

FIVE

You don't look English, the Silent Man said.

Rhiow threw a glance at Urruah. "Did I miss something?" she said.

Urruah tilted his head to one side, looking thoughtful. But before he could say anything, the Silent Man said, *We've got a lot of Brits around here. They're real big on the Queen.*

"Ah," Rhiow said. "I take your meaning now." She purred, slightly amused. "You mean the queen-*ehhif* whose territory includes London. No, sorry, not that Queen. We have one of our own, who is of...for the moment, let's just say a higher order."

Those very cool eyes rested on Rhiow for a moment, and the Silent Man's hand went off to one side, as if searching for something that wasn't there. Then he very visibly brought the hand back to rest in front of the typewriter, and put the other hand down on top of it, as if intent on keeping the first one where it was.

"Am I meant to understand," Rhiow said, trying not to sound too threatening about it, "that you have no problem with the idea that a cat might be able to speak?"

Oh, on the contrary, the Silent Man said, *I'm thinking that this all probably has something to do with the medication. They keep telling me they're sure they've got the dosage right now; but every time they say that, I get some strange new side effect.* He gave Rhiow a rather cockeyed look, though again it had that cool, assessing quality to it. *I'll grant you, though, this side effect's a lot stranger than some. And I usually don't get them this late in my day...*

“I’ve been called a lot of things in my time,” Urruah said in the Speech, “but never a side effect.”

The Silent Man looked at him. *One talking cat, he said, might have been an accident. Two starts to look like a coincidence –*

“And three would be enemy action?” Urruah said. *I wonder, he added silently for Rhiow’s benefit, should we tell him that’s what we’re here about...?*

I wouldn’t rush that, Ruah. Look at him – he’s a bit on the brittle side, at the moment. And tired. Let the simplest part sink in first.

The Silent Man laughed, just a barely audible hissing sound. *And a smart guy, too, he said to Urruah. Okay, you’re making the case for ‘hallucination’ a whole lot stronger now...*

“I’m sorry if all this strains your sense of your grasp on reality,” Rhiow said, “but sometimes, to keep that reality in good order, such interventions become necessary.” She glanced at the page in the typewriter. “It would seem that you’ve seen something unusual: something that may have a bearing on the reason we’ve come here.”

The Silent Man leaned back in his wooden typing chair, so that it rocked back a little on its base. He looked from Rhiow to Urruah and back again, and shook his head. *I seem to be seeing a lot of unusual today, he said, and rubbed his face with both hands. As he let them fall, for a moment a look of great weariness and pain showed in his eyes: but a second later it had been so completely sealed over that Rhiow wondered for a second whether she had really seen it. So let me get this straight. Cats can talk...*

“Some cats can talk to humans, or *ehhif* as we call them,” Rhiow said. “Yes.”

“But only when our business specifically requires it,” Urruah said, “as it does now.”

Okay. But how come my cat doesn’t talk to me?

“She doesn’t know the Speech,” Urruah said. “She speaks Ailurin, like most cats do.”

The Silent Man looked unblinkingly at Urruah. *There are two secret cat languages? he said. Oh, come on, now, that’s one too many. What a shame: I was starting to believe you weren’t the drugs talking...*

Urruah’s tail had begun to lash; but Rhiow was amused. “One of the languages is no secret,” she said. “Humans can learn some Ailurin if they’re patient and attentive. Sheba says you know a little of it. The other language, you don’t need to learn. Everything recognizes it: and it’s not just a cat language. It’s the language in which everything was made. Not all cats know it, though – not even most of them.”

“The way most of the humans you’d meet here don’t speak Italian,” Urruah said.

The Silent Man gave Urruah a dry look. *You’d be surprised how many of the humans I deal with speak Italian,* he said. *But let it pass.* He looked back over at Rhiow again. The expression was strange. *So what’s all this about?*

“There are some strange things happening in your city at the moment...” Rhiow said.

The Silent Man gave her a look. *Blackie,* he said, *this is Hollywood. If strange things didn’t happen here, I’d worry.*

Hwaith snickered. The Silent Man threw him a look. *And you,* he said. *You I’ve seen here before, but you never talked to me.*

“It wasn’t allowed,” Hwaith said. “Now it is.”

“What we read about in your writing there – “ Urruah said. “That would be one of the things we’re looking into.”

Why? said the Silent Man.

Rhiow tucked herself down into what her *ehhif* usually referred to as “meatloaf” mode. “The explanation may take some time,” she said, “and I have to suggest that you may think it’s something to do with your medication again, as many aspects of it are going to sound bizarre.”

He smiled again. *All right,* he said. *One thing’s for sure: my medication doesn’t refer to itself as often as you do. And the other things you’re looking into – what would those be?*

Rhiow threw Urruah a look. *Keep it simple!* she said silently.

“The earthquakes,” Urruah said.

At this the Silent Man actually threw his head back and laughed, though again he produced no sound but a kind of hiss. Rhiow thought of the hissing way Ith laughed, and again nearly bristled, but for a different reason: humans weren’t meant to laugh so. *Earthquakes!* the Silent Man said, rubbing his eyes again as he recovered his composure a little. *They’re just like the weather, aren’t they? Everybody talks about them, but nobody does anything about them...because nobody can. But now here you folks come along, and say you can do something. What do you do?*

“It’s more in the line of prevention than direct intervention, as a rule,” Rhiow said. “Quakes are difficult to stop outright. Also, like forest fires, they have their own reasons for happening – so trying to forestall them too long can be unwise. But the ones you’ve been having lately aren’t natural. We think they may be connected to something else we’re investigating at the moment.”

I suppose, the Quiet Man said, that it might strain my present credulity too far to inquire what that might be.

"Maybe we should leave that alone for the moment," Urruah said.

Rhiow looked thoughtfully at the Silent Man. "Let's just say," she said, "that some of the earthquakes that have occurred recently have a kind of connection to certain places in the city: not merely a physical one. We're in the process of investigating some of those connections, and the spots to which they're attached. One of them is quite near here." She looked over at Hwaith.

"Within a couple of blocks," Hwaith said. "Just south of Sunset, near Beverly and Crescent –"

The Silent Man nodded: though the look he gave them all was a little odd. "And there are several other locations," Rhiow said, "that we're going to go have a look at as well. This one was closest; our colleague Hwaith here suggested that we should stop with you first to get the news. And now I see," and she threw a sidewise glance at Hwaith, "that the choice was wise."

So let me see if I've got all this straight, the Silent Man said. What we have here is a secret organization of talking cats dedicated to stopping earthquakes...

Rhiow looked up into the Silent Man's face, amused: for he wasn't speaking in mockery. And it was surprising to be looked at with such quick acceptance of her intelligence by an *ehhif* who was not also a wizard; and not just acceptance, but humor -- although the humor was not only dry, but a bit chilly. This was a creature who did not waste time denying reality. Once he had accepted it, he got on with business. *But then, Rhiow thought, if I'm any judge, this Silent Man has had entirely too much reality to deal with over the past few years.* That look of pain on his face was familiar: she'd seen it in Iaehh's face too often of late. *I must find out more about what's the matter with him. If he's going to be of help to us, the least we can do is return the favor.*

"I'd say our remit goes a little further than just earthquakes," Rhiow said. "Nor does the organization consist only of cats. We and numerous other species, including your own, work together to keeping this world in one piece."

I'd say your organization's had a close call, the last few years, the Silent Man said.

"I'd say you were right," Rhiow said. "Many of our people were involved. Many died, trying to prevent what almost happened...and didn't. We're busy with that job again; or still. But the scale is considerably larger."

Larger than the Second World War? said the Silent Man. ...*But then, what was it she said? 'The sheaf of the sheaves of worlds?' Drunks and crazies repeat themselves, sometimes. But the Lady in Black didn't look drunk. And crazy...* He shook his head. *Crazy covers a lot of ground. Especially in this town. His eyes glinted with cynicism. Around here no one notices your crazy much, if your wallet's fat enough. And there are fat wallets in plenty.*

"That's another issue," Hwaith said. "Cults..."

We've got enough of those around here, the Silent Man said. ... and I'd be the wrong man to ask why. Lots of people smarter than me have to have been asking themselves that question for years now. Maybe it's just -- He leaned back in his chair, waving his hands in the air in the first really casual gesture that Rhiow had seen him make since he walked in the door. *This is California, after all. The Gold Rush mentality has never really died. People come here from every place where things aren't working to get away, start over, leave old lives behind. And then when they get here, they start to find out how lonely that is. He folded his arms, leaning back further. Or they fail... and then they go looking for friends. After a while, somebody tells them about this great place they've found, this temple or churchlet or secret club, where people tell you how to act, what to do to have everything come out right. The lost and failed and frightened are glad to find a place like that. Soon enough they start thinking that person who runs that place is something special. Maybe not even quite human...*

The Silent Man smiled. It was a surprisingly grim look. *And then the person in whom the poor patsies have placed all this trust starts pulling the strings. He or she starts getting them to do things they'd never otherwise have done. Hand over everything they own, their houses and the contents of their bank accounts. Desert their husband or wife and marry somebody they're told to. Give up their children to be raised by someone else, according to someone's 'holy word'. And then, while they're not looking, the compassionate and enlightened leader of the Ultimate Tabernacle of Divine Confusion runs off to Rio with a carpetbag full of his poor dumb disciples' money.*

"Maybe," Urruah said, "such people -- the victims, anyway -- are just looking for meaning in their lives." He flicked a glance at Rhiow, not having to say aloud what she knew he was thinking; that it was hard on a species not have any clear sense of whether or not the One existed. To be sure, there were People who didn't believe in Queen Iau, but not many; a far more common reaction for holders of the feline worldview was simply to have no time for Her. Independence ran deep in the feline psyche,

sometimes enough so that a given Person might feel her or his essential felinity was best expressed by denying the authority of Deity -- if necessary, to Her face. There were numerous stories among People of the Queen dealing kindly, even humorously, with such free thinkers...knowing them to be intent on being true to themselves and their nature. But such defiance was not an option that would've been open to Rhiow; it would have been an essential denial of a command structure that she had long accepted.

In a world full of death and pain, the Silent Man said, a world full of lies and corruption and theft and cruelty, where good people get cheated and bad people prosper, can you blame them?

"Hardly," Hwaith said. "Nonetheless, despite how well they might mean, such innocents can still do great harm if they're led into it. Or misled."

"Which brings us to your Lady in Black," Rhiow said. "Your friend had seen her often before. But no one tried to follow her before? No one had tried before to find where she'd come from?"

If they tried, the Silent Man said, my sources didn't mention it.

"I think we should find out," Hwaith said.

Rhiow lashed her tail. "I concur. The things she spoke of -- " She flicked an ear at Urruah. "There are some troubling implications."

What, you mean besides the destruction of the 'sheaf of sheaves of worlds?'

Urruah laughed under his breath at the *ehhif's* dessicated humor. "You wrote that your companion said she'd been seen three months running -- "

That's right. Always a couple weeks after the full moon.

"In other words," Hwaith said, "when the moon's dark." She gave Rhiow a thoughtful sidewise look.

Rhiow's tail lashed. Moondark was not an unequivocally dangerous time; but when the Tom's Eye was most tightly shut, there was a tendency for the darker influences to scurry about and make themselves noticed, like rats scratching and running inside the walls of the world. *And for straightforwardly natural reasons, the new moon's one of the nodes of the month that favor earthquakes...*

"You said that she was yowling," Urruah said.

The Silent Man nodded. *Godawful noise, he said. Kind of like a cat. No offense.*

"None taken," Rhiow said. "And then no sooner had she delivered her message than she went around the corner and simply vanished."

That's the way it looked.

Rhiow flicked an ear backward, then forward, considering. “There’s a place we need to visit as well, then,” she said. “We may be able to throw some light on where she came from, or where she went.”

She sat up. “Perhaps we might make your home our base for a short time while we conduct our investigations?” Rhiow said. “Sheba’s told us the ground rules: we won’t seem different to your neighbors from any of the other People who visit you here. And we won’t overtax your hospitality.” Will *we*, ‘Ruah?

Urruah half-closed his eyes and let his glance wander sidewise. Officially this was “strategic aversion”, a gesture of agreement or conciliation to a more senior or dominant Person in a pride. But Rhiow noted in combined amusement and annoyance that the direction in which Urruah’s eyes slid included the food dishes out on the terrace...which turned the gesture into more what an *ehhif* would have thought of as an eyeroll.

The Silent Man naturally noticed nothing of this. *You kidding?* he said. *I’d prefer you stayed. That way I can test whether you’re still so voluble when I’m off the pills. Hang around just as long as you like.*

“One thing, though,” Hwaith said. “The writing you just did – Cousin, would it be intruding to ask what your interest in the story is?”

You mean, besides seeing it happen in front of me? The Silent Man stretched, leaned back in the chair again and folded his arms. *This town is all about surfaces, he said. And light. The light of day, and what shows when the flashbulbs pop. When something pokes through a surface – or else only puts in an appearance at night, when the light’s poor, and the things come out that can’t stand daylight or publicity – then that attracts my attention. It’s been that way for me for a long time now, and maybe it’s a bad habit. But it’s a hard one to break, this late in the day.*

Urruah stood up and stretched too, giving the Silent Man an approving look. “I think we have something in common there,” he said. “Night’s our time. Though we’re not beyond hunting in daylight when the circumstances call for it.”

“Which is a business we should be about,” Rhiow said. “If you have a map, and can show us the places from which the Lady in Black appeared and then disappeared, we’ll go have a look.”

Why waste time with maps? the Silent Man said, pushing back from his desk. *I’ll show you myself.*

Rhiow stood up as the *ehhif* did. *Well*, she said, a little concerned, *we wouldn’t want to put you to any trouble --*

Besides, might be smart to have some cover. You guys can't just go parading around down there by yourselves, after all. There are people and dogs and traffic...

“Oh,” Urruah said, putting his whiskers forward in amusement, “dogs... I wouldn't worry about the dogs. In fact, if I were them, I'd worry -
-”

Could you cut out the tom stuff for a moment? Rhiow said silently “Actually,” she said aloud, “though your concern does you credit, you needn't worry: no one's going to see us unless we want them to.”

You mean you can vanish or something?

“Urruah?” Rhiow said.

Urruah, his whiskers forward, jumped down from the desk, turned around to face the Silent Man, and then took a step sideways, sidling as he did so. He took his time about it, and went so far to control the effect that his face, set in what an eh-hif used for a grin, lingered slightly longer than the rest of him before it disappeared.

The Silent Man didn't even blink. *Now I know some people who'd find that talent a whole lot too handy,* he said, as Urruah slipped back into visibility again. *Probably better that the technique stays under wraps.*

“So you see,” Hwaith said, “we'll have no problem avoiding notice.”

Sure, the Silent Man said, *but that has to take some effort.*

“Well, it does,” Urruah said, “but - “

And why should you bother? Everybody around here knows Sheba. She goes out with me all the time. Why wouldn't she bring some of her chums along for a stroll on the Boulevard? Nobody'd think twice. This is Hollywood, and you're with me.

Urruah began to purr so loudly that Rhiow was surprised the windows didn't rattle. “Cousin,” she said, “you're kind to want to save us trouble.” She put her whiskers forward. “And I confess, it'd be fun...”

The Silent Man glanced at his watch. *Come on,* he said. *We'll go down there, have a look around at the first couple of your places, grab an early lunch.*

“But you've been out all night,” Rhiow said.

Couldn't sleep now if I tried, the Silent Man said. *Besides, now you've got me wondering about some things I missed at first glance. Wouldn't mind asking a few more questions myself. You can tell Sheba what we're planning, I take it?*

“Of course,” Rhiow said. “I think she'll be delighted.”

“It'll be something of a walk down to Hollywood and Highland - “
Hwaith said.

Walk? The Silent Man looked at Hwaith with a cockeyed expression. *Are you from here? Who walks in LA?*

And that was how they wound up being driven into the heart of Hollywood in the back seat of a sky-blue 1941 Lincoln Continental, by the Silent Man himself.

Iau only knows what the neighbors think of this, if they're watching, Rhiow thought as she and Urruah and Hwaith wandered down the pathway to the street in Sheba's wake.

And when we're talking, said the Silent Man, as he opened the car door, *no one's going to be able to hear us?*

"No one we don't want to," Urruah said. "You'll want to make sure your mouth doesn't move when you're saying something, that's all. We can hear you subvocalizing just fine."

The Silent Man shook his head. *All right, then,* he said. *We'll go down to where I saw her, have a quick look around. Then you'll let me know what else you need. Everybody in...*

Sheba, long used to the drill, leapt up inside and curled herself down comfortably in the front seat, opposite the driver's side. "It's so much fun to do this and know what's going to happen for a change!" Sheba said. "And it's great to go down to town: everybody's going to make a big fuss over us. Now I know that leather back there is slippery, but try not to sink your claws in any deeper than you need to on the curves. You won't have to hang on very hard: he's a careful driver..."

Rhiow jumped up into the broad back seat and looked around her with surprise. Rhiow's experience of *ehhif* mechanical transport until now had been limited to the occasional New York cab, when her own *ehhif* had taken her to the vet for checkups and so forth. But this roomy solidity took her by surprise, and the luxury of the fittings: they were real leather, real wood. Rhiow was, however, also surprised by some of the omissions. *No seat belts?* she said silently to Urruah, as he and Hwaith jumped up behind her, and the Silent Man shut the door. *Have they repealed the laws of physics on the highways here?*

Urruah's tail was waving from side to side as he sat down beside her. *It took the ehhif a little while to wrap their brains around the concept of auto safety,* Urruah said. *Or that they would have to pay more for it. I'll grant you, these cars aren't as safe as the ones at our end of time. But they're handsomer...*

For her own part, Rhiow would happily enough have exchanged any amount of handsomeness for the knowledge that the occupants of the car she was riding in weren't about to be thrown all over the place if something hit it. But as the Silent Man got into the driver's seat, started the car up and pulled away from his house, she felt a little reassured: he seemed to be driving very slowly indeed.

"Can't be doing more than twenty-five miles an hour," Urruah said under his breath. "Looks like we're riding with someone who actually takes the local speed limit seriously...."

And it seemed that he was right. After a minute or so, as they turned a corner, Rhiow relaxed enough to stand up on her hind legs and put her forepaws up against the bottom of the rear window. The car slid down yet another street lined with broad sidewalks and houses set well back from the street behind well-watered green lawns, then turned yet another corner.

Even the house-lined streets they'd been in until now were fairly wide: now they had come out on a wide boulevard that looked at least as broad as a New York avenue. It was lined with low buildings, mostly shops and stores and the occasional hotel or bank or other office building.

"Oh, now *look* at this," Urruah said, in the kind of voice one would normally reserve for suddenly seeing something of great beauty or wonder.. He had somehow managed to get the back window on his side open; and now he was sticking his head out of it, staring at something they were passing. Rhiow dropped to the seat again and looked over to the other side of the car, seeing what looked like a long red bus.

"It's a *hRhed Kharr!*" Urruah said. "Oh, Iau, thank you for letting me see this!"

Rhiow was tempted to simply squeeze her eyes shut and stop watching: Urruah was so far beyond delight at the moment that she suspected he was on the point of letting his tongue flap in the air like a *houff*. All she could do was put her whiskers forward at the sight of the amused ehhif looking down at him from the "Red Car", which it turned out was no bus, but some sort of trolley that slid demurely past them on rails. Rhiow sat down by Hwaith and said quietly, "Cousin, you've got to forgive him: he does believe so deeply in complete cultural immersion..."

Hwaith's whiskers were forward too. "Rhiow, it's not a problem," he said. "Where would our tourist industry be without tourists?" The Red Car glided away in a splendor of sunlit crimson, and Urruah was already craning his neck to look at something else.

Hwaith, for his part, was looking thoughtfully at the back of the Silent Man's head. *About a hundred things you didn't say to him just now,* Hwaith said silently.

What...about the strictly spiritual side of things? Probably it's wiser to keep our conversations with the Whisperer out of the ehhif public domain for the moment. He's a hard-headed one, the Silent Man: but I wouldn't stretch that hardness too far just yet.

And what about his "Lady in Black?" You have some suspicions about what she might be, I think. What are you going to tell him about her? Or should I say "it?"

Rhiow's eyes widened, and her tail lashed. Hwaith had quickly reached one of her own conclusions, one she very much hoped was more pessimistic than the reality. *I'll bite that rat's throat when we've caught it,* she said. *Especially since there are almost too many suspicions, at this point...and even the Whisperer didn't sound as if She was eager to see the worst of them vindicated.*

But will She, though? That's the question.

The unnerved sound of Hwaith's thought made Rhiow look at him with some concern. *This part of the world,* Hwaith said, *has its own peculiarities. Plenty of wizards, to be sure. But there are old powers and influences here that can bubble up without warning...and when they do, it can take considerable intervention to quiet them down again.* He looked out the window, blinking, as if the light suddenly bothered him. *That's how my predecessor on the gates went; old Fu'ahh. He stumbled into a sinkhole in the hills – a pool of old power that had gone live in response to something some ehhif had stirred up.* Hwaith's tail was lashing now, and his eyes had gone veiled over an expression of anger and pain. *We never did find out what caused that flareup...*

We might now, Rhiow said, *if we keep our eyes open, and watch what we do.*

Hwaith gave her such a look of naked gratitude that Rhiow hardly knew where to look, except away. *There's something I hadn't known. How lonely has he been since he lost his mentor? Does he think it's his fault somehow? This may complicate things...*

The car slowed, stopped. Rhiow looked up and out the nearest window, and was glad to see a distraction: a strange iron shape rearing up behind one of the buildings on the south side of the boulevard, near the middle of the block. It made her think of the top level of the Empire State Building, marooned by itself on the ground and looking rather out of place. Urruah caught her glance. "A radio tower?" he said.

What? That monstrosity? Not a chance. Look at the size of it. That's the hot new thing...or so they tell us. Television. The Silent Man shook his head.

Urruah stared. *Really? Surely it's too – oww!*

He turned and looked over his shoulder at Rhiow, who had just reached up and stuck a claw in his butt. She narrowed her eyes at him. *You were just about to tell him some of the future? Don't get carried away here!*

Too what? the Silent Man said.

“Uh, sorry. Too small for a TV antenna?” Urruah said.

The Silent Man laughed that hissing laugh again. “TV”, he said. *Cute. Too small, though? This one screws up the local skyline more than somewhat as it is. Paramount had a heck of a time getting the city to give them permission for the thing – but finally they got their way. Though whether they'll be glad about that in ten years, who knows? There's maybe three hundred television receiver sets in LA. Most of them belong to people with a lot of money. What do you expect when one of the things costs a hundred bucks? The rest are homemade – one of the transmission companies that was trying to start up actually mailed out flyers to people with instructions on how to build their own receivers. Don't know what kind of takeup they got.*

The Silent Man shrugged as the signal changed and he pulled the sedan into the intersection for a right turn. *I think W6XYZ there is just a loss leader: Paramount's using it to get more attention for its movies. They've been trying to get a commercial license for the service for years now, but the government's had a whole lot of other things to think about. Now that the war's over, though -- You ask me, the radio people have been greasing some palms in Washington to keep things just the way they are. Don't see why they're worried, though.* He smiled one of those cynical smiles that Rhiow was already getting used to the sight of. *Who'd sit home squinting at a blurry movie on one of those little dinky tubes when you can go for a night out with your doll and see it in a beautiful gilded picture palace? And the only other thing they're talking about doing on television is some kind of program with a host interviewing people. They're calling it a 'talk show'. Who's going to spend a hundred bucks on a box that just shows people sitting around talking?*

“Who indeed,” Rhiow said. She glanced over at Urruah again. *Are you settled down a little, now? Can you please remember what decade you're in?*

Uh, yeah. But, Rhi -- Urruah climbed carefully onto the back of the front seat, balancing there next to the brim of the Silent Man's hat and

peering forward through the windshield. Then he leapt down into the front seat beside Sheba. *Our guy here is really enjoying talking to someone without having to run it through paper first. Big pieces, or little ones...*

Yes, Rhiow said, *I gathered that.* There was something else about his tone that was jogging her memory. The Silent Man's voice reminded her of the way Iaehh sounded, some evenings, when some colleague from work called him: as if he wanted to keep them talking past the mere business at hand – the sound of someone afraid of the silence that would eventually fall, a silence that had once had another voice in it, now no longer to be heard except in memory. *And even memory fades...*

Here we go, said the Silent Man. *We'll park here and walk over.* He pulled up to the curb, killed the engine, and stepped out of the car, opening the back door on the curb side for the rear-seat passengers.

Rhiow and Hwaith jumped down onto the sidewalk and stood there, glancing around them, as the Silent Man reached in to get Sheba out, and Urruah followed. "This is where it happened?" he said.

"This is it," said the Silent Man, settling Sheba comfortably on his shoulder. He headed up to the corner, and stopped there.

Rhiow and the others followed him, pausing to gaze upward at the astonishing structure that took up what had to be at least the next half of this block of Hollywood Boulevard and reached well back along Highland.

"This," Rhiow said to Hwaith, "...is a hotel?"

"One of the better ones," Hwaith said.

It occurred to Rhiow that taking it all in was going to require some time. *But then I'm used to New York hotels. Relatively small buildings, in terms of the space they take up on a block...and relatively sedate.* Whereas it seemed that the only thing this building's architect had lacked was sedation. The place was a complex vista of white stucco and red tile, with a confusion of terraces and porticoes and awnings and cupolas and even what appeared to be a couple of dome-topped bell towers. The terraces and balconies on the Boulevard side were set back from the street by a couple of sidewalks' width of plantings, and sheltered – if that was the word for a building so exhibitionistic – by a row of fine tall palm trees.

Quite something, huh? said the Silent Man.

"Unique," Rhiow said, putting her whiskers forward.

"Spanish Revival, they call it," Hwaith said to Urruah as they stood there gazing up at the little tiled portico that sheltered the entry to the Hollywood Hotel's bar.

Revival? Rhiow thought. *...Possibly because it fainted after they woke it up the first time, and it saw what had happened to it...?* She waved her

tail in a gesture of irony that she hoped would be lost on a watching *ehhif*, and regarded the portico. HOLLYWOOD HOTEL CORNER, a sign above it proclaimed, as if seriously thinking it could redefine the nearby intersection in its own terms. “So this is where you came out,” Rhiow said, “and saw the Lady in Black...”

This is the spot.

“Good,” Rhiow said, as she caught sight of two small mostly-white shapes coming along toward them under the palm trees. They were looking at Rhiow with interest, and slight confusion. *Sightseeing, Rhi?* one of them said silently. *And out in the open? We done here already?*

Arhu’s tone was surprisingly edgy, in marked contrast to the sound of it just a couple of hours ago. Siffha’h was walking quite close to him, a kind of body language that Rhiow had started to recognize as suggesting that she was troubled by her brother’s rattled state.

Not just yet, Rhiow said. Granted, the situation looks unusual, but bear with me for the moment. We’ve turned up something interesting with this ehhif’s help. Some kind of apparition was out here before dawn... possibly even a revenant. But the only ones who saw it were ehhif. We need a better look.

Arhu glanced curiously up at the Silent Man as he and Siffha’h came strolling up to the group and paused at the corner. For his own part, the Silent Man looked at them almost without surprise. *More of your people, Blackie?* he said to Rhiow.

“The younger members of our team,” Rhiow said. “This one, Arhu, is gifted in a particular way that will be helpful to us. He sees what’s going to be...”

“Which is useful,” Arhu said, “but sometimes not as useful as seeing what’s been.” He looked over at Rhiow. “How long before dawn did this apparition turn up?”

“Maybe two hours before the Eye came up?” Rhiow said to Hwaith. He waved his tail “yes.” “Four AM, as *ehhif* reckon it. See what you can See.”

“Got to do something about this traffic first,” Siffha’h said, and sat down at the corner, looking out at the intersection.

All the traffic lights promptly turned yellow, and then red.

Now that’s a gift, said the Silent Man, as the traffic in all four directions came to a halt.

Arhu sidled himself and wandered out into the intersection. “Give me five minutes,” he said.

The Silent Man watched with interest, backing up to lean against one side of the tiled portico, like one *ehhif* casually waiting to meet another. On his shoulder, Sheba settled herself down with her paws pressed together, and closed her eyes. *Don't think you'll have that long*, said the Silent Man, shaking his head as he looked for any sign of where Arhu had gone. *They'll start jumping the lights...*

"I wouldn't bet on it," Siffha'h said, and closed her eyes.

A sudden odd silence fell over the intersection as all the cars' electrical systems failed in unison, for perhaps a mile in every direction.

The silence didn't last more than a few moments: all around the traffic lights, drivers started getting out of their cars, pulling the vehicles' hoods open, staring into the complex innards in complete bemusement, and (in some cases) exercising their vocabularies most creatively. But Arhu paid them no mind. In mid-intersection, he sat himself down, curled his tail around his toes, and stared in an unfocused-looking way at the cracked concrete there.

Rhiow didn't have anything of the Eye herself, but to a watching wizard, the influences involved in its use could obscurely be glimpsed. For a few seconds, the imagery of previous hours whirled around Arhu as he felt about with his mind for the specific moments of past time that were needed. He overshot a bit at first. Filmy cars seemed to run over or through him at high speed, gauzy pedestrians jittered back and forth in the background; the memories of recent days and nights alternately spotlighted or shadowed Arhu. He didn't move, not even his tail twitching, as the imagery faded, went unchangingly dark around him. And then he looked up, gazing down Hollywood Boulevard.

"There," Arhu said.

They watched her come, moving through and past the brief here-and-now traffic jam as if it wasn't there: but then again, last night, it hadn't been. Down the white line she came, exactly as described. The revenant was a thin, pale apparition in the broad sunlight of day, and hard to see; but there was no mistaking her. She was tall and elegantly dressed and empty-eyed, walking with a stately and icy precision, her eyes seeming fixed on some goal that the people around her had given up their right to see. The expression of cold-set scorn on the queen-*ehhif's* face, and the feeling of revulsion and rejection that flowed from her, gave Rhiow a chill down her back.

She glanced up and saw with some surprise that the Silent Man's eyes were fixed, not on Arhu or the traffic jam, but the remembered vision of the

night before. *But then he was here, Rhiow thought. That alone could make it possible for him to see an induced recurrence.*

Possibly feeling Rhiow's regard on him, the Silent Man glanced down at her. *That's a good trick, he said softly.*

"We'll see if it's going to be good enough," Rhiow said. Closer and closer the vision came, straight down the white line, walking right through one of the live *ehhif* who was standing with his hands on his hips and staring at his stalled car in disgust. He got an odd look, that *ehhif*, and he shivered all over: in the mid-morning warmth, he took off his hat and mopped his brow as if suddenly sweating cold.

On the Lady in Black came, and stepped out into the intersection. Another second or three and she would walk right through Arhu. But he looked up, catching her eyes with his: and in mid-step she froze where she was.

In that instant the vision went sharp, clear and dark. Around her the pavement went black and wet; beyond her, night and streetlights could be seen. Rhiow didn't move, for fear of distracting Arhu. But she looked closely at the Lady in Black. As *ehhif* went, Rhiow suspected that this particular queen would be considered extremely beautiful. Yet there was also something strange about her, a sense that the physical form she wore was as relatively unimportant as some item of clothing.

Rhiow looked harder, as Arhu was doing. He had gotten up now and stretched himself, and was walking around the queen-*ehhif*. Perhaps Rhiow caught a touch of his examination more directly, now, for as she looked at the *ehhif's* shape, inside it, only half-seen, some odd force seemed to twist and writhe. *What's going on there?* Rhiow wondered, her ears starting to go back. *It's as if –*

She's not really there? Arhu said silently, pausing to look up at the woman-shape from behind. He was bristling, the hair on his back all spiked up, and his tail was starting to fluff. *Good guess. No scent, Rhi. She's a shell. She's been soulsplit.*

Rhiow growled softly in her throat, angry and unnerved to have her and Hwaith's suspicions independently confirmed. A few ways did exist to denature a body's connection to its soul while the body was still living – not exactly a severance, but the next best thing, exempting the soul from passing along the consequences of its actions to the body in which it belonged. All these methods were dangerous, and except under very specific circumstances, all of them were illegal for wizards to use, either on other beings or on themselves. There were, of course, some ways besides wizardry to produce the same effects. Either way, the hapless practitioners tended not

to stay alive long enough to spread information about the techniques very widely. But where soulsplitting was being employed, there were also usually other closely affiliated abuses of power to be found: and all of them were favorite tools of Sa'rráhh's, when the Lone One thought she could trick some poor mortal creature into using them.

Is her body still alive, do you think? Hwaith said.

Don't know, Arhu said. She sure doesn't care. This soul's completely taken up with thoughts of what she's warning us poor bystanders about. His tail was lashing. And she's enjoying the thoughts, let me tell you. She really hates everyone and everything here, and she just can't wait to see this whole state fall right off into the Pacific.

Rhiow hardly found that surprising. Many beings who underwent soulsplitting did so because they thought that liberating the soul from the body while still scheduled to be alive would allow them access to some "higher", purer, less emotion-dominated state of being. But all too often matters went the other way entirely, usually because the creature initiating the split didn't fully understand the deeper reaches of the relationship between soul and body -- the way the physical side of existence acted as a check on the less safe or sane urges of a spirit still connected, however tenuously, to physical timeflow and its consequences. *Arhu, Rhiow said, is it safe to query her? For us, and for her connection to her body? Whatever state that might be in...*

Arhu walked back around in front of the Lady in Black, watching her closely, and sat down again. *I'm holding this revenance out of the timeflow for the moment, he said. It's probably safe enough to ask her a few questions. But I can't keep Seeing her this way for long: and even if I could, it might not be smart. Something else is watching her too, Rhi. Whatever it is, it's inside time, and shouldn't have any perception of this frozen moment. But I'd rather not press my luck.*

All right. Ask her: who is the Great Old One?

Arhu said nothing aloud, merely looked at the queen-ehhif's apparition. She spoke no word in response, moved not at all. But at a long chilly remove, as if it were being bounced back through several stages of some immaterial relay, the answer came: *He is the one from outside, older than all Gods: their inverse, dwelling in the Void. He is the darkness before any word, and the silence into which all words spoken must die. He is the End.*

Rhiow licked her nose. Urruah, now sitting by her, looked out at Arhu. *Ask her, Urruah said, who is the Black Leopard?*

Another long silence: longer this time, Rhiow thought. *He is Tepeyollotl Night-Eater, Lord of the Beasts of the Dark, the answer came back, who is called into time to devour all things: and to the darkness beyond time and timelessness he will return when all is devoured. He is the Herald of the End.*

Rhiow and Urruah looked at each other. Each of them could feel the Whisperer, silent for the moment, listening through their ears and minds: and they could feel the tension in Her as if it were their own.

Rhi, Arhu said, can you feel something in this neighborhood watching this? Not that close by. Not actually taking an interest as yet. But it might –

Urruah looked out at the intersection, his tail waving slowly from side to side, his ears down. *Ask her, what is the meaning of the sacrifice that has been made?*

An even longer pause this time. *It is the opening of the way into the realities that are fouled with life. It is life spilled out to enable the entry of the Great Old One into the worlds he will rule and destroy. It is the beginning of the End.*

Rhiow stared at Urruah, the fur going up on her back...as, on some other level of reality, the Whisperer's was doing. And Hwaith, standing by Rhiow and Urruah now, looked out at Arhu. *Ask her, he said: where did you die?*

Rhiow looked at Hwaith in shock. And this time there was no delay whatever in the answer. *I have not died. I can never die! Yet I am done with the world of bodies, one with the Black One forever, safe in His darkness!* It was almost a shout of triumph, the first answer holding any passion that this image of the Lady in Black had produced. Yet – was there fear in that voice, too?

-- and beneath it, so faint that Rhiow's ears twitched forward as if to hear it better, a faint desperate cry like the mewl of a kitten trapped down a sewer: *Laurel –*

And the fur abruptly stood up all over Arhu. *That's enough!* he said, hurriedly backing away from the Lady in Black. On the instant, the rainy night that had seemed to cling about her was gone. She was a ghost again, pale in the hot sunlight, and moving again, walking down the centerline of Hollywood Boulevard, past them, around the corner, and up Highland past the Silent Man's blue car. And then she was gone.

Arhu made his way back to the sidewalk and sat down there, still sidled. He started washing, and it was very much the composure-washing of someone eager to put himself to rights before their *ehhif* guest could see him.

What happened there? Hwaith said.

Arhu paused in his washing and shook his head as if someone had clouted him upside the ear. *Whatever was listening...all of a sudden started listening a whole lot harder. If it'd heard much more, it could have realized who was looking at it, and from when. Not something we want anyone to know right now, I'd think.*

He was unnerved. Rhiow put her head down, bumped heads with him, though she was unsure how much reassurance she could truly offer Arhu in a situation like this: she was unnerved enough herself. *You did right*, she said. *There's another spot we need to look at, down the street: but it can wait a little.*

No, Arhu said. *No, I'm all right.* He shook his head hard, so that his ears rattled: when he looked up, a little of the normal insouciance was back.

This soulsplit, Hwaith said. *How long ago would you say it happened?*

Arhu's tail twitched with uncertainty. *Hard to say. That soul could last have been in a body as long as...two, maybe three weeks back –*

Around the time the earthquakes started, perhaps? Hwaith said.

Arhu looked at him thoughtfully. *Could be*, said Arhu. *It'll take a little more checking to find out. We'll need to go back up the hill and have another look at that spot where the gate's trying to root. I didn't have any idea, the first time, that we were going to find this connection...*

Rhiow sat down by Siffha'h and tried to keep her own bristling under control. *Wonderful*, she thought. *Another problem we didn't need.* For now the question arose: had the Lady in Black invoked this unsavory state of existence of her own free will, or had she had it wished on her? If she had, she had to be helped out of it. If the soulsplit had been her own idea, she still had to be offered the opportunity to remake the choice. *Assuming her body isn't already quietly decomposing somewhere up in the hills, Rhiow thought, or being digested inside any number of coyotes. Why in Iau's name do ehif seem so eager to do this kind of thing to themselves?...*

Meanwhile, here they all stood in the sunshine, with the *ehhif* of the past going about their business in their fat solid shining cars, and in the big red trolleys that passed by with a cheerful clangor of bells when pedestrians threatened to get in its way, or some auto turned across an intersection in a trolley's path. The fronds on the palm trees off to their right rustled and glinted in the sun, and everything nonetheless seemed very unreal... especially with the direct experience of the Whisperer's unease just a few minutes before. Rhiow let out a long breath. "Come on," she said to Arhu, "get yourself unsidled: we've got to work out what to do next. Siffha'h –"

Siffha'h glanced down the road. Barely a second later, one of the engines in one of the cars some ways back in the traffic jam turned over. Other drivers, noticing, got back into their cars; within moments, more and more engines were revving all up and down the road.

Siffha'h got up then, stretched, and turned and walked away from the intersection. Behind her, the lights changed to green, and gradually traffic on Hollywood Boulevard started moving again. Behind one of the palm trees, Arhu came out of invisibility and wandered out to join the others.

The Silent Man watched him as Siffha'h went over to bump noses with him. *So would someone tell me what that was all about?* he said.

Rhiow was trying to figure out just how to do that, and how much to tell. "Half a moment," she said. "I still have to finish debriefing our two youngsters. Was there somewhere else we were going first?"

Down by the Chinese – that other address you were interested in. It's only a block or so.

"Let's head down there, then," Rhiow said.

They walked down Hollywood Boulevard, past the frontage of the hotel. It was a pleasant stroll in the sunshine, and amusing enough because of the *ehhif* they passed, who looked with utter fascination, sometimes with laughter, at the procession: the little man in dapper gray with a white cat riding on his shoulder, surrounded by a bodyguard of four more – the gray tabby in the lead, two black cats and a small white calico-patched tom strolling on either side of him, and another calico-patched white bringing up the rear. Cars on the Boulevard, having been sitting still for the better part of fifteen minutes, now actually slowed down again to watch them all pass by. Rhiow flirted her tail in wry comment as they made their way along the Hollywood Hotel's palm-lined front terraces. To Arhu she said, *Now tell me: what did you find up by Laurel and Highland Trail that left you so on edge?*

The gate's sunk a root there, all right, Arhu said, silent. *But not deep: not yet.* He sounded unusually grim.

Then what's the trouble?

Someone died there, Rhi. An ehhif. Not long ago.

Siffha'h came up alongside her twin and put her tail over his back as they walked. *The gate-root was tunneling straight down into where that life spilled,* she said, *sure as a seedling drilling down for water.*

Spilled? Rhiow said. *Actual bloodshed?*

Siffha'h wrinkled her nose in disgust and distress. *No question. A Person with no nose could have smelled it.*

And a Person with the Eye, Arhu said, *could see it.*

That explained Arhu's grimness well enough. Nearly murdered with his littermates when hardly more than a few weeks old, Arhu's relationship with death was a thorny one, and probably would be for some lives yet: that kind of trauma could take a good while to move through. And --

Laurel, Rhiow said. *She said "Laurel" --*

Arhu looked at her, both angry and confused. *No*, he said. *No matter what she says, I'm not sure the Lady in Black is really dead. And anyway, she's not the one I saw killed.*

Rhiow stared at him. *Are you sure?*

The Eye doesn't lie: not when it's looking back. Forward's another story. The dead ehif up on Laurel was a tom... But he still looked confused. *Trouble is, Rhi...what we all saw, just now, still smells to me of that death up the hill.*

They all walked on to the next intersection, where the sidewalk bent around a gardeny area marking the end of the hotel's property. *I could make the predictable joke about tongues*, said the Silent Man, glancing down Orchid Street to see if any traffic was coming. *But you'd probably thank me not to. What did Patches here find?*

"We think," Rhiow said, "perhaps a murder."

Is that so.

Rhiow looked up in surprise at the sudden intense interest in the Silent Man's voice. His eyes were on her, and they were suddenly much more alert than they had been.

"It's early to tell, yet," Urruah said from where he'd fallen in beside Rhiow. "Always a mistake to start theorizing before you've finished examining the evidence carefully...."

The Silent Man smiled. *Another student of the Master*, he said. *Well, this makes the spot we're about to visit a little more interesting.*

"Why?" Rhiow said.

But the Silent Man just shook his head as they crossed Orchid. Rhiow wasn't given much time to press the issue, for as they came up onto the curb of the far corner, Urruah stood stock still for a moment at something he saw...then broke into a run. Tourists and business people and casual strollers on that sidewalk looked with surprise or amusement at the big gray tabby that ran helter-skelter down among them, stopping in front of what seemed from this end of the street to be some kind of big empty plaza. Urruah stood staring into that space as intently as if it were some kind of delicatessen.

The Silent Man glanced down at Rhiow, a wry look. *Tell me he's a film fan*, he said, in the tone of an *ehif* now prepared to believe just about anything.

“There are a fair number of us,” Hwaith said. “More than you might suspect...”

The Silent Man reached up to rub Sheba behind the ears as they walked after Urruah. *Now why in the world would you be interested in the movies?*

“Because we appreciate a good story as much as you do,” Hwaith said. “Even when it’s full of all that boring human stuff.”

The Silent Man looked just briefly nonplussed. And the glance Hwaith threw Rhiow then was so wicked that, despite her concerned mood, she still had to stifle a laugh. She was still working at retaining her composure by the time they all caught up with Urruah, or rather, with the spot where he had been standing.

There before them lay a wide space filled with strange differently-colored patches of concrete. Curved walls decorated with fanciful-looking flowery sculptures embraced this forecourt on either side, ending in two archways peaked with odd prickly-topped towers; each was sheathed in greened copper, and flared up into peculiar spiky crowns. At the rear of the concrete-filled plaza were bronze doors guarded by a couple of huge statues of what Rhiow at first took to be *houiff* -- though there was something leonine about them as well, so that she was strangely reminded of the statues of Hhu’au and Sef outside the New York Public Library. Above the doors, done on a huge plaque of gray stone, was a massive curling carving of some kind of fireworm; and above it all, borne up on coral-colored columns, rose yet another high sloping copper roof with yet more spiky ironmongery cornices at the corners.

Rhiow looked around for Urruah, expecting to see him amongst the *ehhif* tourists, dawdling among the footprints he’d told her about earlier. But he was out of sight.

“Sidled,” Hwaith said over her shoulder. He was right: a moment later, Rhiow caught sight of Urruah under one of the huge dog-beasts, the one on the left-hand side of the doors. He had his head down, sniffing at the concrete, and his striped tail jerked once or twice as if in distaste. Then Urruah straightened, sneezed, and turned to walk back to the waiting group.

“Blood,” Urruah said to Rhiow, and looked up thoughtfully at the Silent Man. “*Ehhif* blood. Absolutely no mistaking it.”

The Silent Man nodded slowly. *About two weeks ago*, he said. *It was the middle of the night when they found the body. The management were keen to cover it up. They were worried it’d be bad for business.*

“Two weeks would match the dating on the merely physical scent,” Urruah said. He looked at Arhu.

Arhu, though, had his ears back in what for him was a rather uneasy expression: and he looked over at Rhiow. “Rhi, I’d rather not do an in-depth search here right now. I’d be nervous that whatever was starting to pay attention to me a few minutes ago might have more of its attention drawn here. That could make trouble for us later.”

“And he’s tired,” Siffha’h said, and bristled at Urruah. “Leave it till later.”

“Wait a minute, I’m not *that* tired! It’s just that – “
Siffha’h cuffed Arhu in the head, claws in. “Don’t give me that! Didn’t you just tell me that – “

“Never mind what I told you, would you just stop mommying me?”

“It’s not mommying to – “

The yowling, quiet as it was, was beginning to draw amused looks from some of the *ehhif* around. “Arhu,” Rhiow said. “Sif. *Enough.*”

Fortunately they knew that tone of voice, and stopped. Both of them immediately sat down and started washing, though in different directions.

Maybe we need a break, the Silent Man said. *I promised you folks lunch. How about it, babe?* He reached up again to rub Sheba behind the ears.

Sheba reached out and patted his cheek with one paw. “Did he just say the food word?” she said. “Tell him we should go to the place with the wooden back room and the table with the window!”

Rhiow passed this on. The Silent Man grinned. *She’s got taste,* he said. *Let’s go back the way we came. It’s a few blocks further on: we don’t need the car.*

He led the way at a brisk walk: and all the People fell in behind him at a trot, amused by the attention of the *ehhif* they passed, but refusing to acknowledge it. Rhiow, behind the Silent Man, glanced over at Urruah as he caught up with her. “Don’t say it,” he said.

“What?”

“I was fanboying.”

“For the ten seconds you spent over it,” Rhiow said, “not Aaurh Herself could have chastised you. So I was hardly going to start.” She glanced down Orchid as they crossed it and made their way past the Hollywood Hotel again. “Besides, I felt sorry for you.”

He looked at her in surprise. “What? Why?”

“Well, the circumstances weren’t exactly optimal, were they? The first time you see this place in the flesh, and you have to be all business? You’d have liked to get right down and roll around on that concrete, all over those famous *ehhifs*’ pawprints. Don’t deny it.”

His whiskers were twitching. “Well...” he said.

Hwaith had come up on Rhiow’s other side: he glanced over at Urruah. “When we’ve got our business sorted out,” he said, “we’ll come back here and I’ll introduce you to the backstage crowd.” He put his whiskers forward. “And the queens.”

Urruah gave him a sidelong look. “*Thought* I caught a few ladies’ scents up front...”

Rhiow walked a little slower and let the two toms drift ahead together to talk shop: though she didn’t miss the glance Hwaith threw her way as she dropped back. *A nice young tom*, she thought, mulling over again what he’d mentioned about the loss of his mentor. *I guess I see why he might have seemed a little nervous to start with...especially with the circumstances being, again, not exactly optimal. But he’s working in all right.* She paused, as the others did, at the corner of Highland and Hollywood: in front of them, as Siffha’h’s tail flirted idly, the lights changed with near-unseemly haste.

Across the road they started passing more normal-looking buildings than the concrete-forecourted theater and the histrionic hotel. Shops and stores, the occasional granite-faced bank; and then suddenly, without warning, the smell of roasted meat occurred as they came up to a wooden storefront with square-paned windows. Rhiow’s mouth began to water as the Silent Man opened the door and held it for the People to walk in.

I will not run, I will not run, Rhiow thought: but she didn’t loiter, either. Inside the door it was very dark and cool, compared to the rapidly warming day outside: and everything smelled of meat, and fish, and smoke. The floor was of wood, and all the walls were paneled, with rows of tables and benches covered in red leather, and a counter down the right-hand side. Just in front of where the Silent Man stood was a wooden podium, and behind it stood a tall balding *ehhif* in a suit.

“And who’s this functionary?” Rhiow said.

“It’s a *maitre d’*,” Urruah said. “He tells the *ehhif* where to sit.”

The *ehhif*’s expression didn’t look like that of anyone who seemed about to issue orders, though, once he set eyes on the Silent Man. “Well, good afternoon, Mr. Runyon!” the *maitre d’* said. “And the lovely Miss Sheba as well. So nice to have you.”

“It’s so nice to be recognized,” Sheba said to the others, over the Silent Man’s back. “Once they get to know you here they’re very good. Wait till you see – “

“—But we don’t often have the pleasure for seating you for lunch,” said the *maitre d’*: “it’s just as well you got here early. Would you prefer to be at the counter today, or your usual table?”

The Silent Man shook his head, reached into his pocket and came out with a small notepad and pen. On the pad he scribbled something quickly, held it up. Rhiow craned her neck to see.

GOT MORE COMPANY TODAY. SIDE TABLE BACK ROOM?

The maitre d' peered to either side of the Silent Man, briefly confused. Down by his feet, though, Rhiow looked up and said, just loudly enough to attract an *ehhif's* attention, "Meow."

The maitre d' looked down in great surprise at Rhiow – then saw, behind her, Urruah and Hwaith and Arhu and Siffha'h, all sitting around the Silent Man's feet, looking absently in various directions and wearing the universal expression of bored people waiting in line.

"Well, my goodness," the maitre d' said. "This would possibly be Miss Sheba's fan club?"

The Silent Man grinned, scribbled on the pad again, ripped the page, held it up. VISITING TALENT FROM OUT OF TOWN. GOT ENOUGH CHAIRS?

The *maitre d'* allowed himself a slight smile as the door behind them opened. "I'm certain we can manage. How many menus?"

"Is there room for one more?" came a female voice from behind them.

The Silent Man turned, and his eyes widened slightly. So did those of the *maitre d'*.

In through the restaurant door came undulating a tall slender figure in red, her raven hair coiled up loosely under a wide-brimmed red hat that slouched down over one eye. Rhiow, catching the other eye, put her whiskers forward, then glanced up at the *maitre d'* and the Silent Man as the lady in red paused before the *maitre d's* podium.

"Rrrrrrowrrrr," Urruah said, amused, and not particularly under his breath.

Ewwwwww! Arhu said silently. *Interspecies stuff! You are beyond perverse.*

"I'm so sorry to be late," Helen said to the Silent Man, "but I took a wrong turn on the way here." From those dark eyes, Helen gave the *maitre d'* a look that could have been described as "smoldering" if it hadn't been so amused.

The Silent Man glanced down at Rhiow. Without moving his lips, he said, *Are you going to tell me that this lady's in your organization too?*

"Yes," Rhiow said, amused.

Where do I join? he said. The Silent Man's eyes went back to Helen again: he held his hand out, smiling.

“Since you’re helping us,” Rhiow said, “I think possibly you’ve joined already.”

Helen took his hand. “Helen Walks Softly,” she said.

And carries a big stick, I bet, the Silent Man said as he shook Helen’s hand.

“Normally,” Helen said in a demure whisper, “a gun. But I’m not packing today.”

A gun, huh, said the Silent Man. *Funny. You smell like a cop. But they don’t give lady cops guns in this town.*

Helen didn’t even blink. “There are other places where a lady can be a cop,” she said: which was true enough, if a misdirection. “As for how I smell, I guess you missed the ‘Evening in Paris.’”

A slow grin spread over the Silent Man’s face. *Come on, doll,* he said, as the maitre d’ left his podium and headed for the back of the restaurant.

They passed through the front room, followed by the unavoidable stares and laughter of the *ehhif* already seated there – though Rhiow noted that as many of the stares, interested or envious or sometimes both, were directed toward Helen’s dark good looks as toward the trail of cats behind the Silent Man. In his wake, they all walked into a secondary room with an arched and painted ceiling covered with autumnal outdoor scenes. A bar ran down the right side of this room, and more tables along the left side: and about halfway down was a door into a third room, smaller and more shadowy than either of the first two.

The *maitre d’*, Helen and the Silent Man went through. This room was as darkly wood-panelled as the others, but was also, to Rhiow’s surprise, nearly full – the front of the restaurant had still been half empty. And the tables were almost entirely occupied by men, most of whom looked up with great interest as Helen walked in behind the *maitre d’*. Helen gave them all the kind of gracious, cool look that visiting royalty might have bestowed on a crowd of visiting lackeys, and then turned her attention to the table where the *maitre d’* had pulled out a chair for her.

It was an excellent spot for them: round, with one side of the table edged into a lace-curtained bay window that looked out into an unassuming back yard space, more a service area than a patio. The window had a high window seat cushioned in red leather: perfect for *ehhif* children, or People. Urruah and Hwaith leapt up and seated themselves next to Sheba as she jumped down from the Silent Man’s shoulder onto the window seat. Siffha’h and Arhu jumped up next to them. Rhiow leapt onto the window seat’s far side, closest to Helen: and on Helen’s other side, the Silent Man seated

himself with his back to the rest of the room, where no one else could see whether he was moving his mouth or not.

“I take it,” Helen said, “that back here, the press won’t be too much in the way?”

The Silent Man smiled at the sound of a question that might as logically have come from some publicity-shy starlet. He put his pad down, scribbled on it briefly by way of camouflage, while saying silently, *I wouldn’t worry about it. There’s nobody back here but writers.*

Helen smiled, laughing softly. Across the table, Urruah looked over the Silent Man’s arm as he opened the menu. “Steak,” he said. “Liver. Salmon. Brook trout...” Rhiow looked away, eager not to see him actually drool.

“Your usual, sir?” said the *maitre d’*.

The Silent Man nodded. The *maitre d’* turned to Helen. “A glass of wine, perhaps,” she said.

“And for Miss Sheba and her friends? Cream, perhaps? Or is it too early in the day?”

Rhiow was hard put not to laugh out loud. “Cream all around,” Helen said, “by all means.” She smiled at the Silent Man. “Would you like me to handle the orders for the other side of the table?”

The Silent Man nodded, smiled.

The *maitre d’* took himself away. Urruah was purring already. “I foresee a very interesting afternoon...” he said.

It’s already been a fairly interesting morning, the Silent Man said. Visited one murder site and had hints about two more.

“Well,” Helen said, “I’ve just come from the live files section at the LAPD.” She was using the Speech now, but in such a way that no one in the room but the People and the Silent Man could hear her. “If we’re discussing the same two murders – the ones at the Chinese, and the one up at Laurel and Highland Trail -- then they have something unusual in common with six others that have taken place in the last month.”

Six others? said the Silent Man. *Since when does this town have eight murders in a month?*

“Since now. And every one of the bodies, when found,” Helen said, “had had its heart cut out.”

Coffee arrived for the Silent Man: he ignored it. Saucers of cream were placed in front of all the People: they paid them no mind, staring at Helen. Helen bestowed a brooding look on the glass of wine that had been brought for her: it was red, like blood.

“Cheers,” Helen said.