

FOUR

Rhiow looked down the length of the valley where they stood, into a hazy darkness that glittered faintly. Spread out before them like a broad carpet, stretching away to a dimly-seen horizon, were city lights; but the color of the glittering light was strangely white and cool, and not nearly as bright as she would have expected. As Rhiow watched, the light seemed to dim almost to nothing in patches, then brighten again. Rhiow realized she was seeing the city's light through a haze of what at first glance looked like low cloud.

Just behind her, Arhu was sniffing. "Smog," he said under his breath. Helen let out a long breath, looking around her. "Even before there were cars and factories," Helen said, "the People living down there called it 'the Valley of the Smokes...'. The inversion layer'll hold anything down that comes up from sea level: even our campfires were enough to do it." She shook her head, looking down the valley again. "And it's a long time before the clean-air legislation starts to cut in. But there's still a lot more in the air than just hydrocarbons and ozone..."

Rhiow, scenting it, had to agree. It was strange to be right above a city, and yet be standing in air so strongly scented with orange blossom, almond blossom, citrus, the corky, woody scent of walnut...

"And I see what it is now," Helen said, sitting down on a nearby fallen trunk of a scrub oak. "About the light. It's strange not to see the sodium-vapor lights we've got in our own time. You get used to city light being a lot brighter, and very orange..."

"Sodium vapor?" Hwaith, sitting nearby in the shadow of a manzanita, flirted his tail. "No, those are a good ways downtime from us, I'd say. The *ehhif* here are using incandescent bulbs with little tin reflectors over them."

“I’m a little disoriented,” Rhiow said to Hwaith. “I think I smell morning coming, but it’s hard to tell – “

“You’re right,” Hwaith said. “The Eye will be up in about three hours, but the skyglow’s obscured by the mist this time of year, and the city lights confuse things. Downhill from us southward. And over to the left is my badly-behaved friend...”

There, hanging and wavering gently in midair in the shadow of several skeletal gray-needled pines, was this time’s version of the LA gate. Rhiow looked at it for a moment, and got an odd feeling as she did so; there was something almost uneasy about the way it was rippling, not in the usual steady rhythm, but with a kind of shiver interfering intermittently with the ripples. “It doesn’t *look* right,” she said.

“No,” Urruah said, “it doesn’t. The chroma of the weft looks way off.” He glanced over at Aufwi. “You know this gate better than any of our group does, though – “

Aufwi lashed his tail. “Definitely looks sickly,” he said. “Much too blue in the crests of those ripples. It’s a look mine’s been getting lately...”

“I’ve seen that blueshift before,” Rhiow said, getting up again and going over for a closer look. “You get it when something’s interfering with a gate’s control structures...usually some change in the local matrix it’s sunk into. In this case, it’s sunk into a spot it wasn’t intended to be, and the last group of settings are arguing with the new location.”

“More than that,” Urruah said. “See the way the waves are canceling each other here and there?” He sat up on his haunches, looking at the gate. “Two, three...four places. Hwaith, your problem child’s trying to put down more roots.”

“It kept trying to do that before,” Hwaith said, sounding furious. “That’s why I was reluctant to leave it for even such a short time.”

“We’ll pull them up,” Urruah said, “and then try to get a sense of why it’s doing this. May I?”

“Please,” Hwaith said, “don’t stand on ceremony! You’ve come a long way to do just that. Just tell me if you need help.”

Rhiow put her whiskers forward, relieved that Hwaith wasn’t going to get all possessive; all she needed right now was to find herself at the wrong end of time with another version of Jath on her paws. “Now,” she said, “all we have to do is find out why this has been starting to happen to your gate, so that we can keep it from happening to ours...”

Not ‘all’, said the quiet voice in the back of Rhiow’s head.

Rhiow flicked an ear. Hwaith gave her an odd look as she turned away from him. *Whisperer*, she said silently, *if you have any hints for me, now's the time.*

No hints today, said the Mistress of the Whispering. *We're all in the dark here together. If you turn up anything that seems germane to the Powers, believe me, I'll mention it. But none of our first guesses or assumptions are likely to be good enough to rely on; and finding out what lies at the root of this gate's trouble, and yours, is going to make all the difference between life and...something else..*

Rhiow licked her nose several times, very fast, as the Silent One fell silent again. "Sorry -- " she said to Hwaith, turning back to him.

"She doesn't sound very encouraging, does She," he said.

"You caught that?"

He flicked his tail in a gesture of mild annoyance, looked away. "I do hear things, unfortunately," Hwaith said. "It was my first specialty after Ordeal: not the Eye, but the Ear. I could never really control it, though, which is why I went into gate work as soon as there was an opening." He looked at Rhiow again, apologetic. "Please excuse me: it's not intentional...and when She speaks in that tone of voice, it's hard to avoid hearing Her."

"I wouldn't argue that point," Rhiow said, looking away to watch Urruah reach out and sink his claws into the edges of the gate's weft, hooking them into its control webs. He pulled, and the predictable tangled lines of light stretched out and away from the gate proper. "Is it just me," Rhiow said, "or do those threads look...I don't know...*thinner* than usual?"

"It's not just you," Hwaith said. He licked his nose once or twice, nervous: and Aufwi looked over at Rhiow and Hwaith and said, "This is something my gate's been doing too. It's been sporadic, though, and I haven't been able to get it to repeat so that I can do a diagnostic..."

"Got some trouble here," Urruah said then, and the steady way he said it brought the fur up all over Rhiow.

"What?" she said, getting up and trotting over.

"No," Urruah said, "nothing you need to do anything about right this second. We're going to need a few extra paws in a little bit, though." He bent in close, seized a bundle of the glowing gate-strings in his teeth, and reached in with the freed-up paw to hook another tangle of them with his claws. "This thing hasn't just put down one root. It's got *five* now."

Hwaith hissed, swearing in helpless anger. "It's not going to do any good pulling them up one at a time," he said. "It'll just re-root one of them while we're working on the next."

“We can each take one,” Rhiow said. “Ruah, are the roots sinking themselves nearby?”

It looked as if the knotted mass of hyperstrings was resisting him, trying to snap back into the gate. He lashed his tail “no”. “They’re spread out,” he said. “South, east, southeast, southwest of here. Take a look – “

Urruah bit deeper into the hyperstring bundle he was holding in his teeth. Sudden bright strings of light shot out from the base and edges of the gate-weave, seeming to lance down into the dimly glittering cityscape like laser light, the only difference being that physical objects didn’t stop them. They resumed on the other side, in one case going straight through a hillcrest and down into the landscape below.

“One’s a little stronger than the others,” he said. “That one going through the hill. Maybe it’s been there a touch longer – hard to tell. But they’re all going to have to come up at once.”

Rhiow flicked her tail. “How are you for power at the moment?” she said to Hwaith. “Did we catch you at the end of your work day, or the beginning?”

He let out a breath. “I’m tired enough,” he said, “but I won’t drop what I grab hold of a moment before anyone else does. Let’s go.”

“Ruah, I’ll take that older root,” Rhiow said, heading over toward it. “Hwaith, the one next to mine, running down the canyon. Aufwi, the one past that. Arhu, the last one. Sif, you stand by and lend power if you sense anyone slipping.”

Everyone headed to the string Rhiow had indicated for each of them, and bit down on it or hooked their claws around it. “Can I do anything to help?” Helen said.

“Lend Sif a paw if there’s need,” Rhiow said. She bit down on her own string, pulling back a little and testing it. With the pull she got a clearer sense of the structures into which it was trying to root – the stone of some other hillside, cracked, unstable-feeling – and something else that concerned her more: an odd sour stink or flavor, unpleasant. It reminded Rhiow of something, but she couldn’t think what. *And now it’s going to make me crazy for days until I remember. Where’s that coming from, though? You don’t usually get taste associations on hyperstrings --* “Let us know when you’re set,” she said.

“Just a moment more,” Urruah said. All along and across the web of the gate, hyperstrings flickered and vibrated as if someone was plucking them; beads and streaks of multicolored fire chased up and down the threads as Urruah made final adjustments in the master web of the gate, securing its

structure before starting to pull any roots loose. “All right,” he said then. “Everybody – *pull!*”

Rhiow set her teeth hard, ignoring the sudden increase in that odd stink, and started backing away from the gate. The string she was biting resisted her more aggressively, but she kept on backing away – this being only the physical component of the actual stress Rhiow was bringing to bear on the hyperstring, the pressure of the mind and of the necessary words in the Speech, all bent toward persuading it to give up, let go, stop being so attached... But the resistance increased. *This attachment suits me*, the string told her, in the stubborn, silent manner of a construct refusing to answer to the desires of a wizard who hadn’t put it there. *I was told to root here, and here I will stay.*

I have rightful authority over you, Rhiow thought in the Speech: *I am sent to you on errantry by the Powers that Be, and it’s proper that you obey my intent!* But the root-string was having none of it. It sought to anchor itself deeper in that down-canyon ground, even as Rhiow pulled at it. The strange muddy stink in her nostrils got stronger as it did, and Rhiow could also feel something else through the far end of the string – a shiver, a tremor, rumbling, growing: the memory of a recent earthquake. And one trying not to be just a memory –

She shivered all over, but she kept her grip. Around her she could sense the others having a similar problem: Urruah’s temper wanting to flare, but being suppressed; Arhu annoyed at anything being able to resist his intention, still unusually powerful in a wizard so near his Ordeal; Aufwi alarmed at the string’s refusal to respond: Hwaith surprisingly cool and certain as he stepped back and back with his own string. *Well, it’s his own gate, after all. But he doesn’t seem to be having any better luck than the rest of us. This doesn’t look good --*

From outside the group, Siff’hah said, “Rhiow – “

She was tempted to tell Siff’hah to throw all the power she had at one or another of the roots – for dividing her effort among them seemed unlikely to do much good at this point. *But what if doing that unbalances the whole gateweave? It might tear loose and run out of control, like Aufwi’s did –* Or else the gate might just tear apart, possibly even shred under the strain altogether. That didn’t bear thinking about, for worldgates, even a singleton gate like this one, had a tremendous amount of power wrapped up in them. Release all that energy at once, and local space and subspace were both at risk of becoming deranged – as was the matter they contained.

Either way, the tack they were taking at the moment apparently wasn’t getting them anywhere, and they were going to have to consider other

possibilities. *Sif*, Rhiow said silently, *start a mapping routine. We need to see in which exact spots those roots are sinking themselves, so we can go down there afterwards and understand the whys as well as the wheres.* She was careful not to say *After this doesn't work*: there was always the possibility something might yet give in their favor, that the gate would see sense and do as it was told --

Doing it now, Siff'hah said. *Think we're going to need it, too --*

Rhiow said nothing. Her whole business at the moment was to hang onto her string and watch what Urruah did as he manipulated the strings held in teeth and claws. Her own words came back to her suddenly: *I'm not going to do this job forever...* She sank her teeth more tightly into her string, pulled harder. *Now what made me say that to him right then? Maybe I was just tired.* Yet one way or another, there was some truth to it. She might be a wizard until the day she kicked this life's skin away behind her and moved on to the next one: but she wasn't required to do the same kind of work all that while. *Even specialties don't have to be forever. And the Powers understand that sometimes you need a break from the routine --*

That strange mind-stink from the hyperstring was beginning to bother her. Rhiow wanted mightily to sneeze, but that was the last thing she was going to allow herself to do at the moment, when it could upset someone else's concentration. She wrinkled her nose, then her whole muzzle, in an attempt to disrupt the coming sneeze. It worked for a moment, but then the stink started to itch in her nostrils again. *I will not*, she thought, *I will not, as Iau's my witness, I will not --*

"Anybody making any progress?" Urruah said, though from his tone of voice Rhiow thought he already knew the answer.

"Not moving!" Arhu said.

"The thing's locked down," Aufwi said. "Some kind of compulsion --"

Urruah glanced over at Hwaith. Hwaith, hanging on, simply lashed his tail angrily, tried to take one more step back, failed --

"Then ease up, all," Urruah said. "Let's stop and think --"

Everyone slowly started to give way to the backward pull of the gate-root he or she was holding. Rhiow could feel something peculiar down the string as she stopped exerting pressure against it: an odd sense of -- not satisfaction, but relief. And not from the root, but from the gate itself: as if it knew perfectly well it was the object of contention between two different forces, and was glad to see the contention stop, because it was -- frightened? *Frightened, not of the other -- but of us?*

When Rhiow was close enough to the gate, she opened her jaws, and the root-string snapped back hard the instant she let it go. Urruah let go of the bundles of strings he was holding and dropped to his forefeet again, his ears back flat.

“Well,” Arhu said, “*that* was a whole lot of nothing! What’s the matter with the thing? Doesn’t it know we’re on its side, and it’s supposed to do what we ask it?”

“Good question,” Urruah said. He sat down, his tail lashing. “Something else for us to look into. Hwaith, has the gate been openly uncooperative this way with you before?”

“Never,” Hwaith said. He sounded mortified.

“Well, it doesn’t matter. I don’t think we should waste any more time trying to disengage those roots from here,” Urruah said. “Our effort’s being attenuated by our distance from the actual spaces they’re affecting.”

Rhiow flicked an ear in agreement. “We’re going to have to go to the separate locations where they’ve sunk themselves in,” she said, “and pull them up from there, one at a time. And while we do that, someone’s going to have to stay up here and keep the gate from putting down new roots in response. And if it does, try to get a sense of what’s making it behave that way.”

“I know its structures pretty well,” Aufwi said. “Probably that’s me.” He looked over at Hwaith. “If you don’t mind – “

Hwaith swung his tail “no”. “I think I’m more likely to be needed as a ‘native guide,’” he said.

Siff’hah came strolling over then, with Helen Walks Softly close behind. “I have your root locations for you,” she said to Rhiow, and put one white paw out a little ahead of her, resting it on a bare patch on the dusty reddish ground. From her paw, delicate lines of light fled away in all directions, describing in miniature a duplicate of the faintly glittering street-structure below them. They all gazed down at it, and Helen hunkered down by it and gazed down at the four small pulsing golden lights that burned on the little map. A larger white one pulsed up in the darkest part of the wizardly map, amid the hills.

“All right,” Helen said, pointing at the nearest of the golden lights south of them. “*That* one I know. That’s Hollywood Boulevard and – yeah, Highland Avenue, see the way it doglegs north of Franklin? There’s a lot of new building there now, but – “ and she waved a little further down the street-line to where that golden light burned – “*that’s* still where it belongs. Mann’s Chinese Theater.”

“You mean Grauman’s,” said Hwaith. “Who’s ‘Mann’?”

“Uh, long story,” Helen said.

“Au,” Urruah said, “*Grauman’s* -- !” He went from wearing the ears-back expression of an annoyed gate technician to the whiskers-forward of some kind of excited arts fan, an expression Rhiow had seen a thousand times before. “You’re going to tell me that that they do opera there, I suppose,” she said.

Urruah turned one of those stricken, don’t-tell-me-you-have-no-idea-what-I’m-talking-about looks on her. “You’re kidding me,” he said, “surely! Even *you* have to have heard about the place – “

“Somehow the Whisperer neglected to bring me up to date,” Rhiow said, trying to sound severe.

“It’s a place where *ffilhm* was shown,” he said. “Maybe the greatest *ffilhm* showplace of this time. The *ehhif* stars would come here when their *ffilhms* were premiered, and walk down a red carpet, and put their handprints in cement – “

“And after all the trouble we went through to get them up off all fours,” Rhiow said, torn between annoyance and bemusement, “tell me *why* in Iau’s name they’re so eager to get down on them again? But, no, please, don’t tell me *now*, because I know it’s going to happen later no matter how I try to avoid it – “

“Hey, I had no idea you were a fan,” Hwaith said to Urruah, looking surprised. “When we get this gate settled, I’ll take you down there. I know some of the backstage toms. They keep asking me why don’t I– “

O Queen Iau, Rhiow thought, help me keep my claws sheathed and my temper in one piece! Is this why most of the really good gate techs are queens? Toms just can not focus for more than the time it takes to eat something or kill something – She opened her mouth.

Then Rhiow closed it again, as startled as everyone else by the sudden sound of Siff’hah hissing softly. Urruah and Hwaith both turned to stare at her. “I am *not* holding this imaging spell here for my health, you two!” Siff’hah said. “Hhel’hen, do you know what those other lights are, or are we going to have to stimulate these *sheihss*’s thought processes a little?”

Claws were now very visible jutting out from the paw that held the wizardry in place, and Sif’s eyes were pits of solid, furiously dilated darkness in the dim light. Helen leaned over the map, wearing what for an *ehhif* would have been only the smallest of smiles, as Urruah and Hwaith fell quite abruptly silent, and Arhu looked up into the darkness with an expression of complete innocence and uninvolvedness. Rhiow kept her whiskers back for the moment, though she was amused.

“Well, up here close to us – “ Helen was tracing one curving, switchbacking road with a forefinger: the road went bright where her finger had been. “This isn’t my normal patrol area: I’m normally down in Wilshire and Central, and these roads are hard to keep straight...but not many of them go all the way across to the Valley. So that has to be either Laurel Canyon or Coldwater Canyon...”

“It’s Laurel,” Hwaith said. He peered at the light that shone just off to one side of it. “That cross street, the little one running up the side canyon...that should be Prospect Trail... No, Highland Trail. Either way, it’s interesting, because that was the epicenter of two of our earthquakes last week...”

“Was it now,” Rhiow said softly, looking over his shoulder.

“Not much built up yet, by the looks of things,” Helen said.

“No. There are a few old houses, and a new mansion: some *ehhif* involved with real estate in the Midwest built that before the *Hurw’sshehhif*.” It was the Ailurin term for what *ehhif* called their Second World War.

“That’s going to be worth looking at, perhaps,” Helen said. “And this, down here by the ocean – “

“The *ehhif* call that ‘Santa Monica’,” Hwaith said. “Lots of houses, some of the big *ffihlm* studios have lots near there...”

“Any quakes there?” Urruah said.

“Not recently,” said Hwaith. “But some months back we had one.”

Helen nodded. “And then there’s this.” She reached out to point at another spot, more westerly and closer to the hills. “Those two six-point intersections are kind of hard to miss. Sunset Boulevard, where Beverly and Crescent cross each other?”

“That’s right,” Hwaith said, peering more closely at the map.

“That’s the Beverly Hills Hotel in your time?”

“Oh yes,” Hwaith said, “but it doesn’t look like the hotel’s the marked spot, does it – “ He put one of his own paws on the map: the streetscape enlarged, but the light stayed the same size, relocating itself as the map changed. “No, it’s one of those little streets behind it. Rochdale, I think. Now why under the Eye would the gate be wanting to put a root down *there*?”

Or why would it be told to? Rhiow thought. “But it doesn’t matter,” Hwaith said. “I know a Person very close to there who knows everything that goes on inside that place.”

“Perhaps you might introduce us,” Rhiow said.

“As soon as we’re done here, I’ll take you right down,” Hwaith said. “The time of day’s no issue: there are People in and out of her place by light or night. And whoever else is interested should come too...though I assume we’re going to be splitting up to check out the root locations separately.”

“It makes most sense, I’d guess,” Urruah said. He glanced up at Helen. “Maybe you want to choose the one where an *ehhif* wizard could come by the most information,” he said.

Helen looked at the map. “Hard to say where that might be,” she said. But as Rhiow watched her, Helen slipped a hand inside her shirtfront and touched something hidden there that hung from her throat. For a second she held very still.

Though no words of the Speech were spoken aloud, to Rhiow there was no mistaking the slight scent of some kind of *ehhif* wizardry on the air. Faintly Rhiow thought she heard something odd in the middle distance, like sticks cracking or snapping. *No*, she thought then, as she smelled smoke, and glanced around her quickly. *Like fire in brush*. But there wasn’t any fire --

Then Rhiow was jolted out of her analysis by the raucous noise of some kind of bird braying at them all from up in a nearby pine tree. It was an extraordinary noise, suggesting something mechanical rather than biological, and something that needed a session in the shop and a lube job, at that.

Hwaith laughed under his breath, a little audible trill. “Dawn’s coming,” he said. “The jays always know.”

“*That* was a bluejay?” Arhu said, looking up into the tree, and licking his chops.

“Not one of your little eastern ones,” Hwaith said. “This one’s a crow relative.”

“The melodious voice,” Rhiow said, “is a giveaway.” She sighed. “Well, we should get moving. Aufwi, Hwaith, is this gate likely to move if we leave it here?”

They both waved their tails “no”. “It seems like all its intent’s to stay right where it is,” Aufwi said. “For the moment, that seems just as well. Of course we’ll have to put up some kind of bounding spell to keep it hidden, and keep *ehhif* and everything else away from it.”

“We’ll take care of that,” Arhu said, as Siff’hah collapsed her map spell.

“Stay clear of its control structures when you ward it,” Urruah said. “You don’t want to jostle it into doing something while you’re setting up the spell.”

“Which brings us to the next question,” Rhiow said. “The roots... Can you keep it from putting any more down? We’ve got enough problems as it is.”

“I should be able to prevent it,” Aufwi said. “I’ll shout if there seem to be any problems.”

Rhiow was somehow sure that there would be. And one more thing to check yet, she thought. But a moment for that. She glanced up at Helen. “Well,” she said, “what did your *ikheya* say?”

Helen grinned at her. “Caught that, did you,” she said. “He says, Since you People have an *ehhif* with you, she might as well see what kind of news other *ehhif* can give her while you folks are discovering what you can from other People. I’ll take myself downhill to the Library and have a look at the papers...see what news the world throws in my way.”

“But not like that – !” Hwaith said, sounding rather distressed all of a sudden. “Queen-*ehhif* don’t dress that way these days – “

“Oh, no, not like that at all,” Helen said. “I thought I’d wear something like this – “

The change was so abrupt it made Rhiow blink. One moment Helen was standing there in her police clothes, and the next she was wearing a long, tan, belted coat with a patterned dress underneath it, and (what most surprised Rhiow) a hat that actually had a veil attached. Rhiow was no expert in the ins and outs of *ehhif* fashion, but she recognized the clothing as well out of date for her own time, if only because Helen was so much more covered than most of the *ehhif* she saw in New York.

Hwaith looked most surprised. “Nice illusion!” he said. “I can’t even see through it – “

Helen took off the hat, wiped a little sweat off her brow, and replaced the hat again. “Not an illusion,” she said. “It’s a full transform. It costs, yes, but sometimes it’s useful to be able to do one in a hurry.”

“I bet you have to do that a lot back up at our end of things,” Arhu said. “Human wizards have to hide what they’re doing all the time...”

“Most of them do,” Helen said, looking down at herself and brushing at the skirt. “But for me it’s not as much of a problem as it is for most. I keep what I’m doing out of view, sure. But if I need some time off to do an intervention, I just tell my colleagues I’m going off to do some wizardry.” Then she laughed at Rhiow’s expression, and Arhu’s. “No, seriously! They know I’m Native American, and a shaman for my band. So anybody I mention it to thinks I’m just going off to do some New Age thing, with drumming or something.”

Rhiow waved her tail, impressed. “I bet a lot of your fellow *ehhif*

wizards wish they had such a good excuse..."

"I'd take that bet," Helen said, and grinned. "As for the clothes, though – they're just me being lazy. I got into the habit when I was working Vice a few years ago. Couldn't be bothered changing them again and again – especially with the clothes they were giving me: who knew where they'd been? -- Anyway, Hwaith, will I fit in? How's the style look?"

"Good," Hwaith said. "Very modern."

"That's fine: I was shooting for just postwar," Helen said. "So, as I said, I'll go have some breakfast, wait for the library to open...see what I can pick up. If we're going to split up, where should we meet up again afterwards?"

"Back up here, I'd say," Rhiow said. "Aufwi, if anything gets out of hand up here, call and we'll come running."

She turned again to look at the gate, hanging there shimmering innocently in the predawn twilight, for all the world as if there had been nothing wrong with it at all. Yet... "I was told to root here," Rhiow said under her breath, "and here I will stay."

"Yes," Hwaith said. He had come up beside her and was looking at the gate with an annoyed expression. "I heard something like that too."

Which reminds me that there was one more thing I wanted to check. "Cousin," Rhiow said then, "walk with me a little way?" And she headed uphill, under the shadow of more of the evergreen oaks, toward a lesser crest of the hill they stood on.

Hwaith looked at her oddly for a moment, then followed. Rhiow paused under the last of the trees before the upper hillcrest, and as Hwaith caught up with her, she said, *Please, Hwaith, forgive me the familiarity –*

It's not a problem, he said silently. You have to ask: how are my relations with my gate?

She put her whiskers forward. *You really do have the Ear,* she said. *And yes, I do have to ask.* For gate management was not just a matter of mechanics, of knowing which string to pull, and when, and how hard. Gates were tremendously complex constructions incorporating the hyperstrings that were the Universe's building-blocks with hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of words in the Speech which had *made* the Universe out of those building-blocks. Where such complexities had been sustained for prolonged periods, there was always a question of whether or not the construction incorporating them had acquired some level of sentience...and many gates acted as if they had. Where there was sentience, or the appearance of it, there was relationship: and sometimes relationships went bad.

Rhiow, I've been working with this gate for nearly seventy moons, Hwaith said. It's never given me more than a moment's trouble, from the first weeks I spent with it until a few weeks ago when it began to misbehave. And there was no sudden withdrawal of cooperation, no falling-out. He sat down, looked eastward: out there, slowly making itself apparent through the haze over the furthest line of hills, was the Great Tom's Eye, what ehif called the Moon, rising now, and half-closed. Just, at the end of the last moon, as the Eye started to go dark, a feeling that the gate's attention was turning elsewhere. Or being turned. As if it was being increasingly distracted by something besides me and this world...something just out of the field of vision, the thing you feel with your whiskers and can't see...

She looked at Hwaith, troubled by the trouble in those bronzy eyes. He glanced back, and lashed his tail once or twice, a frustrated gesture. *Maybe if I'd called for help sooner, he said, none of this would be happening. Or it would have happened, and have been fixed by now. Have I been acting too much like a tom...?*

The question caught Rhiow completely off guard...especially as it was one she couldn't recall ever having been asked by a tom before: they didn't tend toward self-analysis nearly as much as queens did. *I don't think so, she said at last. Which leaves us looking at the same problem, I suppose. 'I was told to stay here.' Told by whom?*

"It's the question I don't seem to be able to find an answer to," Hwaith said, aloud now. "And as you've heard, the Whisperer didn't have one either. I suspect that's what we've got to find out."

She flicked one ear in unnerved agreement. "It's when we most want concrete answers from Them that we don't get any," Rhiow said. "Annoying. But it's the world we've got, until we fix it...so let's get busy."

She got up and shook herself, and saw Urruah coming up the hillside toward them. "Ruah," Rhiow said, "let's take one last – " Then she stopped: for Urruah had stopped too, and was staring at her. "What?" Rhiow said.

He started cursing under his breath, though in a good-natured way. "I can't *believe* I've been here for an hour without seeing that!" Urruah said.

She waved her tail, confused. "Seeing what?"

"Look up there!"

Rhiow looked over her shoulder, confused. Dimly to be seen above and beyond her and Hwaith, silhouetted against the slow-growing twilight, a great flat pale oblong shape reared up and caught a very little of the cityglow from beneath them. Urruah seemed quite taken with it, though, and Rhiow had to stare at it for a moment before she recognized it as a squared-off

version of the ehhif-English letter “D”. It looked to be in bad shape: the wood of which the letter had been built was streaked with bird droppings and pocked here and there with what looked like bullet holes; its white paint was peeling, and the whole letter leaned backwards against its supporting struts as if considering the virtues of falling down. There were light bulbs all round the letter, outlining it, but most of them were broken, and in any case the power to them seemed to have been switched off.

Rhiow craned her neck a bit to catch a glimpse of more letters like this one, reaching eastward along the ridge of the hill from where they all stood. L A N D, said the ones she could see. “Some kind of advertisement?” she said after a moment. If there was one thing she’d learned about ehhif over time, it was that they would put up an ad anywhere that gravity would allow.

Hwaith made a little trilling noise down in his throat, a feline chuckle. “That’s right. Some *ehhif* started building a housing development up here a couple of decades ago, and they put these letters up here to show where the houses would go.” He glanced up at the D, waved his tail in amusement. “They were supposed to take it down quite some while back, but they’ve seemed to become too fond of it to get rid of it...or too lazy to bother. I take it they still haven’t done anything about it, uptime?”

Urruah chuckled too. “Oh, they’ve done something,” he said, “but not in terms of getting rid of it.”

Rhiow quirked her tail at him to forestall the inevitable explanation. “Ruah,” she said, “later for this. Are the others ready to go?”

“Just about.”

“All right,” Rhiow said. “Come on...”

With the two toms following after, Rhiow walked back down to where the gate hovered, now inside the nearly-unseen spherical shell of a boundary wizardry that Aufwi had erected around it. Arhu and Siff’hah and Helen had just finished checking it over with him. “If any *ehhif* come up here,” Aufwi said to Rhiow as she came up, “they won’t even get close enough to the boundary to bump into it: they’ll just get an urge to steer away.”

“That’s fine,” Rhiow said. “So let’s all get out there and see what we can discover. Take a close look at the other ends of the gate’s roots, see what they’re sunk into, and try to get a sense of why they chose that particular spot. The answer may not be obvious: it might be some transitory phenomenon, or some person or being that’s been in that spot, rather than something inherent in the spot itself. Once you think you’ve worked it out, don’t *do* anything about the root: we’re all going to have to act together in that regard. But take the time to check the surrounding area carefully.

Time’s the issue here, after all. We can’t stay backtime all that long on any

one trip: besides the danger of producing nested time paradoxes, it's just plain bad for the soul, and none of us needs to add temporal wasting to the problems we've got already. So make your observations count, and don't be afraid to bring a little more data back than you strictly think you need."

Everyone swung their tails or nodded that they understood. "Let's go, then," Rhiow said. "Hwaith, is our own goal close enough to walk to?"

"It's a long walk," he said, "unless you're used to that kind of thing."

She flirted her tail as they all started downhill, making for a path that could be seen down below, among the trees. "I'm a New Yorker," she said. "I do my forty blocks a day...it shouldn't be a problem." As Arhu galloped past her down the hill, she reached out a claw and just managed to snag his tail.

He skidded to a halt before the claw had time to dig in. "You be *careful!*" Rhiow said.

"Oh, come on, Rhi! We've been backtime before!"

"Not this close to our hometime," Rhiow said. "Little distances between times are more dangerous than big ones. A mistake made way back leaves you lots of successor instants to correct it, and the piled-up error is big and easy to patch. Close in, the effects are a lot more subtle, and fixing them is sa'Rraah's own business. So watch what you do –"

"Don't worry, I'll keep an eye on her! Don't get your tail in a kink!" Arhu said, and galloped on down toward the path.

In his wake came Siff'hah, who threw Rhiow a look of profound annoyance. "And watch your manners when you meet People here," Rhiow said, though. "None of the edgy stuff like a few minutes ago." She put her whiskers forward, for it had still been funny. "*So* disrespectful to a more senior wizard! Jath would be shocked."

"Please," Siff'hah said, and laid her whiskers back. "Don't 'Jath' me! Yet another tom. Has it occurred to you how many of them seem to be around at the moment?"

Hwaith glanced around him as if this news came as a surprise, and Rhiow's whiskers went even further forward. "Oh, *you're* okay, Hwaith. But Rhi, did you hear him? '*I'll* keep an eye on *her?*'" Siff'hah snorted. "No doubt using the one brain cell he keeps tucked away up his *thath* and only sticks in his head occasionally for fear he'll wear it out. And as for Urruah –"

"Now now," Rhiow said.

"Oh, he's all right," Siff'hah said. "But he's such a – he's such a *boy!*"

“Boys have their uses,” Rhiow said, with a humorous glance at Hwaith. “As we will doubtless hear *you* saying over and over to anyone who’ll bother listening when you’re next in heat. Meanwhile, the single-brain-celled one is getting ahead of you.” She peered past Siff’hah. “Probably going to fall down that next ravine if someone doesn’t hurry up and keep him out of trouble...”

Siff’hah plunged downhill after her brother. “They’re good kits,” Rhiow said when Siff’hah was safely out of earshot, to judge by the sudden sounds of crunching and thrashing in the toyon and manzanita brush at the bottom of the hill. “A little rambunctious.”

“But extremely powerful,” Hwaith said. “The Whisperer told me their power ratings. You’ve got your hands full.”

Rhiow laughed under her breath. “It’s not just a question of power,” she said. “You should have seen Arhu when he first arrived: all claws and ego – he’d have shredded sa’Rraah’s own ears if he thought she was looking at him the wrong way. And Sif was apparently much the same. They’ve both had a busy time of it, this life: and a hard one. But they’re settling in.”

“It must be interesting working with a team,” Hwaith said, looking over his shoulder to where Urruah and Helen were walking together and chatting.

“It must be interesting working unaffiliated,” Rhiow said. “Aufwi’s been doing it for a long time. And – seventy moons, you said? That’s a good while. But this isn’t a busy gate.”

“No,” Hwaith said. “Historically, San Francisco’s always taken most of the strain – especially bearing in mind the willful way this gate’s always behaved. No one’s relied on it for much.” He glanced back upslope to where Aufwi was minding it. “To tell you the truth, I’d hoped, when I timeslid ahead, that I’d find it’d finally been clouted into some kind of stability.” The look he gave Rhiow as they came down onto the path was rueful. “And that you folks’d be able to tell me how to come back and straighten things out.”

“More likely,” Rhiow said, “what we do back here will enable us to go back ahead and *get* it straightened out. It’s we who’ll be thanking *you*.” She peered over the edge of the ground past the path, where the crashing noises of the twins heading downhill were continuing. “Looks like they’re taking a short cut,” Rhiow said, and glanced over her shoulder at Helen, who with Urruah had just come down onto the path behind them

Helen, too, was looking down that way with amusement. “It’s a good thing we weren’t trying to be *sneaky* or anything,” she said.

Rhiow laughed. “They’ve got the sense to sidle,” she said. “So should we, I suppose: no point in confusing any *ehhif* we might meet out early walking their dogs.”

“You won’t see much of that up here,” Hwaith said, as they both paused to go invisible, and Urruah came up with them. “Up here in the canyons, most of the dogs are kept in the *ehhifs*’ houses, or in their yards: they’d be nervous about taking them out, for fear of running into coyotes.”

Urruah chuckled, sidling himself. “Well, neither dogs or coyotes are likely to be a problem for us,” he said, pausing for just a moment to sidle. “But it’s as well to preserve a low profile. What can’t see you, can’t have its eyes looked through by...other interested parties.” He sounded a little disturbed as they made their way along down the path, which began to curve as the hillside did, under the outreaching branches of the gray ghost pines.

“You caught that scent too,” Hwaith said, “did you?”

Urruah’s nose wrinkled. “Something rank,” he said. “Yes. Never got that from a gate before, no matter *how* badly it was malfunctioning. You notice it, Rhi?”

“I did,” she said. “And it seems to me that it had something to do with what I felt while we were in transit, in the timeslide. That cold feeling...”

“And different from the Lone Power,” Hwaith said, sounding almost upset by this. “You know how it is – how you can almost always hear her laughing, that angry, nasty edge – “

Rhiow had to agree with him. She’d sensed that before, too, and it had been completely missing in whatever had been lurking just beyond the walls of the timespace corridor through which they’d been traveling. As they came to a spot further down the hill where their path met a broader one, graveled, and coming from the right, Rhiow looked over her shoulder and said, “Helen, did you – “

Then her eyes went wide. Helen was not there.

Urruah and Hwaith looked behind them, too, and were surprised. “Where’d she go?” Urruah said. “Did *she* sidle?”

“We’d have felt it,” Hwaith said. He was right: you usually could feel someone else sidling in the immediate vicinity. But none of them had felt anything – nor, as they looked around, did it seem that she’d used any of the other methods for invisibility available to wizards.

“Boy,” Urruah said, “she really *does* walk softly. One of those tribal talents, I guess.”

“Well, she knows where to meet us,” Rhiow said. “Come on, let’s get where we’re going...”

The track below them abruptly ceased to be gravel and pine needles and bark chippings, and turned into the place where, on both sides of the sudden, capped-off road, the sidewalk began. To a city Person, this was a strange contrast, eloquent of the difference between city and country. But overhead the live oaks and the peppertrees leaned in over the path, along with the occasional ragged escapee palm up the hillside; and from their quiet pre-dawn murmurings, Rhiow could tell that the road that started where the sidewalk did meant nothing in particular to *them*. As far as the trees were concerned, these were the hills eternal, as they had been since the Ice retreated, and a little concrete more or less on the ground hardly mattered at all. The Ice had broken it before, and would again: and afterwards, in the fullness of time, the Trees would still be there.

Once the road began, no wider than a Manhattan side street, the houses started too. They were relatively small at first, widely separated bungalows and two-storey houses mostly done in white stucco and tiled roofs. Some of their gardens looked a little ragged, overgrown with wiry-looking ground cover, pachysandra and pinched-looking ice plant. Here and there the ground under the hundred-foot royal palms was untidy with spiky, frayed heaps of their long shed olive-green frond; and scattered palm-fruits, like fat fluorescent-orange marbles, lay squashed on the sidewalks and in the road. Rhiow paused by one palm tree, sniffing. “Rats?” she said. “Up in the *trees*?”

“Palm rats.” Hwaith cocked an eye up toward the crown of one of the king palms. From up there Rhiow could hear a strange scratchy noise, like her *ehhif*'s old mechanical alarm clock trying to ring when it wasn't properly wound up.

“Any sport in those?” Urruah said.

“When they come down, sure,” Hwaith said. “Unless you feel like going up after them. They have a little bit of an advantage up there...”

“But if you skywalked...”

“Yeah, but is that *sport*?”

Rhiow smiled to herself as they headed further down the canyon, and the sidewalk became wider and cleaner, and the houses bigger, and the driveways broader. It was as if the further down you got from the clear air and the hills' height, the more important it became to let other *ehhif* know how important you were – mostly by the size of what you “owned”. This was a behavior Rhiow knew all too well from Manhattan – knowing also how the Earth itself laughed at the concept of ownership, as hilarious to the semi-sentience indwelling in the ancient bedrock as the idea of *ehhif* selling each other virtual artifacts and “unreal estate” in computer games. In New

York, anyway, the Earth had not for many centuries done what it might so easily do – just shrug, and then bear the brief glass-splinter itch as things fell down and smashed. *Here, though, that's just what it's been doing.* And indeed she could see, as they walked downhill through wisps of morning mist, the occasional upthrust slabs in the sidewalk and cracks in the stucco and plaster of the houses they passed: the shed tiles that no one had noticed or picked up, the slow rilling trickle from someone's ultramodern lawn-watering system where a pipe had cracked, and the trickling leak was spinning palm pollen and pine needles down into the gutter. *Worse could happen. Worse will happen. Iau, Whisperer, be with us, let us know what we need to know to keep it from happening: in the here and now, and our now and then...*

They turned a switchback curve in the road. “What in the Tom’s Name,” Urruah shouted as they came around and saw a huge mist-glamoured vehicle crouching by the curb outside one oversized bungalow, “is that what I *think* it is? It’s a *Hhhu’ssenherh!*”

He ran off across the street toward one of the big heavy vehicles, walking around it and staring up at it in a good imitation of awe. “Is this one of your passions too?” Rhiow said to Hwaith.

They both stopped dead as Arhu galloped unheeding past them down the middle of the road at top speed, shortly followed by Siff’hah, who was fluffed up from nose to tail and cursing her brother loudly. “Uh, not particularly,” Hwaith said, after the ruckus had gone by and vanished around the downhill curve. “I guess it’s one of those situations where you don’t really notice something until the tourists come through.” He put his whiskers forward.

“I’ve only seen these in *ffhilms*,” Urruah said, turning around to spray one of the vehicle’s snow-white tires with great care. “Isn’t it fabulous?”

Rhiow flirted her tail. “If you say so. ‘Ruah, you’re not by any chance doing something that would *annoy* the ehif who owns it, are you?”

“Oh, not so anyone would care...” He waltzed back over to Rhiow and Hwaith. “It’ll wash off in the next rain...”

“Hah,” Hwaith said, amused, as he led them on down the hill. “You really *are* a New Yorker. ‘The next rain’ won’t be until October.”

They ambled further on down the road, and Rhiow noted as they went that the houses seemed to be getting much bigger, the front yards most seriously wider and deeper and more manicured, if occasionally a bit brown; and some of the houses even had two of the big autos in front of them. “You must have good police here,” Rhiow said, glancing into one driveway at the

two massive cars there. “You’d think just anybody could steal them, or key them, out here...”

“Steal them?” Hwaith said, sounding shocked. “They wouldn’t get far. The police here *are* pretty good, for *ehhif*. And I don’t think there are as many cars now as you folks have uptime...”

Rhiow cocked an ear: the Whisperer slipped a number into it. She blinked. “Three *million*?” she said. “In the whole *state*?”

“You’ll believe they’re all right here in the Basin, under your nose,” Hwaith said, sounding rueful, “the first time the inversion layer gets bad.”

“Leaded gas...” Urruah said, waving his tail, looking back at the big cars as they headed on downhill.

Hwaith looked at him with big bronzy eyes, their polite expression nonetheless managing to suggest that Urruah was one whisker short of a full set. “What else would there be?”

“Wait a while,” Urruah said. “Believe me, it gets better. And you just wait till the sushi bars open.”

“What’s sushi?”

Urruah took a deep breath, then let it go as they all paused in the middle of the street where it was crossed by another. The four-way STOP sign might as well have been in the middle of the Mojave for all the traffic there was at this hour of the morning. “Let it be,” Rhiow said. “Hwaith, *Herself* is very quiet. Have you noticed that?”

“Unusually so,” Hwaith said. “I hate it when *She* waits for us to tell *Her* what to do.”

“You and me both, littermate,” Rhiow said.

They wandered across the intersection, and Rhiow caught a sidewise glance from Urruah as he headed across the road to sniff at the base of a peppertree. *‘Littermate?’*

She gave Urruah his look back with a dead rat on top. *Goodness me, ‘Ruah, do I detect a note of jealousy?’*

Of what? Of him? Urruah busied himself spraying the bottom of the royal palm at the corner with an expression of utter abstraction. *He’s too skinny for you, Rhi. Plus, you met him, what? Two hours ago?*

Fifty years ago, some ways, Rhiow said, angling gently rightward: away down the road, she could see another of those huge blunt round cars coming up the road. *He’s a nice young wizard who can use some emotional support, the way things are going around here. Got a problem with that, Dumpster boy? Go pee on another tree.*

Urruah gave her an amused look as she and Hwaith stepped up onto the curb. He trotted away from them, across yet another perfectly coiffed

emerald-and-jade-striped lawn, to examine a big scraggly bush with bright red flowers that looked like bottlebrushes. Urruah stared up into the tree as they walked past the large pink-stuccoed house it leaned on. “You People have really large bees here!” he said.

“Uh...it’s a hummingbird,” Hwaith said softly, but not in time for Urruah to get out of the way of the furious little bundle of scarlet feathers that came diving at him from higher up in the bottlebrush tree, making a sound like an infuriated cellphone stuck in texting mode.

Urruah went galloping off in a gray-tabby streak into the next yard downhill: the hummingbird, a subdued blood-ruby glint in the early light, went after him at humm factor five, closing fast. Urruah dove head-first into a bed of ivy and vanished.

Rhiow had to stand still for a moment: it was bad for a team leader to be visibly incapacitated by laughter, at least for longer than a breath or three. “City guy,” Hwaith said under his breath. “We get them here. But there are cities, and there are cities.”

“I begin to get that sense,” Rhiow said. They walked another block or so downhill, the equivalent of a Manhattan long block – if the road wound rather more while it made its way down the hillside -- while Urruah lost his pursuer, or talked it out of the pursuit, and emerged from a low flat bank of ornamental yew, looking ruffled but (to do him credit) amused.

“Didn’t look like it was much interested in the Formic Word,” Rhiow said, as Urruah joined them in sauntering down the middle of the street again. From behind them and off to the left, where there was more high ground, mist had begun rolling gently down the hillside. It started to slip across the road as they walked, so that shortly they and the big *ehhif* vehicles by the curbs were hock- or half-wheel-deep in it.

“No,” Urruah said. “My mistake. Can we bring about five million of those things home with us? Think what they’d do to the pigeons!”

Hwaith chuckled. “I wish,” he said. “Our pigeons don’t seem all that impressed. But if you think it’d make a difference...”

They headed downhill, and the yards around the increasingly magnificent houses started to resemble significant portions of Central Park. “It’s not like they *use* any of this space...” Urruah said.

“But they *could*.” Hwaith said. “I think that’s the message.”

“Typical *ehhif*,” Rhiow said. “Prove how important you are by having lots of ground and keeping other *ehhif* from having it.”

“It’s true,” Hwaith said. He sounded regretful, as they stopped at another intersection. The country around them had flattened out now; above their heads, looking southward, a little spiky-headed forest of palms reared

itself against a sky slowly growing violet-blue with the light of the dawn at its back and the reflected light from the unseen sea beneath it. “At least some of them are that way. Not all. The one whose house we’re going to: he’s one of the ones who don’t seem to care. He’s all about *ehhif*, and not about where they are, if I understand it. And his house is friendly to People.” Hwaith looked up the cross street and down it, like any New Yorker, but with (from Rhiow’s point of view) far less need, for there still wasn’t a car in sight.

“Does one of our People live with him?” Rhiow said as they crossed the wide street.

“Absolutely. She’s such a gossipmonger: there’s nothing happening in these hills, and the businesses around them, that Ssh’iivha doesn’t know. That’s why she’s our first stop.” He paused once more, glancing around him. “Come on; we’ll go in the back way.”

He headed off to the right. As they went, Rhiow saw that each block of the broad clean street had a kind of shadow block behind it; a little blank bare alley with a gutter down the middle of it, to carry runoff water when it rained, and – behind each house – a gate behind which the ribbed metal bins where *ehhif* put their castoff stuff stood ranked. Here and there such bins stood with their lids askew, but (rather to Rhiow’s surprise) no People were patronizing them. As they walked by the first few gates and bins, Urruah sniffed appreciatively. “High-end stuff in there,” he said. “Smells like Zabar’s.”

You would know better than I would, Rhiow thought, but didn’t say. Hwaith led them past one pair of garbage cans to one high gate in a property’s back wall. It had a hinged People-door cut into it. “Right through here,” Hwaith said, and led the way through.

Rhiow slipped through behind him, followed a second later by Urriah. They found themselves standing at the rear of a back yard as beautifully groomed as the front yards they’d been seeing, but much smaller. Here and there a few lawn chairs stood around on the grass, and a round table with an umbrella and a couple of seats set beside it. Past them was a patio area with potted palms set out at its ends, and on the far side of the patio, a large pink-stuccoed bungalow with high glass doors looking out on the back yard. Between those doors and the smaller back door, under the windows, a row of bowls was set out – about twelve of them, it seemed.

Hwaith led them up to the house. “If it’s been a while since you’ve had a snack,” Hwaith said, “feel free to tuck in. That’s what they’re out here for.”

Urruah walked among them, inhaling appreciatively. “Can you *smell* this stuff?” he said under his breath. “No coloring agents! No preservatives! No weird chemical agents with numbers instead of names! No vegetable additives snuck in by confused animal activists! No *vhai’d* rice or ‘roughage’ -- nothing but *meat*! All *kinds* of meat!” He looked briefly confused. “And now that I think of it...what kind of meat *is* that I’m smelling in this stuff?”

“Probably mink,” said an amused voice from off to one side. “After they make coats out of them, what’s left over winds up in the canned People-food....”

From around the corner of the house, along a walkway that probably ran to the front yard, came a Person. She was, as People reckoned such things, extremely beautiful in an exotic way: white-furred, fluffy, and a bit plump, with small, well-set ears and vividly green eyes. Nor was she one of those flat-faced, inbred People whom *ehhif* have inflicted on the worlds over time, but a long-nosed, gracious-looking Person, with a look of courtesy and intelligence about her to go with the beauty. Rhiow didn’t bother glancing back at Urruah to see his reaction: she could already hear him doting on this pretty new apparition.

“Hunt’s luck, Hwaith,” the newcomer said. “Long time no smell!” They breathed breaths briefly.

“Got some visitors in, Ssh’iivha,” Hwaith said. “They’re hunting news, and I knew just where to bring them.”

“News we’ve got,” Ssh’iivha said. “More of it than *I* know what to do with. Hunters, you’re welcome! Luck to you all. Come on in, get comfortable. Names or not as you like...”

“Names, of course,” Rhiow said, coming forward to breathe breaths with their hostess. “I’m Rhiow. And thanks for your welcome! We’ve come a long way on our business: we’re on errantry, and we greet you – “

“Oh, I knew *that*,” Ssh’iivha said; “anyone could see you’re wizards, just by looking at you. You’ve got Hwaith’s look.” Behind her, Rhiow could just hear Urruah’s comment on that: fortunately it was well submerged in the levels of private thoughtspeech to which another nonwizardly Person would not be privy. “Whatever brings you here, you’re welcome.”

“Is it all right for us to be here?” Rhiow said as Urruah went to greet Ssh’iivha. “It won’t make trouble for you with your *ehhif*?”

“Oh no!” Ssh’iivha said, and laughed. “He likes People: that’s why he’s left all this food around. Everyone comes here to visit the Buffet, and swap news. This is a regular clearing house for Our Kind’s gossip, all up and

down these hills. Which is doubtless why you're here." She gave Hwaith an affectionate look, and at the sight of it Rhiow felt a strange pang she didn't know how to classify. *But then how many non-wizardly People am I close to at home?* she thought. *Just Yafv, really. And just to say hello to in the mornings, when I pass him on his stoop, fresh from his latest rat. It must be nice to be part of a mixed community...*

"It's an unusual *ehhif* you've got," Rhiow said, "who's willing to make so many of us welcome when they don't actually live with him."

"That's true enough," Ssh'iivha said. "But he's something of a loner, and I think we're company for him without needing to get into emotional involvement. You know how some *ehhif* are...afraid to get too close. Anyway, if you're sure you're not hungry, come on in..."

Ssh'iivha led them in through another People-door, this one built into the normal *ehhif* back door. "If I may ask," Urruah said, glancing around him as they came through the big white-tiled kitchen full of huge, stocky, retro-looking appliances, "is 'Ssh'iivha' a real name or a nickname?"

Rhiow's whiskers went forward a little: it was the kind of question a tom might ask of a queen he was getting interested in. "Well, actually it's both," Ssh'iivha said. "My *ehhif* uses it too, or a word that sounds a lot like it. Used it, I should say."

They came out into the living room. It was handsome, airy, but spare. It was high-ceilinged, wooden-floored, white-walled, and sparse of furniture – suggesting that the *ehhif* who lived there was either in transit, didn't consider furniture all that important, or took pleasure in taunting the *ehhif* around him with his own opinion that *their* surroundings were too cluttered. Here and there, on one or another of the low white sofas, some Person slept: here a brown tabby, there a white shorthair with his feet in the air. "If you want to take a while to relax," Ssh'iivha said, "this is the place for you. The neighbors make no trouble: my *ehhif* makes everything right with them. So we try to keep things right with *him*. No mating in the back yard, no yelling, no fighting with the neighbors' People; this is a no-*heuwwaff* zone."

"Oh," Urruah said, sounding slightly disappointed. Rhiow had to fight to keep her whiskers from going too far forward, as mating, yelling and fighting with other toms were probably Urruah's three favorite things besides wizardry.

Ssh'iivha jumped up on a spare couch and stretched out: Hwaith went up after her, and Rhiow followed, while Urruah stalked around a little examining more of the room, particularly a massive desk over by one of the windows that looked out into the back yard, flanked on both sides with full bookshelves and a couple of occasional tables piled with more books. "You

say,” Rhiow said, “that your *ehhif* ‘used’ your name. But he doesn’t use it now?”

“Oh, yes,” Ssh’iivha said, “just not out loud, these days. It seems silly to think it’s a coincidence: I suspect he can hear us a little, though he probably doesn’t think of it that way. And he talks to us as if he thinks *we* can hear, which is considerate for an *ehhif*.”

“But he doesn’t speak out loud....” Urruah said. He was up on the desk now, peering at the complex-looking black-and-gold machine on the top of it.

“No,” Ssh’iivha said. “There’s something the matter with his throat. If he has something to say to other *ehhif*, he has to write it down on a piece of paper and give it to them. We can just barely hear him whisper, but other *ehhif* can’t hear him at all.” Ssh’iivha waved her tail, sadly, slowly. “He wasn’t always like this. A while after I came to live with him, his voice started to get hoarse. Finally he went off where *ehhif* go to be healed, the *hhohs’hihal*: and he came home seeming well enough, but without his voice. So now all our People call him *Eth’ehhif*, the Silent Man, when they visit.”

“I tried to have a look at him to see what was going on with his throat,” Hwaith said, sounding a little embarrassed, “but I couldn’t get far. I’m not really much good at healing: I specialize in spatial constructs, mostly. And he’s spiky, Rhiow: a real tom. You try to get friendly with him, and if he didn’t start the process himself, he wonders what you’re up to, he holds you away....”

Rhiow waved her own tail, trying to maintain her composure. The words “the *hhohs’hihal*” had brought the fur up on her against her will. She could still see her poor Hhu’ha’s discarded body lying there on a steel slab, not inconsiderately treated, but nonetheless terribly empty of the soul that had so often used that flesh to pick her up and cuddle her and make rude-for-*ehhif* noises against her belly -- an entirely undignified process for a Person, and one without which the world was now all too dry and empty a place. “We’ll look into it while we’re here, if you like,” Rhiow said, commanding herself to some kind of calm. “We’ve got some other things to look into as well, but if we cross his path we’ll certainly try to see if he needs some kind of assistance that we can offer him. Are you expecting him soon?”

“It’s hard to say,” Ssh’iivha said. “He works our hours, truly: he’s almost more one of us than one of them. Out from sunset to a bit past dawn, usually: then he comes home, makes notes of what he’s seen and where he’s been, and after a drink of something, falls over. He’s in the Business, you see. He sleeps the day away...then, a while before sunset, he gets up and dresses himself and goes out again.”

“The Business?” Rhiow said. “Which one?”

“He makes dreams,” Ssh’iivha said. *Hheivhwei* was the Ailurin word she used, a common one for fiction, as opposed to *fwaiwei*, “news”, a story that was known or supposed to have really happened.

Urruah jumped down from the desk and wandered back over to them. “He’s working with one of the *ss’huhios*?” he said.

“That’s right,” Ssh’iivha said. She looked over at Hwaith. “It’s the place that has the lion as its symbol: don’t ask me the name of it – they’ve changed that about three times in the last few years. He’s just finished work on a *ffhilm* for them. It’s based on one of the stories he told for one of the *hviih-sh’ethh*, the papers-that-speak-silently.”

“A magazine,” Urruah said. “Interesting.”

“But I heard from one of the other People who come through here, Hhaiivuh his name is, he’s a mouser at one of the other *ss’huhios*, that the *eth’Ehhif* was lucky to finish work on that *ffhilm* when he did.” Ssh’iivha’s eyes went wide with the expression of a Person plunging happily into the latest gossip. “Apparently that big earthquake the other day did a lot of damage at the *ss’huhio*: some gas connection or something went wrong in the fake-street where they’d been making the *ffhilm*, and half the backlot burned down. There were even a couple of *ehhif* killed. The police and the *ehhif* who put out fires were all over the place for days. And even now that they’ve gone, everyone’s schedules over there are in shreds, it seems...”

“The earthquakes,” Hwaith said, “they’re part of what’s brought us here. But I hadn’t heard that anyone had been killed!”

“Oh yes,” said Ssh’iivha. “And here’s a curiosity for you! The *ehhif* who died in the fire weren’t even *ss’huhio* people, Hhaiivuh said. They were [insert Ailurin term here] *ehhif* – “she used the word for “stray” that many People used to express the human-English term “homeless” – “and no one’s sure how they got into the backlot, or why they didn’t get out when the fire started. Because it didn’t start suddenly: it took a long time to get going, Hhaiivuh said. Maybe too long.” Ssh’iivha flicked on ear back in a bemused gesture. “Hhaiivuh told me that there’s a rumor going around that the fire wasn’t really caused by the earthquake at all, but started on purpose – “

From out at the front of the house came a sudden noise: a car door slamming. “Oh,” Ssh’iivha said, “he’s home early today. Anyway, Hhaiivuh told me that another of the hunters over there, Fehwau, said he’d been over in that part of the backlot earlier in the day and hadn’t smelled anybody who shouldn’t have been there. He said, Why would homeless *ehhif* have been there except to sleep? It didn’t make sense that they would

have been there so late in the day, because the fire started at about noon, right when that earthquake happened – “

A key turned in the front door, and it opened. The *ehhif* who came in was extremely well-dressed: three-piece suit in dove grey, expensive-looking silvery silk tie, fedora just a shade of grey darker, shoes to match. He wasn't a tall man, and was rather pale and slightly built; but to Rhiow's way of thinking, that wasn't something you'd notice much once you'd seen his eyes. They were piercing and cool behind the silvery wire-rimmed glasses: the expression could doubtless be rather intimidating, by *ehhif* standards, depending on what the rest of his face was doing.

He paused there as he shut the door, and glanced around at the various other People lounging about the place, and Ssh'iivha and Urruah and Rhiow and Hwaith. Seeing them all, he nodded, his expression seeming to say that all this was fine with him; and he slipped out of his jacket, draping it carefully over one of the white couches. “Half a moment,” Ssh'iivha said, “the gossip'll keep,” and she jumped down from the couch to run over to him.

She rubbed against the *ehhif's* leg, purring, and he bent down and stroked her, then picked Ssh'iivha up and cuddled her. *Awwww*, Urruah said silently as she reached a paw up to touch the *ehhif's* cheek.

The *ehhif's* mouth moved. *Hey there, Miss Sheba*, he said, and to Rhiow's astonishment, not a whisper, not a murmur, came out of him as he said it. *Had a good night out. Looks like you and your buddies've been doing the same.*

He put Ssh'iivha down and went to the back door, glancing out at it, apparently to check the state of the food bowls. Then he went to the icebox, got himself a seltzer bottle, spritzed himself a glass full of it, and went over to the typewriter.

The *ehhif* sat down, reached down into a drawer of the desk, pulled out a sheet of paper, and rolled it into the machine with such speed and ease that it was plain this was something he'd done so many hundreds of thousands of times that he didn't even need to think about it any more. And then he was typing, fast, with two fingers.

“You see how nice he is,” Ssh'iivha said as she wandered back to the couch and jumped up on it again. “I had no idea that there were *ehhif* so nice until I came to him.”

“You had another one before?” Rhiow said.

Ssh'iivha scrubbed briefly at one ear, turning it inside out and then rightside in again. “Sa'Rraah sends us these things to test us,” she said. “Oh, Hahr'rena was very beautiful. And very famous, as *ehhif* judge things:

she's been in a lot of *ffhilmss*. And she meant well: she was kind enough, when she thought to be. But she's not very good with People. Sort of an unconscious type, always full of her own dramas and troubles, but never one to depend on for keeping food in the bowl." Ssh'iivha opened those green eyes wide in a vexed expression. "I can't tell you how many times I had to walk two blocks from home in BelAir to get a drink out of someone's fountain or fishpond because she'd forgotten to fill the water dish. I was mortified. All the other *ffhilm-ehhifs*' People looking out the window at me as if I was some kind of stray...! Well, finally she met the Silent One here, and 'gave' me to him. And was I glad to go!" Ssh'iivha's tail lashed a little.

Behind them, the typing was going on at full speed: a piece of paper was pulled out of the typewriter, and another one was pulled out of the drawer and inserted and the typing began again, with hardly a second's break. "He's a good provider, then," Rhiow said.

"Absolutely. The house here, the apartment in New York -- Oh yes," Ssh'iivha said, seeing Rhiow's whiskers go forward, "I thought I heard the accent. Yes, we do well enough. He has a housekeeper who watches this place while we're not here: the Buffet is on whether we're here or not. He and I, we go back and forth between the coasts together. Not as often as we used to since before he lost his voice, but..."

Urruah had been watching the rapid-fire typing with increasing curiosity. "Rhi," he said, "do you need me right now?"

She flicked one ear "no". Urruah jumped off the couch and padded over to the desk, glancing up at it. "Don't go in the drawer!" Ssh'iivha said: "he's fanatical about that. Very organized. And don't get too close to the left elbow: the speed it moves when he hits the thing that makes the carriage go back over, he'll knock you halfway into next week, and then spend an hour apologizing."

Urruah leaped up carefully onto the desk and balanced there on the edge of it, looking at what the *ehhif* was typing. The *ehhif* spared him no more than a glance, just enough to make sure that Urruah wasn't going to disarrange anything or get in the way. *You just stay there, fella*, he said, *and don't get in the paper drawer* – And then he went back to his typing.

"Ssh'iivha," Rhiow said softly, "forgive him: he's such a snoop. And a bit besotted with *ehhif* culture. He's far better than the rest of my team at reading their writing, even without the Speech to help him: it's become a hobby. Back home he's endlessly translating their posters and ads, whether we want to know what they're about or not – "

"And menus, I suspect," Hwaith said, with a sly grin.

Rhiow's whiskers went forward. "Au, cousin, you have no idea," she said. "The foods he's gotten me interested that it was far better I didn't know about..." She looked back over at Ssh'iivha. "But forgive me: you were telling us about the fire that started when the earthquake hit – "

"Well, it's all a bit strange, isn't it?" Ssh'iivha said. "Those poor homeless *ehhif* – They do get into the backlot, over some wall, or through some freight gate that's open a few minutes longer than it should be. There's so much of the lot, they can easily move from place to place and avoid the *ss'huhio*'s own security people. Not us, though. There must be a hundred People working on the Lion's backlot, and it's impossible for us not to be able to tell what *ehhif* have been where, and when, and for how long. And in the case of those poor strays, you know how they smell – "

"I do," Rhiow said. "I have a few under my care, back home."

Behind them, the typewriter went ding! one more time, a page was ripped out, another was rolled in. "He's so fast," Rhiow said.

"You have no idea," said Ssh'iivha. "You should see him when he really gets going. He'll be doing that hour on hour, never gets up, never looks away from the machine. I worry about him sometimes, but there's no stopping him: besides listening to other *ehhif* talk, it seems to be his life." She let out a slightly sad breath.

"And there's not another *ehhif* for him?" Rhiow said.

Ssh'iivha looked pensive. "No," she said, "not for a while now. Not the one he wants, anyway – "

"Rhi?"

She looked up. At the desk, the silent *ehhif* was still typing away, but Urruah was gazing down at the the page he'd just taken out of the typewriter. He glanced up at Rhiow. "You need to see this," he said: and he sounded alarmed.

Rhiow gave Ssh'iivha a bemused look. "I'm assuming this isn't just some attack of fannishness," she said. "Excuse me a second – "

She leapt up quietly onto an empty spot in the bookshelf to the right of the desk, so as not to upset the *ehhif*, and looked over his shoulder. He was still rattling away at top speed. "Amazing how fast one of them can work with only two toes," she said. Her own *Iaehh* worked the same way, but at no speed anything like this. "So what am I supposed to be seeing?"

"That last page," Urruah said. "No, wait a second – "

He looked at the three pieces of paper to the right of the typewriter. Rhiow felt, under her skin, the small wizardry Urruah was doing. The barest breeze moved through the room, easily mistakable for a random draft; and at

the same time the topmost piece of paper slid smoothly to the side so that Rhiow could see the one under it.

“Very slick,” she said, squinting at the paper. “What am I looking for, exactly?” And her tail lashed a little. “This is just so strange...” For she was much more used to Iaehh’s laptop now, and the *ehhif* letters that burned up clear and sharp onto the shining page, than this strange mechanical way of putting one’s thoughts into fixed form with little hammers and an inked ribbon. Yet at the same time there was that strange, retro feeling of mass and solidity about all this, the same feel one got from the cars in front of the houses and the huge stoves in the kitchen: something triumphant, a victory of intention over resistant matter. Not a wizardly mindset at all, indeed something very *ehhif*-ish – but you had to admire it all the same.

“Look through my eyes,” Urruah said. “It’s faster.”

She purred at his courtesy, crouched herself down compactly on the bookshelf, let her eyes go unfocused, and did the small twist and knot of wizardry that for a moment would let her share Urruah’s eyes. It always took a moment for her to synch in, for toms do not see the world the same way queens do: nearly everything has an additional edge, being judged as either enemy or potential conquest. But Urruah was both tom and wizard, and therefore knew that some things, like *ehhif* print, were essentially neutral in content if not context. Rhiow squinted her eyes a little, as any Person does to see more clearly, and read on the first paper:

It is a night like any other, except that this is Hollywood Boulevard, and on the Boulevard there is no such thing here as a night like any other, as they are all different while pretending to be the same.

There is a bar on Hollywood Boulevard in the Hotel of the same name, and there the citizens and denizens of the area congregate at all hours that the L.A.P.D. allows them; which in the case of the Boulevard Bar means six AM to five AM, that hour being when they mop the floor and chuck out the denizens who are unconscious or no longer able to pay their tab -- this latter category being something that must be judged nightly by Tough Therese who minds the cash register, and that on a case by case basis. It is at about four-thirty AM, therefore, that someone sitting at the bar begins to hear the many and entertaining variations on the theme of helping someone else pay their tab for them. But there is also something else that sometimes happens then, and it involves the backwash from four AM, which is when sick people are known to die and crazy people are likely to become the craziest, always depending of course on what the Moon is doing.

Rhiow shook her head until her ears rattled, trying to keep her “eyes” in Urruah’s head as she did so. “What is this?” she said. “Fiction or news?”

“It’s hard to tell with them sometimes,” Urruah said, “especially when they get into magic realism. I think maybe this is an early practitioner – “

Rhiow wanted to start banging her head into some friendly yielding surface, or whack Urruah upside the head, or both. For her “magic” and “realism” were parts of the same continuum: but Urruah seemed to be describing some kind of strange *ehhif* literary fad rather than the simple truth. Nonetheless – it being a simpler and possibly kinder response than just getting down out of the bookcase, walking across the back of the *ehhif*’s chair and hitting Urruah very hard between the ears -- for the moment Rhiow just kept reading:

Now it is held as a matter of fact among the residents and clients of the bar in the Hollywood Hotel that there is a place in the middle of the great North American continent where crazy people roll across to and then mostly get stuck. It is the Continental Divide, and east of it reside the people who are pretty much sane, and in Denver reside all the people who are only sort of half crazy and having hit the Divide can go no further. But the truly nutso folk roll right over the Donner Pass and down into Nevada and Oregon and Washington and so on, but most especially into California, where there is just something that attracts them, maybe the San Andreas Fault, and the crazier they are the further they go, and the very craziest wind up in Los Angeles: and the most select of those crazies are in Hollywood.

Rhiow looked over at Urruah again, more bemused than before. He simply shook his own head, and his own not-inconsiderable ears flapped as if in a gale. “Read it,” he said.

She bent her head to the page again, glancing over when it was finished to the next one --

Now even among the Hollywood set some of the crazy people stand out, and these are mostly the ones who arrive from Pennsylvania, or Transylvania, or some other vania, with an eye to relieving the locals of their hard earned dosh. There is much of this commodity available in Hollywood, for it is a locality rich in film industry types who have acquired great heaps of the necessary along the

way, and who love to be seen to fling their moolauw about the landscape in various and sundry directions, thus theoretically proving that they are worth more than the cost of the clothes they stand up in, which can be considerable. Fancy jewelry much with gold and diamonds the size of California walnuts are nothing to these swells, as are mansions the size of the Grand Central Terminal, which is very grand indeed, and therefore many of the crazies, especially those who are crazy in the manner of the fox, have hit on the conceit that all the simooleans possessed by these industry swells are no good to them, for (say the crazy-as-a-fox types) they have no inner beauty, which is to say the beauty of the soul. And these foxy types get busy selling inner beauty and meditation and strange old religions and stranger new religions to these movie people, and relieving them during the process of vast wads of cash, which is of course supposedly worthless anyway, so that this is obviously what the LAPD would normally call a victimless crime.

Now a bunch of us are sitting around the bar very late in the Hollywood Hotel: and the bunch consists of Mike the Mick, who is the doorman and opens the door for those rich swells who forget how their arm muscles operate any time they approach a portal in a place where other mortals may see them: and also in attendance is Kip the Cyp, who is not from Greece but from the island where Aphrodite rose from the waves, and so is big on handling other exotic foreign bundles that have been dumped into the water by guys with speedboats and then come bobbing to the surface again before the coppers get there and notice their provenance. And also there is Shady Harry who owns the bootleg bar out back of Max Factor's: and with him is Dora, who is a shapely blonde and Shady Harry's companion, and a very highly paid companion at that, one who shops at Robinsons all the day and has tea there with the Hat Ladies in the Palm Room upstairs and would not be seen on the Boulevard except in a big black car with a driver, or a guy with a bankroll the size of the big black car. And while we are sitting nursing our various beverages in the dim of the night, which is most excellently silent for the most part, suddenly out of this silence rises a great howling noise like someone who has had a few slugs put into them, though not in the lung, otherwise they would sound much more like they were gargling.

"Now who may that be?" says Shady Harry, as Miss Dora turns a very light shade of pale for someone of her comely ancestry.

Mike the Mick merely nods in a knowing fashion. "It is a nutjob or head case," he says, "who we call the Lady in Black. She is a frail who has been coming down Laurel Canyon

every month or so in this weather. She has acquired this monicker as she always wears black, and very high-end black at that, so that we think she is bankrolled by some unattentive guy up Laurel. And two weeks after the moon is full, which you cannot miss because of the noise of the other crazies who inhabit these environs, she comes down the Boulevard and commences to save our souls, whether we recollect having mislaid them or not. It is interesting timing," says Mike the Mick, "since most of our other crazies prefer the Moon to be full. You cannot stir out of doors without hitting them in such weather."

"I think it is some kind of marketing ploy," says Kip the Cyp, who in his real life is an accountant and knows more than somewhat about ways to get and keep the cabbage, as many studios employ him in this capacity. And since Kip has an adding machine where his heart should be, this is a smart move on the studios' part. "I think," says Kip, "that the Lady in Black has spotted a hole in her competition's advertising strategy and is exploiting it." And indeed she is exploiting it out in the middle of the Boulevard for all the market will bear, which at this hour of the morning is a considerable amount.

Since it is 3 AM and there is little other entertainment to be had at such an hour except the numbers game that Georgio the Wop is running behind Delmonicos, which is nothing to do with New York's Delmonicos but does not mind being mistaken for it, such is the wicked world we live in, the bunch of us go out through the fine polished brass revolving door of the Hollywood Hotel, the first such door on the West Coast, and make our way out onto the sidewalk of the Boulevard, which is very quiet this time of night, the dice games all having retired out behind the Grauman's Chinese. And out there in the midst of the boulevard, where few vehicles pass at such an hour, the Lady in Black comes wandering down from where Laurel Canyon crosses the Boulevard, and she is dressed far more like a babe who has just come out of one of those night clubs downtown than any normal type of god-botherer, as such folks are more usually dressed like performers in the band than like the thrush who stands up in front of the mike and sings. The Lady in Black is walking down the middle of the white line in the middle of the street like someone doing a drunk test, but as she gets closer it can be seen that there is nothing drunk about the way she is walking, and as all the while she looks neither to left nor right or at anything in particular, as far as we can see.

The Lady in Black is making the aforesaid yowling noise like some kind of upset animal, and then she stops that noise at the same time she stops in front of the Hollywood

Hotel, and she turns toward us, but like someone who sees nothing: and she says very loudly, "You are all doomed."

"This is the usual routine," says Mike the Mick under his breath. "She has a rant about not being friends with someone."

"You are not the friends of the Great Old One," she says, "and so when he comes, he will not be kind to you as he will be to his friends, who will be granted the gift of swift oblivion, but you will suddenly take leave of your bodies and your unhoused souls will writhe in torment through aeons uncounted and you will wish that you had been friends of the Devourer of Worlds, but it will be too late for you."

"And now she will tell us the price of admission to being this Devourer guy's friends," says Mike the Mick in my ear, "and it will be retail, not wholesale."

"For now at last comes the hour of the day, and the day of the year, and the year of the aeon of the Black Leopard," says or rather shouts the Lady in Black, "and of that aeon there will be no ending, and the sheaf of sheaves of worlds will be torn open by His teeth and gulped down in His maw, and all lesser dominations even unto the God of the gods will be cast out into the houseless void, and cease to be."

One more page came out of the typewriter and went down onto the desk, and another page was rolled in, and the machine-gun-fast typing started again. As it came down and the last words vanished under the new page, Rhiow heard something she had never heard before, and hoped never to hear again: the Whisperer yowling low in Her throat, in great and increasing distress.

The fur bristling all over her, Rhiow craned her neck to look down at the new page. Hwaith leapt up onto the bookshelf beside her. *Did you hear that?* Rhiow said silently, to both him and Urruah.

Hwaith's eyes were as wide as Urruah's were. *Yes*, Hwaith said: and, *I wish I hadn't*, said Urruah.

"This is unusual," says Mike the Mick. "She has not yet offered to save our souls. That is usually the blowoff that follows such a pitch."

"For the sacrifice has been made in full, though mindlessly," says the doll in black, as a big Ford goes by her and she pays it not a red cent's worth of mind. "And mindfully it is made now, three times three; and the Black Leopard receives it, and the end time is set in train. Exult then, fanged ones, exult in the hour of night when the prophecy is at last made real, and the worthless worlds are

made an end of, and the Black One gorges Himself full on the corpse that is all Life."

And she walks on by us, right down that white line, and pauses at the intersection of Hollywood and Highland and then hangs a left and vanishes around the corner of the hotel. And we stand there being quiet, since though we are all always being told that we are doomed, it rarely gets done quite like this.

"Now there is a lady who is minus at least one banana from the bunch," says Kip the Cyp.

"The City ought to do something," says Miss Dora. "What are we paying our taxes for?"

And they all go back inside through the beautiful brass rotating door of the Hollywood Hotel, with Mike the Mick and myself being the last ones to go. "It is strange that she did not try to charge us the usual rate," says Mike the Mick, "which always involves some kind of meeting up in the rich part of the hills and a great forking over of cash."

"Now where is she gone to?" I say.

"Let us go see," says Mike the Mick. "But I do not think we will see much."

We go up to the corner of Hollywood and Highland, and as we go it commences to rain, which is a peculiar thing out of what seems like a clear sky, but then with the lights as bright as they are on Hollywood Boulevard these days, it is often hard to tell what is going on up in the aether. And when we look up Highland, there is no sign of her.

"For a doll dressed like that she moves fast," I say to Mike the Mick.

"This I have seen before," says Mike. "But there is never anyone there to pick her up in a car, and I sometimes think she must slip into one of the apartment buildings up Highland, but there is no sign of her doing so, and no one up there seems to know about her, for once or twice when I have a slow lunch hour I go up there to ask a few questions, and no one shows any sign of having been bought off, which I would surely detect by now."

So we head back in the direction of the Hollywood Hotel, and Mike the Mick says, "I have seen the Lady in Black three months running now, and I do not know whether I should buy some more umbrellas when I see her, or throw them away." Because as we walk back up the Boulevard, the street where it was raining is now as dry as any number of bones.

Now we have plenty of ghosts here but none of them can dry the street up after a rain, and I wonder whether the City should try to procure her services in the flood season. Yet if the Lady in Black is in fact producing the rain, then a joe with a smart head could use her to make a lot of moolah out of the LA County Flood Control Board. But no one

can catch her long enough to figure out which side she should be working for, or against, which is annoying and also too much like life.

The Silent Man stopped typing, and stared at the paper.

Rhiow looked at Hwaith. “I thought you said it wasn’t going to rain until October,” Urruah said.

Hwaith shrugged his tail. “Poetic license,” he said. “Anyway, it didn’t rain last night. At least, not anywhere else...”

Rhiow was beyond being all that concerned about the weather. She was bristling still, and still hearing the silent distress of Hrau’f the Silent, of one of the Powers that Be, over something long-dreaded, half-expected, now coming terribly true. In the meantime, the Silent Man had stopped typing, and was staring at the half-finished page in the typewriter. *I hate it when these things don’t have an obvious ending...* Rhiow heard him think.

Then Rhiow stepped down onto the Silent Man’s desk, because now – however bizarre it seemed – she understood what she needed to do. She sat down by the right side of the typewriter, and stared at him until he felt the weight of her regard and looked her in the eye.

“Cousin,” she said in the Speech, “I am on errantry, and in the Queen’s name, I greet you. Now let’s talk business.”

And the Silent Man didn’t move an inch except that his eyebrows went right up.