring around him. “But it’s really going to be all right now,” the tom said then, looking from one to another of them, and last of all his eyes came to rest on Rhiow. “I made it. I’m here. I’m on errantry, and in need and haste I greet you – “

It was a form of the Avedictory that Rhiow had only rarely heard used -- the one meant to convey utmost urgency. “Cousin,” she said, “tell us your name, and tell us how we can help you.”

“Hwaith,” he said. “I’m Hwaith. Our gate is malfunctioning, the LA gate – “

“But it’s fine,” Aufwi said, glancing up at it.

“The kind of fine that means People can come through it after you’ve shut it down?” Urruah said. “I’d say that is the *wrong* kind of fine.”

But Hwaith was already lashing his tail “no”. “Not that one,” he said, and licked his nose again, nervous. “*My Los Angeles gate.*”

Rhiow’s eyes went wide. “Hwaith, you’ve timeslid, haven’t you? When are you from?”

“2432022.873981,” Hwaith said.

At the sound of the middle three digits before the decimal point, Rhiow blinked, then said silently to the Whisperer, *Would you check me on this?*

A twenty-digit conversion was slipped into her mind, including

cognates in *ehhif* and cetacean eras. Rhiow blinked again. *Are you sure?* she said silently.

Inside her head, the Mistress of the Whispering made a small demure coughing sound like someone giving polite warning that she was getting ready to dispose of a hairball, or a ridiculous question. *Sorry*, Rhiow said, for one did not casually query the soundness of the advice of Hrau’f the Silent when on errantry. *Sorry, just a reflex...*

“That would be nineteen forty-six, as the *ehhif* make it,” Rhiow said. “Cousin, you know the rules about front-timing – “

“And you know it’s impossible in the first place if someone from the front-time hasn’t given you the necessary coordinates and conditionals,” he said. “You did that. *Will* do it.”

“Not without a fair amount of explaining,” Urruah said.

“And the Powers have sanctioned it,” Hwaith said. “Otherwise I wouldn’t be here. Please, cousins, you’re needed to put right what’s gone wrong! You’re the *answer*.”

This response left Rhiow, as usual, very unnerved as to the possible nature of the question. But at least this was a nervousness she knew what to do about – unlike having the Earth move under her. “What’s needed, Hwaith?” she said. “What’s the problem?”

He looked at her for a moment as if wondering where to begin. “Something’s trying to subvert our gate,” he said. “Something that wants to use it for its own purposes.”

Jath looked annoyed. “The Lone Power,” he said.

“*Again*,” Arhu and Siff’hah said in cranky and slightly bored-sounding unison.

“No!” Hwaith said.

They all stared at him. “No,” Hwaith said again. “Something else. Something worse.”

“Worse than the *Lone One*?” Rhiow said, astounded.

Hwaith let out a long breath and sat down, his tail thumping on the ground. “Much worse,” he said. “Something from *outside*.”

Rhiow sat down too, the world rocking under her in a way that had nothing to do with the San Andreas Fault, but was nonetheless not much of an improvement. “Tell us,” she said...