

SIX

The light in the back room shifted and mellowed as lunchtime passed; the writers at the other tables drank their cocktails, packed up their briefcases and bookbags and went away: and still the People and the Silent Man and Helen Walks Softly sat and talked, the Silent Man scribbling on his pad every now and then for the sake of appearances. There had been much more cream after the initial shock wore off, and some more wine, and finally some lunch. The food had been wonderful, but Rhiow, watching the restrained and regretful way in which Urruah was washing his face after the meal, could see that he hadn't had the inclination to do the kind of justice to his raw liver that he'd originally intended. She felt sorry for him again...but once more, she had to admit that they all had a lot more to think about at the moment than food.

Helen lifted her second glass of wine as the Silent Man drank about half his fifth cup of coffee at a gulp. "You should really cut back on that," she said. "It's going to make a mess of your nerves."

They're a mess already, the Silent Man said. *And this beats the alternative.* But he put the cup down. *Look, I could use a map of this, and a timeline. It's been too much bad news at once.*

Helen nodded and started moving plates and glasses around on the table, and pushed off to one side the gloves she'd shed when the food arrived.

"Six more murders," Arhu said. "And all 'unaffiliated' *ehhif*, out-of-pride types..."

"Transients," Helen said, "or people who had no relatives or interested others who'd have noticed or cared when they vanished." As she spoke, Helen started drawing with one finger, apparently idly, on the tablecloth; but where her finger passed, precise narrow lines started to show up on the linen, sketching out a bare-bones rendition of the area between downtown and the Hollywood hills, with Wilshire Boulevard the spine of the map, and various cross streets and avenues sprouting out of it on either side, like ribs from that spine. "Here, and here," she said, adding a dot in one spot and another on either side of Wilshire, near the center of downtown, " – these were the first ones. About a month ago. Both males, both apparently long-term vagrants who stayed in residential hotels down in the old Skid Row area, both in their early fifties. They both used all kinds of names at the places where they stayed, so neither has been positively identified. In this man's case, they're still trying to find dental records: in this one's case, there was no way

to find them.” She glanced up at the Silent Man. “I didn’t mention, when we started: his head was missing, too.”

He had been scribbling on his pad as Helen drew, making a copy for himself. Now the Silent Man paused. *Now why on Earth?*

Helen shook her head, kept drawing. “Here, and here,” she said, adding a couple more dots, again on either side of Wilshire but closer to Hollywood, “the next two. One of them was an escapee from one of the local psychiatric institutions, a man in his late sixties, possibly someone mentally or developmentally impaired. The hospital he got out of was a fairly tight-security kind of place: it’s hard to tell how he got loose. That would have been about three weeks ago.”

“When the earthquakes started,” Siff’hah said, leaning over the edge of the table to watch Helen draw.

“That’s right. The fourth one may have been another escapee, but from a different hospital. Same general presentation as the other victims, though. Found on waste ground – a vacant lot behind a bar, in this case – heart cut out.”

“Was that what killed him?” said Arhu.

Helen gave him a slightly cockeyed look. “That would do it for most of us, I’d think.”

“Oh, come on, I know that! I mean, was that *how* he was killed? Or did something else happen before he died and *then* they took his heart out?”

“Oh, sorry. No, nothing else happened, as far as the coroner could tell.” The look Helen gave Rhiow suggested that she was regretting the vast difference between the kind of forensics that would have been available in their home time and the kind available here and now. “The only possible alternate cause of death, in a couple of cases, was alcohol poisoning: or in one case, drinking booze that had been contaminated with denatured alcohol.”

Old-fashioned bathtub gin. Or else Sterno drinking, the Silent Man said, still scribbling away at his pad. *Common enough behavior among the poorest bums down on Skid Row. The ‘canned heat cocktail’ is pretty popular down there.*

“The coroner didn’t think either of those victims had drunk enough, or *were* drunk enough, to have died of what they drank,” Helen said. “His opinion was pretty much that whatever was used to cut their hearts out had done the real work.”

“They were *all* cut out?” Hwaith said.

“As far as the coroner could determine,” said Helen. “There was some question in the case of the headless man: I’ll get to that shortly. But the instrument used seemed to have been the same one in all cases: and it was very, very sharp. The autopsies all comment that the wound edges were as sharp as if a scalpel had been used. But no one makes scalpels with such big blades, or so strong: the incisions go right through the breastbone in every case.” She looked grim. “The coroner was getting very disturbed about that by the time he got to the fourth case or so. He said in one report that it was like someone had done this many, many times before, and was practiced at getting a heart out in just a thrust, a cut and a twist.”

They used to be big on that kind of thing down in Central America, weren’t they? the Silent Man said. *Sometimes I wonder if that’s why nothing remains of those civilizations.*

Helen threw a glance at Rhiow. *He's quick*, she said silently. Aloud she said, "I've heard other reasons. Changes in the local climate, disease... But they were definitely into some behaviors that we'd think of as unhealthy."

This, the Silent Man said, reaching out with his pencil to tap one of the dots Helen's moving finger had left on the tablecloth, *this is unhealthy. This is not the kind of thing that happens in L.A.* And he frowned. *But the Lady in Black did mention what's his name...*

"Tepeyollotl Night-Eater," Rhiow said, "Lord of the Beasts of the Dark." She could still hear the Whisperer's distress at the mere sound of the name.

"Mesoamerican without a doubt," Helen said. "I'm no expert, but the name sounds Azteca to me."

Rhiow looked over at the Silent Man, feeling his growing unease and thinking how to continue along this line without freaking him out. *The immediate association of cults with serial murder isn't yet common in ehif popular culture this early in the century*, the Whisperer said in Rhiow's ear. *He may find this line of reasoning too bizarre to accept...*

Nonetheless it seemed to Rhiow that the concept had to be broached. "We were talking about cults, back at the house," she said. "Have you perhaps heard of any cult in this area that's been trying to revive some aspect of the old Aztec rites?"

The Silent Man gave her an uneasy look. *One that would take to killing people...as some kind of religious ceremony?* he said. *This many people?*

"It's not a very palatable idea, I'll grant you," Helen said. "It seems that many of the peoples of Central America enacted various forms of human sacrifice. In the beginning, at least some of them said they were trying to re-enact a sacrifice they thought the gods had originally made for them, in order to save the world. But it may have started as a development of what we call sympathetic magic. Take something personally associated with another human being – a lock of hair, a fingernail paring – and you can obtain various kinds of power over them. Take the concept a step further, by offering a divine being something profoundly important to you – your blood, your flesh – and you obtain a different kind of power over them. The gods are obliged to repay the favor by giving you something you want."

The Silent Man frowned at the table, his expression quite still. "What one sacrifices personally is one matter," Helen said. "Other cultures share similar concepts. But later on the Mesoamerican religions started to change. People less often offered their own blood...and much more often, someone else's. In time the sacrifice became a way for populations to stay stable, for nations to dominate each other or dispose of captives of war. Later still a nasty inversion happened: wars were started to acquire enough captives to keep the sacrifices going. And the Aztecs were the people most enthusiastic about doing such things in large numbers."

The Silent Man shook his head. *But why would people do that now? What in the world would they hope to gain?*

"Maybe *nothing* in this world," Arhu said. "The Lady in Black hated everything she saw here. She thought that whatever she'd been doing had made her some friend outside of everything." His tail was lashing now. "A friend who was going to put an end to it all."

Urruah had for some while been sitting upright with his eyes half-closed, looking like an angry Egyptian statue, and saying about as much. Now he opened his eyes a bit more. "I'd prefer it too," he said, "if all this was just down to some crazed psychotic *ehhif* with a deathwish that he's projecting onto everyone around him." He turned to look at the Silent Man. "But I don't think we can afford to ignore any explanation, no matter how distasteful. Any one might be the right one, and we don't dare blind ourselves to spare our tender sensibilities. There's too much at stake."

Their eyes locked. After a long moment, the Silent Man let out a breath, looked over at Helen again. *There were two more?* he said.

She nodded. "Here, and here," she said, adding two more dots on either side of the skeletal map. One of them was much further north from Wilshire than any of the others. The other was much further along, past Hollywood proper and further into the mountains still. "Sixteen days ago," Helen said. "An old homeless woman – the only woman in this new group – and a middle-aged man with a police record, a burglar. Both dumped, like the others, on waste ground." She folded her hands on the tablecloth and sighed.

Everyone was quiet for a few moments, considering the map. "That missing head," Hwaith said after a few moments. "I keep thinking about that. I mean, not that taking their hearts isn't bad enough, but why the head too?" He flicked his ears sideways and forward again in bemusement.

Helen shook her head. "That was the most problematic case in the group," she said, "since the heart wasn't removed in the same way as the other ones were. That poor man's ribcage had been almost completely crushed: at first the police thought he'd been run over by something. But the coroner's report suggested side-to-side crushing. He didn't know what to make of it, especially since there were no tire marks or anything similar to be found on the body. There was some speculation in the file that the dead man might have been involved in some kind of industrial accident – but that wouldn't have accounted for the tearing that the rest of the body experienced. And what kind of industrial accident involves first crushing your chest and then pulling your heart out?"

Tails were lashing all around the table, the exception being Sheba's: the discussion of the technicalities of the situation had prompted her to have an after-lunch snooze, an impulse that Rhiow could completely understand but had to resist. In particular she was keeping an eye on the Silent Man, who was still looking rather unsettled.

He pulled in a long breath, let it out. *There've been whispers on the street for a few weeks,* the Silent Man said, *that the police have been up to something. Some of the citizens around town -- the ones whose businesses the police might, shall we say, be more than somewhat interested in -- have been theorizing that some kind of big operation was under way. But no I think we can guess what that is.*

"They've been concentrating on keeping the whole cluster of murders as quiet as they can," Helen said. "That none of those killed have had close relatives to start making noisy inquiries and raise the profile of their deaths has made matters much simpler. But the police are still tremendously edgy."

Can't blame them, the Silent Man said. *The war hasn't been over that long. Everyone's still getting used to "business as usual". The last thing the cops want right now is something that would suggest they've been loosening up on the quality of local*

law enforcement now that the country's gone off a war footing. Especially since now there are all these new boogeymen looking over the horizon: communists, fifth-columnists... Way too many scary things going on out in the big mean world for people to get into a panic about. The police would go out of their way to keep things quiet in a situation like this. Especially when they don't understand what's going on.

He sighed and stretched in his chair, then bent a curious eye on Helen. *You sure did a full morning's work,* the Silent Man said. *Just how'd you get all this stuff?*

"By not being noticed," Helen said, very demure.

The Silent Man gave her one of those small thin smiles. *In that getup?*

"I'll grant you," Helen said, "this wouldn't be my preferred business attire."

The Silent Man's smile got a shade broader. *I might have wondered if you were really a cop before,* he said, *but I'd say that doubt's resolved. You're as good as any cop I know at not giving a question a straight answer.* He eyed Helen. *'Not being noticed,' huh. The way these guys do it?* He nodded in Rhiow's direction

Helen glanced at Rhiow, who put her whiskers forward, amused. "There are similarities to the way they and I operate," Helen said. "But you don't always have to vanish to get things done, or find things out. When I had to, I simply looked like I was supposed to be wherever I was. I do a good secretary imitation when I have to. And no one suspects a secretary who's going through the files."

Hide in plain sight... the Silent Man said. *Always a sound method.*

"All we have to do now," Hwaith said, "is work out what connection this all has to our main line of inquiry. The earthquakes -- "

"Hwaith," Rhiow said, "not that I'd argue that point with you at all. It's vital. But we've got a whole lot of information to assimilate, all of a sudden...and for some of us it's been quite a long day." Rhiow glanced around at the other People around the table. Like many toms, Urruah's endurance wasn't all it might be, and that blinking lazy look he was now starting to wear wasn't the one he normally affected, but genuine sleepiness. Sheba was still gently snoring. Arhu and Siffha'h, though sitting upright, were now leaning against each other with half-closed eyes in what Urruah had some time ago christened "the bookends pose", trying to appear as if they were merely in a state of lazy alertness: but Rhiow knew how likely this effect was to be ruined by one of them actually dropping off to sleep, which would immediately trigger the other into doing the same. "And our host, too, is off his normal schedule. Since he's been kind enough to offer us a place to rest, maybe we should take advantage of that, and come back to the subject fresh this evening."

Blackie, the Silent Man said, pushing his coffee cup away, *I hate to admit it, but you said a mouthful.* He pushed his chair back, glanced toward the outer room.

Then his eyes widened.

"Really? In there?" said a high female voice from the main room, carrying effortlessly over what remained of the low hum of conversation there from the latest of the lunch crowd. "I'll go right back!"

In unison, Siffha'h's and Arhu's eyes flew open, and they sat up straight. Urruah's eyes opened more slowly, but the whole look of him had suddenly gone strangely attentive. Hwaith, near him, sniffed the air once or twice...and his ears went back slightly, the expression of someone resisting the urge to a much less subtle reaction.

In though the door from the main room came a young, slim, slightly-built queen-*ehhif*. She was fair-haired, the hair tucked up in a peculiar looped style underneath yet another of those hats -- this one a close-fitting, slantwise business in a startling peacock blue, with a bizarre confection of blue veiling and blue-dyed fluffy feathers trailing back from it. Her dress, too, was blue, with a bouffant skirt that rustled noisily every time she took a step, and was perhaps as wide again on each side as she was.

She came clicking along toward their table on delicate little high heels. Rhiow, watching her come, thought that she was probably very pretty as *ehhif* reckoned such things: but there was something about her face, and about the set of the vivid blue eyes, that gave her pause. *I'm not always expert at figuring out their faces*, she thought; *Iau knows their expressions don't work anything like ours*. But Rhiow couldn't get rid of an initial impression of a calculating mind behind the innocuously pretty look. "Why, Mr. Runyon," the queen-*ehhif* said as she came to stand, or rather pose, by the table, looking them all over, "how unusual to see you here! And what an unusual gathering! Where are the PR people?"

The Silent Man simply looked up at her...and then at something else. Rhiow had noted and dismissed the big straw bag embroidered with bright-colored straw flowers that the queen-*ehhif* was carrying over her shoulder. But now in the bag something moved, and Rhiow's ears went right forward as the scent that had been masked by all the food- and smoke-smells in here became much plainer, and a Person put her head up out of the bag.

White fur, fluffy: ears set apparently permanently in a bad-tempered sideways slant: green eyes, watery: a nose that ran. It was surprising to see a Person of so broad-faced a breed somehow managing to look so narrow, pinched and unpleasant. *Maybe it's that poor squashed nose*, Rhiow thought. *How does she breathe through something like that?*

The Silent Man, meanwhile, was eyeing the queen-*ehhif* in much the same way he had when one of the waiters had turned up at their table with the wrong meal. He reached for his pad and pen, though not with any great speed. Meanwhile, the bag-Person was looking over the other assembled People with a peculiar heavy-lidded mixture of disdain and envy that left Rhiow surprisingly unwilling to greet her.

But Urruah's unshakeable sense of his own superlative quality as an uber-tom would hardly let him stay silent in the face of a new queen, no matter how tired he was. "Hunt's luck to you, madam," he said to the Person in the purse, letting an appreciative purr get into the greeting.

Those green eyes dwelt on him for a long, appraising moment before the mouth opened. What came out first, though, was a huge yawn: and after that, when they'd all had a better view than they needed of the gullet behind the yawn and the jaws had closed with a snap, and the green eyes looked at Urruah once more and then at the rest of them, a word came out.

"Peasants," the bag-Person said, closed her eyes, and sank out of sight.

Rhiow flicked one ear back and forth in a "Why am I not surprised?" gesture. Urruah sank back onto the banquette, wounded but keeping that purr going by way of concealment. Hwaith looked mortified, and turned his face away. Arhu and Siffha'h exchanged a glance. *I could tear her a new one*, Arhu said to Rhiow. *Come on, Rhi. It's too late now to spoil anybody's appetite...*

Just you be still for the time being until we understand what's going on around here!

“But what a surprise to find you here having a tea party with the kitties!” said the queen-*ehhif*. Her voice was of the light tinkly sort, which sorted oddly with the hostility that seemed to be peering out from behind the words. “And with a friend! It’s lovely to see the rumors aren’t true that you’re *completely* heartbroken. Or beyond a little more cradle-robbing.”

The Silent Man stopped dead in his writing for a moment, staring very hard at the pad. Then he finished what he was writing, ripped the page off with a touch more force than was strictly necessary, and held the page up.

SCRAM. DOING BUSINESS HERE.

“But Giorgio sent me back here on purpose to visit you and your lovely pussies!” the she-*ehhif* said, looking, not at any of the People, but at Helen. “Maybe I can see why.”

Helen looked up demurely from under that hat, all dark-eyed inscrutability, and said nothing.

“Why don’t you introduce us?” the she-*ehhif* said.

The Silent Man looked away and pointedly had another drink of his coffee.

The she-*ehhif* looked at Helen, put out a white-gloved hand. “Anya Harte,” she said, with the air of someone who expected the other party to know the name as a matter of course.

“Miss Harte,” Helen said, and reached up to shake the hand held out to her. “Helen Walks Softly.”

“Why, how wonderfully...*ethnic!*” Miss Harte said, turning away from Helen to smirk at the Silent Man. “You know, you’re just going to be confirming what everyone’s heard about your exotic tastes in the ladies.” She somehow managed to make “exotic” sound like a bad word. “But then it’s to be expected, I suppose, as what you’re used to by now. Your wife’s a Spanish countess, after all, no matter what *some* people say! And where *is* Mrs. Runyon, by the way? It’s been so long since we’ve seen her around.”

The Silent Man just looked at Miss Harte. Finally he reached for the pen again, aware that in the shadows of the door into the main room, people were standing, trying not to look as if they were watching. He scribbled for a moment, tore a page off the pad and held it up.

OUT OF TOWN

“I’m sure she is,” Miss Harte said. “Well, while the cat’s away! – so to speak.” She smiled what even Rhiow could have told was a poisonous smile for an *ehhif*, if her whiskers hadn’t already been practically vibrating with the sense of happy spite that emanated from the woman.

Miss Harte turned on Helen a look that was as simultaneously dismissive and envious as the expression of the Person in her bag. “Are you in the business?”

“The only one that matters,” Helen said, still smiling.

Miss Harte sucked in a long, happily scandalized breath. “Oh, my!” she said. “And you’re so *open* about it! But I’m sure you’ll do very well at it, with your dark good looks.”

“Thank you,” Helen said, that absolutely imperturbable smile shifting not a fraction. “But better an honest darkness than night masquerading as the innocent day.”

At that Miss Harte blinked, but only for a second. “And you recite your lines so nicely, too! You should really come out and meet some of the really *important* movie people, so that you can get out of the bit-part rat race! A whole lot of the people from the big studios are going to be up at the party at Dagenham’s tonight. It’s an open party, Mr. Runyon would have no trouble getting you in, there are lots of people who’d love to see someone like *you* there – ”

Rhiow sat there in wonder listening to that little tinkly voice, which seemed able to imply something cruel or cutting with practically every word. It made her think of the sound that broken bottles made when dumped into the Manhattan garbage trucks early in the morning: little razor-sharp shards, raining down, every one of them capable of slicing you deep if you would only pick it up the wrong way... “Oh, do come along to Dagenham’s tonight, Mr. Runyon! They’d be ever so *surprised* to see you.” Some further nasty implication lay behind the words: Rhiow was uncertain whether she wanted to know just what. “And just for a laugh, you should bring all your little friends!” The People were included in the glance, but the word seemed mostly for Helen.

“Dagenham’s?” Helen said, looking over at the Silent Man.

He shook his head, shrugged.

“Oh, you must know Elwin Dagenham, he does freelance PR for Goldwyn and Paramount and everybody, and he’s so successful at it, he has a lovely big house up in the hills, there’ll be just hundreds of influential people, and all that champagne and caviar! He has the most wonderful caterers, but then he would have to, with all the important people he knows, you can’t serve them just anything – ”

Miss Harte went prattling on, and the Silent Man watched her, apparently politely enough. But watching him, Rhiow could see – if the queen-*ehhif* couldn’t – that there was absolutely no engagement in his eyes. His regard of Miss Harte was entirely the detached look of a scholar examining some exotic and faintly repulsive life form. For her own part, Rhiow started to wash her face, and used the moment to steal another look at that dress. She wasn’t entirely clear about *ehhif* fashions of this period, but the top would have seemed cut fairly low in her home time. “Ruah,” she said to her teammate with a sidewise glance, “is it just me, or is this queen-*ehhif* – ”

“ – for here and now, dressed in a way that’s just a yowl short of rolling on the ground and waving her *ffiyth* in the air?” Urruah said. “Absolutely.” He glanced out toward the front room. “No wonder the *maitre d’* wanted to get her out of sight. There *would* be some *ehhif* queens who dress that way around here, but not in daylight, and not in respectable places...”

The broken glass just kept on tinkling down. “...and you know, Mr. Runyon, it would do you good to get out, after all, we so rarely see you out in *good* society any more! It’s such a shame. I know everyone’s sure it’s your work keeping you so busy, but you’ve had such difficulties lately...”

The Silent Man held quite still again. Then he reached down to his pad: wrote, scribbled, tore the page off and displayed it.

MIGHT JUST DO THAT. FOR A LAUGH.

Rhiow, looking at the cool ironic set of his face, strongly suspected that the Silent Man had his own opinions about who the laugh would be on. But Miss Harte clapped her hands in glee. “Oh, how wonderful! I can’t wait to tell everyone! And you’ll bring Miss Softly with you? Oh, please say yes!”

“I might have something to say about that myself,” Helen said in that low musical voice of hers. Rhiow blinked, and saw Urruah’s eyes widen, as he caught what Rhiow had. *Has she been spending too much time with us?* Urruah said privately, amused. *That was nearly a growl.*

Your highest praise for an ehif, isn’t it usually? Rhiow said, amused too. *That with some work you could make a Person out of them?*

“However,” Helen said, “yes, I’ll come. It might possibly be interesting to see some of these important people.” And she glanced over at the Silent Man and dropped him just the hint of a wink.

That small thin smile came back, and Rhiow was glad to see it. Helen looked up again, and her eyes and Miss Harte’s locked.

“Well, isn’t that lovely then!” Miss Harte said. “Things will be starting up around eight, I believe: don’t be too late, you’ll miss the fun!”

And with a whirl and a rustle of crinoline from under the sky-blue silk, she went click-click-clicking away, back out through the door into the outer room. The Silent Man’s glance followed her. As soon as she was safely out through the door, and tinkling the beginning of a stream of inconsequentia at someone else in front room, his face relaxed a little: but the expression in the Silent Man’s eyes put Rhiow in mind of the look you might see on a tom who was considering a juicy spot in which to sheathe his claws at some later date.

Helen merely smiled. Silently she said to the group, *Racist remarks, comments on my acting skills, and accusations of whoredom within sixty seconds of introduction!* She quirked an eyebrow at the Silent Man. *Possibly a record?*

About average for her, actually, the Silent Man said, sounding a touch relieved at Helen’s unconcerned tone. *If she’d known you at all, she wouldn’t have taken so long. I’m just glad you’re not carrying a gun today.*

If I was going to do something about her, Helen said, *it wouldn’t be with a gun.* Her grin went cheerfully feral.

The Silent Man’s smile loosened up too. Next to him, Sheba opened her eyes slightly, stretching, and then sniffed. “Is it just me,” she said, “or did I smell someone else in here?”

“Someone else was here,” Urruah said, “and did she ever smell. No wonder she didn’t want to get out of that bag.”

Sheba’s eyes opened a little wider. “Maiwi!” she said, and hissed under her breath. “That fat furball! And her nasty little *ehif*, I’m sure.”

“In the so-completely revealed flesh,” Urruah said, and wrinkled his muzzle in the way a Person does when they’re sampling a scent that turns out not to have been exactly pleasant.

Hearing Sheba’s hiss, the Silent Man picked her up and started to stroke her. *Sorry, doll,* he said, then glanced at Helen. *She annoyed about our little visitor?*

“Both of them,” Helen said.

The Silent Man looked annoyed as well. *‘Giorgio sent me back to see your kitties,’* he said. *If that’s true, Georgie-boy doesn’t get his usual fat tip today, I’ll tell you that.*

“On the contrary,” Helen said, rubbing her ungloved hands together and then reaching out to her wine glass. “Whatever you usually give him, I think you should double it.”

They all looked at her in surprise. Rhiow looked at Helen’s hands: the gesture had been like that of someone trying to get rid of some unpleasant substance or smell.

What’s that mean? the Silent Man said.

Helen sipped her wine, put the glass down again. “I wish I could tell you for certain,” she said. “I don’t know as yet. But it’s a scent – a sense – I’ll know right away if I run into it again. And somehow I have a feeling that someone she’s associated with will have some bearing on what we’re looking into. So I’m very glad,” she said, folding her hands in front of her like someone trying to hold them still, “that you agreed to go to this party.”

Helen, Rhiow said. *What is it??*

I don’t know. I’m not sure. For the moment...it’s just what I said. “But I’ll give you this,” Helen said aloud, looking over at the Silent Man, “Miss Harte’s not your usual practitioner of the dumb blonde act.”

Or any other kind, unfortunately, the Silent Man said. *Fired her once, after she got a job on the production of a film version of one of my stories. She couldn’t cut it. Nice face, nice figure, no one’s arguing that. But can’t act, and can’t get along with anyone who can. Never saw anyone like her for ruining a good working mood on a set.*

“What was that crack supposed to mean,” Hwaith said, “‘cradle-robbing?’”

The Silent Man didn’t look up for a moment, straightening the fork and spoon that remained of his place setting. *This town’s full of gossip,* he said. *If they can’t find something mean and scurrilous to say about you that’s true, they’ll get mean and scurrilous about the appearances. You learn to pay it no mind.*

Rhiow held her tail and her ears quite still, like someone who hadn’t heard a comment, and resolved to have a quiet private word with Sheba about this issue; for the pain suddenly seemed to be simply jutting out of the Silent Man from all angles, like fur a-bristle. *Heartbreak: you can just smell it. Poor ehif...*

The Silent Man rubbed his eyes. *We should probably get back and get some rest,* he said, *if we’re going to do this shindig tonight.* He paused, looking at Helen. *What about you, gorgeous? If you’re with these guys, do you need somewhere to stay too?* Though he looked faintly uncomfortable as he said it.

Helen shook her head. “Don’t worry about me,” she said. “I’m taken care of. And under the circumstances – “ She glanced back in the direction of the main room. “I’d bet that, after Miss Harte’s little performance, somebody out there’d be all too willing to tip off one of the chattier gossip columnists if we left together.” She stood up, smoothing her dress. “So I’ll say goodbye here, until this evening. I’ll meet you tonight at your place, if that’s convenient. Say seven thirty?”

That’ll be fine.

She reached out a hand, and the Silent Man took it. “See you then.” She glanced down at the People. “You’ll be all right here?” she said to Rhiow.

“Absolutely,” Rhiow said. “We’ll see you later, cousin. *Dai stiho.*”

Helen waved at them all and went swaying elegantly out through the front room. The Silent Man looked after her appreciatively, though the expression was tinged with curiosity. *She’s right about the rumor-mongers,* he said. *They’ll be buzzing after tonight.*

“That’s not going to make a problem for you, is it?” Urruah said.

The Silent Man folded his napkin and put it on the table. *Not one that hasn’t been made before*, he said, leaning a little sideways to catch the eye of one of the wait-staff in the main room and nod at him. *And some of these problems I kind of enjoy.*

The check arrived and was dealt with, and the People put themselves in order and headed out after their host as he made for the front door. All around, once again, *ehhif* stared at them and made amused comments. Rhiow did her best to ignore them, and hardly knew whether to be amused or appalled by Urruah, who stared right back at the *ehhif* as the group passed, giving them a Person’s mocking version of the human smile. “You’re like something out of one of those cartoons you keep trying to get me hooked on,” Rhiow said as they slipped out into the street, where the light was slanting golden toward later afternoon. “I think the cable in your dumpster is rotting your brains!”

“Just the pressure of celebrity,” Urruah said as they followed the Silent Man back around the corner to the car.

“Oh, please,” Rhiow said under her breath. But then she let the breath out. *I’m getting cranky*, she thought as they all climbed back into the car. *Probably a good time to take my own advice and have a long nap...* She sat back and watched the scenery start to go by again. *I meant to tell you, though*, she said privately to Urruah: *you and the Silent Man, when he was having trouble getting to grips with what was going on -- that was nicely handled, back there.*

Urruah shrugged his tail. *It’s got to be tough, being asked to believe so many impossible things in a day. He just needed someone to talk a little tough to him and get him over the hump.*

Rhiow put her whiskers forward. *And to do it in a tom’s voice*, she thought. *He might not have taken it so well from me.*

The drive back was quiet. Arhu and Siffha’h were showing the inevitable aftereffects of a moderately strenuous wizardry followed by a big meal, and Urruah and Hwaith were both looking dozy; Sheba promptly fell asleep again on the Silent Man’s shoulder as they drove away from Hollywood Boulevard. When they pulled up in front of the Silent Man’s house, the People got out and trotted toward the door with weary pleasure.

Inside, as the Silent Man closed the door, Rhiow stood looking up at him for a few moments as the rest of her team wandered off into the house to find places to rest. Possibly he felt her regard, or just saw the thoughtful waving of her tail: he looked down. *Something I need to do?* he said, taking off his hat and hanging it on a hook by the door.

“Rest,” she said. “You’re sure you’re all right, otherwise?”

The small thin smile manifested itself again, though edged with weariness, as he loosened his tie. *You mean, has it been an unusually strange day, even for me? Yes. Am I hanging onto my sanity regardless? As far as I can tell, yes. Thanks.* And he surprised her by getting down on one knee and scratching her behind the ears. *Are you all right? I get a feeling some of this hasn’t exactly been a normal day’s work for you, either. Whatever your normal day’s work looks like.*

She put her whiskers forward. “No,” she said, “no, it hasn’t. And it won’t be later, either, I’m sure. But I’ll manage. Sleep well, cousin.”

You too.

He headed off into one of the back rooms, with Sheba padding after him: Rhiow heard a door shut.

She yawned prodigiously, blinked, and then took a turn around the open downstairs rooms to see where everyone was. Arhu and Siffha'h had already curled up on the sofa in their normal thoughtlessly affectionate heap, and were snoring more or less in unison, with one of Siffha'h's self-maintaining force fields cordoning off their area. Urruah had found himself a place up in the Silent Man's bookcase and tucked himself up into a compact round furball, and was dozing. Hwaith had stretched himself out in front of the open back door and was lying on his back with his eyes closed and his paws folded across his chest.

Rhiow looked out at the afternoon lawn: all was peace, not even a bird singing. She turned and made her way back into the front room, letting her nose lead her to a windowsill spot where no other Person's scent lingered. There Rhiow turned around a couple of times, lay down, and half-closed her eyes on the cool spare sleekness of the living space. *It's not a design feature, though, she thought. These rooms are so clean because no one's here often enough to cause a clutter. Poor Silent Man. Iau, help us help him!*

And *keep the known universes from being destroyed*, the Whisperer said.

Yes, Rhiow said, put her head down on her paws, and closed her eyes completely. *Absolutely. That too...*

Much, much later – or so it felt – Rhiow woke up, blinking, and turned her head to glance out the window. She was mildly disturbed to see by the light outside that the sun had just barely set. She felt around in the back of her mind for the part of the Whispering that kept a time-reckoning for her, comparing her personal time against the *ehhif* versions of it. Yes, it was still the same day: she hadn't accidentally slept the Sun around.

Rhiow yawned. A known side effect of residence at the “wrong” end of a timeslide was a certain disorientation in the feel of your personal timeflow: your soul knew that it was in more places at once than it ought to be. *It'll pass...or we'll finish work here and get back home, and it won't be an issue any more. But I keep finding myself wondering how Iaehh's doing. Just the price you pay when you're in a relationship with an ehhif...*

Rhiow got up, stretched, and made her way through the living area to the doors onto the back patio. Except for her team, who were all asleep as she'd left them, no other People were in sight.

She walked through the door, which had been left open a crack. *What a place, she thought, where the crime rate is so low that you can leave things open like this...* The shadows were gone now, the colors of the backyard flowers and the lawn softening down into less-definite shades, drained of their vividness by the growing dusk.

Rhiow wandered off into the least-kempt part of the shrubbery at the corner of the yard furthest from the house, and once decently out of sight could tell immediately that she'd picked the right spot to take care of business: others had done so before. She went

unfocused, and when the necessities were handled, slipped out of the shrubbery again to see a dark shape peering into the house through the open doors.

“Hwaith?”

The shadow turned, saw her, purred -- though the purr had a rueful sound to it. “You couldn’t sleep either?”

Rhiow waved her tail “no”, a regretful gesture, as she made her way over to the house-wall and the cat food dishes. “My brain’s just too full of new information,” she said. “It only let me sleep long enough to recharge my muscles.” She sighed, stretched, and sat down, looking over the dishes. “Your day’s been even longer than ours, though. Did you get enough rest?”

“Enough for the time being. It was a good thing I was up, though: Aufwi wanted to talk to one of us.”

“What’s the matter? Is he all right?”

“He’s fine,” Hwaith said. “There wasn’t any point in disturbing you; you’d just gotten to sleep. But he wanted to let everybody know that the gate was trying to put down yet another root.”

Rhoiw swore softly. “And did it?”

“No, he managed to stop it. But he also marked the location it was trying to sink that root into. I was about to go up and have a look at the spot.”

“We’ve got an hour or so before Helen will be here,” Rhiow said. “Let me have a bite and I’ll go with you.”

She went over, checked out the dishes, chose one that had some kind of chicken cat food in it, and ate. At first, *Just a few bites*, Rhiow thought – but her stomach started to make a liar of her as soon as the first bite was in her mouth. *This is really unusually good*, she thought, *you have to wonder just what they’re putting in our food, or not putting in it, uptime –*

Shortly she looked up to see that Hwaith had sat down to have a wash. “I’m sorry,” Rhiow said, and had to laugh at herself as she went over for a drink. “Maybe I’ve been working harder than I thought I was...”

Hwaith purred loud and raspy at her as she drank. “Don’t rush,” he said. “I’ve got a transit ready: it won’t take long for us to get there.”

She drank, sat down, scrubbed briefly at her face. “I guess it’s easy to forget how hard you’re working when you’re out on the trail,” Rhiow said. “And then when you’re somewhere new and interesting...”

“Or old and interesting,” Hwaith said. “Time travel has its attractions, I guess. Urruah’s certainly been enjoying wallowing in the past.”

Hwaith sounded a little wistful. Rhiow got up, stretched fore and aft once more. “While you wish you could have your mundane present back,” she said, trotting over to him. “Don’t think I don’t catch the occasional thought.” She put her whiskers forward. “And I can’t blame you. Which way are we headed?”

“For the moment, just into the bushes,” Hwaith said.

He led her over to a thick patch of rhododendron on the opposite side of the yard, and slipped under the canopy of broad glossy leaves. Rhiow followed. Back against the stuccoed wall separating the yard from that of the house next door, in the dimness Rhiow saw a patch of a different darkness, paler, twilight. “Right through here – “ Hwaith said, and slipped through.

Rhiow paused for just a moment, assessing the personal gating: a securely anchored and flexible construction, a nice piece of work. She stepped through after Hwaith, glanced around.

They were standing at the foot of a moderately steep hillside; its lower slope and the ground where they stood was covered with the pale oat grass that seemed to favor unwatered spots in this part of the world. Several other small hills came down to meet the ground around them, and rather to Rhiow's surprise, none of them had houses built on them, or even roads.

"We're about three miles northwest of the Silent Man's place," Hwaith said, heading up the hill. "Greystone, the *ehhif* call it. Up here --"

As they climbed, the oat grass gave way to low shrubbery and ground cover, both somewhat overgrown. "This is only three miles away from where we were?" Rhiow said. "You'd think it was much further, out in the country somewhere --"

"Well," Hwaith said, "when these *ehhif* marked out their home territory, they did it with an eye to their privacy. You'll see in a moment."

"I keep meaning to ask," Rhiow said as they worked their way up through the underbrush. "Where's home territory for you, Hwaith? Are you in-pride? Or have you got *ehhif* of your own?"

"Oh, no," Hwaith said. "I've got a den-place down in Union Station, and I'm friendly enough with the *ehhif* there, but I haven't been closely affiliated for a long time now. Managing the gate even under normal circumstances is enough of a strain that I wouldn't want to have to do that and have *ehhif* too. It wouldn't be fair to them, really. And as for a pride..." Suddenly Hwaith sounded as if he was coming up against something he didn't want to deal with too closely. "Work tends to get in the way of pride-life, doesn't it? I mean, the gate-management end of things. If I start thinking about changing specialties, training a replacement, it might be another story."

She gave him a wry look as they came out between one band of shrubbery and another near the top of the hill. "Hwaith, if you're telling me that wizardry's impairing your tom-life, you're doing something wrong! Better have a word with Urruah."

He put his whiskers forward, catching her amusement. "Oh, no, it's not like that. I've hardly forsaken the queens for my Art! There were one or two when I was young, sure, but work got busy, nothing really came of it..." He shrugged his tail as they made their way through the second line of shrubbery. "And later on you learn not to expect it to be a *Sehau-and-Aifheh* thing every time. Might as well expect to have the sky rain fresh songbirds on you with their breasts ready plucked."

Rhiow chuckled. "Songbirds? I'd settle for chicken." But the sudden romantic turn of phrase amused her. *Sehau was a tom: Aifheh was his queen...* At least that was the way the most famous of the many versions of their story went -- a sung-verse variant composed by one of the greatest of the cat-bards, the one who anciently kept company with the *ehhif*-bard Hharo'lahn in the Isles of the West. The tale had already been old when the People first told it to the *ehhif*-wizards of Egypt, and thousands of subsequent generations of People retold it to any species that would listen, and to each other. Toms especially loved it, doting on its over-the-top romance and unavoidable tragedy -- but then toms always tended a little toward the histrionic, as something that would increase the drama in any given song. This, though, was an opinion Rhiow knew perfectly well it was wiser to keep to herself.

They came out of the shrubbery and stood at the hilltop, and Rhiow waved her tail in astonishment as she looked across the wide broad space to a huge frontage of house, built all in shadowy gray granite. The main building was two stories high, and at least a New York short block in length – a stately procession of arcades and porticoes, terraces and peaked roofs, railed stone terraces, archways, and doors of wood and glass. “This was an *ehhif* den?” Rhiow said. “The pride must have been huge!”

“Not at all,” Hwaith said as they headed toward it. “Only two *ehhif* lived here.”

“But not any more, I take it,” Rhiow said. The whole atmosphere of the place spoke strangely of abandonment: lightless windows, overgrown grass, ragged plantings hanging over leaf-scattered garden paths.

“No, it’s still lived in,” Hwaith said, leading the way down along the frontage. “A wealthy *ehhif* built the place some decades ago. I mean, a *really* wealthy one: the founder of one of the great old industrial *ehhif* families that have lived here for more than a century. This was the biggest private home ever built in the city: still is.” Hwaith glanced at the building’s long frontage of the building as they paced by it. “After the old tom-*ehhif* built it, he gave it to his only tom-kit. It was to be the place where the young tom and his queen would live their lives out together.”

“But it didn’t turn out that way,” Rhiow said.

At the far edge of the huge graveled space to one side of the great house, they paused, and Hwaith flirted his tail “no”. “In this town,” Hwaith said, “so many things don’t necessarily go as planned...”

Rhiow put her nose up into the air, sniffed. The scents of old growth, damp bark, shed conifer needles and peppertree leaves, mingled in the still air with scents of stale water and baked stone. But there was something else as well. “Am I crazy,” Rhiow said, “or is that – *oil*?”

“Not crazy at all,” Hwaith said. “Not actually on the grounds, here. But it’s close by: there’s a well down the other side of the hill. Ironic, really, since you could say this whole place was built on oil.”

Rhiow stood still and listened. Muted by the way the ground fell away, she could hear a faint, repetitive creaking noise. “Is that the well I’m hearing?” she said.

“That’s it.” Hwaith started off in the opposite direction, and Rhiow padded after him. “Anyway, down over here is where that root was trying to sink itself – “

Along the ridge of the hill, a terrace reached away from one side of the main house, stretching perhaps a hundred yards. At the terrace’s end a formal box garden began, or what remained of one. Once it had been an interlocking maze of carefully trimmed lines of shrubbery. Now it was looking ragged around the edges, even dusty. “If these *ehhif* are so wealthy,” Rhiow said as they paced through the maze, “it’s surprising they don’t take better care of the place.”

“It is a little strange,” Hwaith said, “but they don’t seem to be here much. Watch out for these steps – a couple of the slabs are loose.”

They made their way down a shallow stairway at the far edge of the maze, heading for a small, flat area further down the hillside, hemmed in by an incomplete circle of trees. “This is where my gate was trying to root,” Hwaith said, “at least briefly.” He stopped, his nose wrinkling. “Wait a minute. Do you smell – “

To a Person’s senses, *ehhif* blood had a metallic reek, instantly identifiable. Even if there had been rain to wash it away, which there had not, the scent would still have

lingered in the soil for weeks, unmistakable. Now Rhiow walked slowly into the center of the ring of trees, sniffing carefully.

The scent was very old. Rhiow spent a while working her way over toward one spot in particular, near the encircling ring of trees, where once upon a time, the blood had soaked deep. But that had been a long time ago. Hwaith came up by her, put his nose down, inhaled. His tail lashed.

“Years old,” he said. “But I’d have trouble saying how many. Forensics hasn’t been my field.”

“Could this be a murder the police here missed?” Rhiow said. “Is this anything you’ve heard about before?”

“No,” Hwaith said, sounding upset.

Rhiow’s tail was lashing too, now. “We’re going to have to get Arhu up here,” she said. “I can’t believe this. *Another* – maybe not a murder, but *something*. And no way to tell if it’s germane to what we’re doing.” She put her nose down to the ground again, took another long breath –

-- froze. A sour stink, faint, damp, acrid, teased her nose. Her mind went back to the stink she’d scented when she had had her teeth sunk into the diagnostic webbing of Hwaith’s gate, just after they’d arrived. “Do you smell that?” she said.

He put his nose down by the ground, breathed, then opened his mouth to rebreathe the scent. “Yes.”

Rhiow shook her head, sneezed. Then she sat down, licked a paw and scrubbed at her nose briefly, it itched so with the warring scents. “I wonder,” she said. “Hwaith, do earthquakes have a scent?”

He gave her an odd look. “That’s a thought that never would have occurred to me.”

“*These* earthquakes, anyway,” Rhiow said. “Your gate’s hyperstrings -- at least, the diagnostic strings tied to the other places where the gate was trying to put down roots -- they were full of this smell.”

“You’re right,” Hwaith said. “But, Rhiow, we haven’t *had* a quake here.” He paused. “At least, not recently. Certainly not in the last six weeks. Maybe not for much longer.”

“I wonder if we’re *about* to have one here.”

He looked thoughtful. “That could be. Are you suggesting we should try to prevent it?”

Rhiow sneezed again – once without trying, and then once on purpose to try to clear her nose of the warring scents. “I don’t know if we could. Even if we could, I don’t know if it would be wise. But I think we should make sure one of us is keeping an eye on this site, because if we can investigate the quake while it’s active, we might be able to run a trace back to the cause.”

Hwaith’s tail waved slowly from side to side as he thought. “It’s worth a try,” he said. “I’ll take a moment to jump back over to where Aufwi’s watching the gate...see how he’s doing, and ask him to add a tracer to the diagnostic that’s looking at this attempted root.”

“If you would,” Rhiow said.

With barely a breath of displaced air and only the softest pop, Hwaith vanished. Rhiow blinked – the departure had been unusually slick – and got up to walk out of the

circle of trees, over to where the plantings parted to allow the southward vista to open up. Below, past the nearer, barren hills, the city view was beginning to glitter through the dusk -- that softer, yellower, fainter light that had so struck Helen the first time she saw it. "Quite a view..." she said.

"It is," Hwaith said from right behind her.

Rhiow jumped – not exactly off the ground, but she started violently enough that all her fur stood up in response. She came around to face Hwaith, still bristling. "How do you *do* that?"

His eyes were wide with shock. "What?"

"You transited in and I didn't even hear you come back!"

"I didn't want to disturb you!"

"Well, would you please do it louder after this, because *I am disturbed!*"

Then Rhiow took a long breath. "Sorry," she said. "Sorry. I'm on edge, it's wrong of me to take it out on you. But sweet Iau up a tree, Hwaith, I've *never* heard anyone self-gate that quietly!"

He ducked himself down and twisted his head to her, and Rhiow's annoyance dissolved instantly into amused embarrassment, for it was the kind of gesture a young Person, half-apologetic, half-playful, would have used with a playmate. "Sorry," Hwaith said, giving her so upside-down a look from those brassy eyes that for a second or so he was practically standing on his head. Then he righted himself. "I don't think about it often. I told you, I have the Ear sometimes – the ulterior-hearing gift. A lot of the time I can hear the air about to move, or what direction it's going to move in, and nudge it out of moving explosively."

"Selective matter displacement," Rhiow said, less upset now and much more impressed.

"More like diffusion," Hwaith said. "I spread the kinetic energy of the air's motion around, that's all. It's a gimmick."

"A useful one, I bet," Rhiow said, and sat down to recover herself a little.

Hwaith sat beside her, looking down the hill at the glitter of the city. "Not usually," he said. "Mostly my gate doesn't care whether I sneak up on it or not: it misbehaves anyway."

They sat quietly for a few moments while Rhiow finished calming herself down. "As I was saying before you sneaked up on me...it really is a fine view. You can see all the way to the ocean from here."

"True enough," Hwaith said, and glanced over his shoulder at the huge dark old house behind them, its windows blank and empty. "Not often anyone here to see it, though, since the murder."

She stared at him. "Wait. Since the murder? *What* murder?"

"Oh, of course, you wouldn't know." He got up, shook himself. "Come on. It's back here it happened."

They walked back through the garden maze to the house. "The young tom-*ehhif* who lived here with his queen," Hwaith said, "had a personal assistant who worked closely with him. Something went wrong with this other young tom-*ehhif* – no one's sure what. One story was that he was jealous of the relationship between the tom and queen – though which of them he might have desired, no one's sure. Another was that he'd become ill in his mind, and couldn't tell friend from enemy any longer."

They came to a halt in front of a set of floor-to-ceiling glass doors set in behind a little terrace. “Right there,” Hwaith said, “something more than twenty years ago now, the tom-*ehhif* who lived here was shot by his assistant: and soon after, when someone came to the house, the assistant shot himself as well. At first there were few questions about it. Afterwards the questions just wouldn’t stop. Why didn’t the queen-*ehhif* hear the first shot? Did she perhaps fire it herself? What was the assistant doing there that night, when he’d been told not to come? And there were a hundred other issues about it that couldn’t be settled to anyone’s satisfaction...” Hwaith waved his tail. “Finally the young tom’s father sold the house to someone else: another pair of wealthy *ehhif*. They own it still. But they’re not here much. I think the place troubles them.”

He let out a breath: they both sat for a few seconds in the quiet. Off in the trees down the hill, a California jay produced its rusty call from a throat that sounded like it really needed to be greased. “You must be thinking that *ehhif* here don’t do anything *but* kill each other,” Hwaith said.

“Oh, no,” Rhiow said. She looked down the length of the house. “But you say the *ehhif* who den here won’t stay... You think they feel the place is *th’haimenh*?” It was the Speech-cognate of the Ailurin word *sseih’huuh*, “haunted,” though the word in the Speech was more precise about the cause of the associated apparitions – more a kind of lingering, self-repeating spectral recording than any real local persistence of soul, for which there was another set of words.

“I don’t know,” Hwaith said. “I’m not clear about how *ehhif* think of such things. You live with them full time: maybe you know better than I would.”

Rhiow thought briefly about Iaehh, sitting some nights in the silence of the apartment that was only his now, his eyes still and sad, his head held in a way that suggested he was listening in mind to a voice he would never hear in life again.

“I’m not always sure, either,” she said, and got up. “Hwaith, let’s get back to the Silent Man’s. They’ll be thinking about getting ready to go. ...And maybe,” she said, glancing over her shoulder and flirting her tail, “you’ll show me just how you diffuse that air.”

In utter silence, Hwaith vanished. Rhiow followed.

When the Silent Man’s car rolled up the broad, curving cypress-lined drive to the front door of Elwin Dagenham’s house in the hills, the pre-intervention conference in the back seat was still in full swing.

“My back fur looks terrible.”

“Sheba, it’s just fine.”

“No it’s not, it won’t lie down.”

“I could help you with that.”

Whack! “Ow!”

“I told you, I’m not interested! Come back in three months.”

“Will there be food? I’m starving.”

“I told you to eat before you left.”

“Did not.”

“Did too.”

“There’s always plenty of food. Just make sure you get it before the *houiff* do.”

“*Houiff*? Nobody said anything about *houiff*!”

“I must have mentioned them at least once or twice. Oh, it *won’t* stay down!”

“All you need is for someone to lick it a little – “

Whack! “Oww!!”

“I told you, *three months!*”

“There must be something in the food here. Hwaith, do they put hormones in the cat food here? Normally he’d have heard her the first ten times she told him.”

“Could just be excitement. Or memory loss. I hear you can start to incur memory loss if you have really big – “

“And don’t worry, they’re usually only little *houiff*. Oh, you do get the occasional *houff* at one of these who’s a film star. That nice big German shepherd, now, he’s a creampuff. Oh, and there’s a collie now too. Actually, there are about nine of them. All idiots, just hit them in the head if they so much as look at you and they’ll run off crying.”

“Memory loss? *Who says that?*”

The car rolled slowly across gravel, stopped with a crunch of tires: the driver turned around, looked into the shadowy back seat. *Awful quiet back there*, he said to Helen. *Are they all right? Anybody get carsick?*

“They’re fine,” Helen said. “Cousins, somebody use the Speech and put our host’s mind at rest.”

“Pre-event arrangements,” Rhiow said, “nothing more. Everybody, it’s wise that the Silent Man should know we’re clear on what the plan is. We go in together as his entourage, and let the PR people have their joke and take their pictures. Afterwards, we scatter. Amuse the guests, try not to damage the dogs any more than necessary for good order and discipline, have the occasional *hors d’oeuvre*. *Occasional*,” she said, eyeing Urruah. “No getting up on the tables, no matter how the guests invite you to. Arrange for food to fall on the floor when necessary. Shouldn’t be hard, as from what Sheba says, this group is likely to be so awash in alcohol pretty soon that they wouldn’t recognize an, uh, intervention if it climbed up their clothes with all its claws out singing ‘Great Queen Iau Had A Cow.’ Otherwise... just keep your ears and noses open for any sign of the kind of thing that Helen noticed in Anya Harte today. If there are any other People there who’re kindly disposed, chat with them, hear what they might have to say, don’t bring up what we are or do unless you must. If they recognize you for what you are by the look of you, downplay your role, don’t get into long explanations: you’re just here with the Silent Man. Which is true enough. When it’s time to go, he’ll let Helen know and she’ll call us all silently. Any questions?”

“About the *hors d’oeuvres*...”

“Yes?”

“How *many* is ‘occasional?’”

Whack! “Oww!!”

“Thank you, Sheba. I owe you one.”

“My pleasure.”

The Silent Man chuckled inaudibly in his throat, reached back for Sheba: she climbed up to her usual place on his shoulder. *We ready?* he said.

“I believe so,” Helen said.

The Silent Man got out, opened the back door for the People, then went around to Helen's door, opened it. But she didn't move.

Problem?

"Not at all. You go ahead," Helen said. "I need a moment to powder my nose."

The Silent Man smiled, closed her door carefully, and headed for the big front door of the Dagenham place with Rhiow and her People in tow.

The house was another of those structures that seemed to be having some kind of identity crisis as regarded its architecture. It had a broad curved front with columns right along the curve, but these sorted very strangely, to Rhiow's eye, with the multiple peaked roofs behind the façade. "Italian revival," Urruah said as they strolled up to it.

"Great," Rhiow said. "Another building that's going to need CPR." Through the tall windows running under the colonnade, Rhiow could see rooms brilliantly lit, and in them crowds of *ehhif*, the queens almost all in bright colors, the toms all in somber shades. Even through the glass, a subdued hubbub of voices could be heard.

Outside the tall carved wooden front door, the Silent Man paused, looked down at the group around his feet. Rhiow looked up at him. "Unless something comes up," she said, "I won't be too far from you. If you need something done, just speak to me as you've been doing. I'll answer in a way that no one will hear, either your people or mine."

He gave her a quizzical look. *'Something done?'*

Like the production of an excuse to leave early, Rhiow said privately.

He smiled -- the expression more than usually edged, since he was its target. *Does it show that much?* And he reached up and pressed the button to ring the doorbell.

The door swung open, managed by a dark tom-*ehhif* in black with touches of white. The Silent Man stepped in, took off the overcoat he was wearing over his own black-and-white regalia, and handed the coat and his hat to the *ehhif* who'd opened the door.

The tom vanished. Rhiow glanced around, glad of the excuse to hold still for a moment, as the sudden assault on the senses took a few moments to manage. Besides the echoing noise of music, voices, laughter, clinking glassware -- for the huge circular front hall was floored in a checkerboard of polished marble -- the scents hit any incomer in a rush of out-flowing warmer air, and had to be dealt with. Food, drink, perfume, *ehhif* sweat and *ehhif* pheromone, the traces of several different varieties of *houiff* and various People, most of them strangers to the house, at least one a resident.

"Whew," Urruah said from behind Rhiow. "How many do you make it?"

"A hundred or so?" Rhiow said.

"Could be a lot more," Arhu said, stalking up beside her. "This is a fairly big place."

"Possibly more like two hundred," Hwaith said, coming up from behind. "There are as many cars parked in the lot up here as there were out on the street."

"Come on," Rhiow said, for the Silent Man had started across the floor to the biggest of the doors on the far side of the circular hall. This was a double door, the doors again of carved wood, opening inwards. Beyond them was a room at least three times the size of the front hall, again circular, the windows and glass doors on the far side all swagged with golden fabric, the panels between ornamented with paintings. Tables and chairs were set out here and there, and more tables, laden with food and drink, stood near

the walls: from an adjoining room came the sound of a swing band playing. In the middle of this room, standing and talking and laughing, was a great crowd of splendidly dressed *ehhif*. They made up a truly astonishing vista -- *ehhif* of all shapes and sizes, dressed of dark suits, from the casual to the very formal, or in gowns of rich silks and satins, enough jewel-flashing bracelets and necklaces to blind the casual viewer, wild hats with jutting feathers, elaborately rolled and curled hairstyles. But what Rhiow watched were the faces, the eyes, of the people who turned as the Silent Man came into the doorway, and seeing him, started to go oddly quiet.

That quiet spread, making the band in the next room sound louder by the moment. The Silent Man didn't move out of the doorway, but simply stood still and smiled at this effect... and Rhiow was sure all the other *ehhif* could see the slight grimness of his look. She was equally sure that the Silent Man saw quite clearly how most of the many glances in his direction were trying to look accidental. Looks changed, scents and postures changed: the air of the room became uncomfortably charged. Nervousness, hostility, scorn, pity, annoyance, a certain nasty pleasure -- without a word spoken, they were all clear enough to Rhiow, who spent at least a little of every day in Grand Central, and who over the years had been exposed to just about every *ehhif* emotion-scent going.

"I heard a rumor that you were coming," said a voice from one side, "but I wasn't sure whether to believe it. You hear so many things in this town..."

Approaching the People and the Silent Man at some speed was a small tom-*ehhif* in a dinner jacket and dark slacks, with a blue- and black- striped necktie of truly astonishing breadth underneath it. His black hair was slicked straight back from his forehead, as if he was trying to make it go as far back on his head as he could; his small beady eyes and long sharp nose suddenly reminded Rhiow of the grackles sitting in the tree above them on Olvera Street, their expressions caught halfway between nervousness and a kind of myopic self-importance. "Mr. Runyon, it's such a pleasure, I'm Elwin Dagenham, we've met at Goldwyn once or twice, no reason for you to remember, of course. Please make yourself right at home. Marcus, quick, go back to the kitchen and get a pot of coffee for Mr. Runyon. Mr. Runyon, you hardly need introductions, you know everybody here, of course..."

The Silent Man smiled at his host, nodded as they made their way into the room. *The normal array of crooks, scoundrels, cheats, jumped-up used-car salesmen now dealing in people rather than cars, money types looking for fame, famous types looking for money, and assorted others who're just plain looking*, the Silent Man said for the People to hear.

"And of course here's the famous Miss Sheba, and this would be, what, her fan club? Oh, I think the papers are going to be interested in this, and probably the fan magazines too." Dagenham gestured. "If you don't mind, let's just -- yes, over here, that's right, come on -- "

Suddenly there were more tom-*ehhif* gathered around the Silent Man and the People, holding up great bulky boxes with all manner of mechanics sticking out from them. Flashes started going off, and Rhiow realized with a start that these were the ancestors of the flashguns of her time: actual little bulbs of glass with something explosive inside them. The smell they produced was appalling.

Dagenham stood there looking pleased and proprietary as more *ehhif* from the party started gathering around, amused by what to them looked like some kind of tame-

cat act. “Even the same phrasing,” Urruah said, staring around and producing his fake-*ehhif* smile for the amusement of the various humans who were gathering around to watch. “How many people do you think are paying Giorgio off for celebrity tips every day?”

“Probably as many as possible,” Hwaith said. “A *maitre d’* doesn’t make all that much, even after the tips.”

Arhu and Siffha’h were standing together, looking desperately alike, wide-eyed and cute, an effect that Rhiow had seen even *ehhif* Queens find difficult to resist. Some of the photographers, apparently having far less developed powers of resistance, went down on their knees to get pictures of the two. “Try pulling the corners of your mouths back further,” Urruah said. “They like that.”

“Please,” Siffha’h said, dry. “My eyeballs are about to jump out of my head as it is. I’m saving my mouth for the food. And I *know* I smell chicken liver pate here somewhere.”

“Across the room, to the left, that second table,” Urruah said without turning a whisker, “between the Swedish meatballs and the lox. And, sweet Queen Iau, is that actually Beluga?..”

Rhiow rolled her eyes as the photographers finished their first round of photos, and Urruah proceeded across the room as if he owned it, straight through the splendid crowd who now turned their attention away from the Silent Man, and laughed to see Urruah march over to the dark *ehhif* in charge handing out plates for the buffet. He sat down in front of this gentleman, tucked his tail around his toes, and simply gazed longingly upward and purred.

An immediate furious yapping came from the next room over, the one containing the band. A small *houff*, one of the fluffy shrill-voiced kind, came charging out of the ballroom with its silky golden fur all a-bristle. Apparently it had seen Urruah crossing the room, and couldn’t bear the sight of a Person on what it had for the moment come to consider its own territory.

Play nice, now! Rhiow said to Urruah.

Urruah didn’t even bother turning his head. Speechless with fury, or at least reduced to incomprehensibility by it, the little *houff* went straight for Urruah – and halfway to him, tripped and sprawled right onto its already sufficiently-flattened nose.

Houiff were of course as unable to see a sidled Person as *ehhif* were. Hwaith, who had slipped out of sight under a table to go invisible, and afterwards had calmly strolled over and crouched down for the *houff* to stumble over, now got up as the enraged *houff* did. It turned toward Urruah, yelping with surprise and frustration, ready to jump at him again. Urruah merely turned to stare down his nose at it...and the poor *houff* had reason to yelp again, as Hwaith administered it a sharp whack on the nose with the claws just out enough to make an impression.

Apparently horrified by the concept of a Person who could hit you before you even got close to it, the *houff* turned and ran back into the ballroom, still yelping: a kindly-looking bald-headed man in a dinner jacket picked it up and took it away, talking to it soothingly. In the main room, the *ehhif* howled with laughter at Urruah’s deadpan reaction, and started plying him with food.

“Don’t forget to save me my percentage,” Hwaith said over his shoulder to Urruah.

“Cousin, caching’s for canids, you know that.” Urruah looked smug. “Just get over here in time not to miss the good stuff.” He paused to lick his chops after one tidbit. “Pretty good sour cream on these blinis...”

Rhiow watched with amusement as Hwaith strolled back her way. “A little harsh with the poor creature, weren’t you?”

“It’s what my dam always said: a claw goes further into the ear than a thousand explanations.” Hwaith wandered back toward a settee over at the side of the room. “Why waste time saying ‘nice doggie’ fifty or a hundred times? *Houiff* talk to each other, if not to us. Word’ll get around in a hurry....”

After a little while she started to wonder if he was right, for they were bothered by no more *houiff*. It was the *ehhif* who were doing the bothering now: Rhiow was picked up, petted, fed, fussed over, fed some more, and even offered alcohol. In the midst of all the ruckus, she was relieved to catch a glimpse of the Silent Man again: she’d lost track of him briefly. Just inside the ballroom next door was a fireplace, and a fire, against the back of the room, between tall windows looking out on a terrace. There the Silent Man had esconced himself at a table that sat a comfortable distance from the fire, and had made himself at home with a pot of coffee that a servant had brought him, while Sheba lay across his lap and accepted the occasional tidbit from a plate of *hors d’oeuvres* they’d been brought. Around the table sat a few other *tom-ehhif*, most of them older men. The Silent Man seemed to be enjoying all their company, but with one of them in particular he seemed to be doing a lot of pad-scribbling: a thin little man, sharp-faced, with close-set eyes – another bird-like face, but more closely resembling a hawk than any grackle. The voice was hawkish too, harsh and rasping, and would have been unpleasant if not for the humor in it. ‘*Ruah*, Rhiow said, *take a break from stuffing your gut, will you?*

“Did it before you thought about it,” he said from behind her. “Rhi, they’ve got oysters on the half-shell on that third table, and they’re going fast. Stop exercising self-denial and get in there.”

Rhiow’s mouth started watering. “Truly I’m going to get you for that one of these days,” she said. “Meanwhile, you seem to know most of these people. Any idea who that one is? The *ehhif* with the nose. He’s the only one here who isn’t looking at the Silent Man like he’s some kind of plague victim.”

Urruah sat down beside her, looking strangely pleased as he started to wash his face. “The look of him I don’t know,” he said, “but anyone studying this land in this time would have heard his voice. That’s *Hhwalther Hhwinhel’lh*. A newspaperman once, as the Silent Man was. But then he did something unusual: he invented the gossip column. Now he’s beyond famous – his column is in two thousand papers across the country, and he does a *rah’chio* show every night....fifty-five million listeners. In this time, he’s a superstar. And he and the Silent Man have been great friends for some while...which is interesting, since Sheba tells me that once they were great enemies.” He put his whiskers forward. “But since the Silent Man got sick, *Hhwalther*’s had a change of heart. Makes you think there’s some hope for *ehhif* after all.”

“So he’s safe there for the time being...”

“Yes. I’ll keep an eye on him for a while, if you like. We’ll all take turns at it. Meanwhile, you go make the oysters feel unsafe for a few minutes! The team’s doing what it’s here for. Arhu and Sif are out looking and listening, and taking Hwaith’s advice when it’s needed. Go on, stop micromanaging...”

Rhiow put her whiskers forward and, to please him, did as she was told. She was on her fourth oyster, obligingly fed to her by a tall dark tom-*ehhif* in a tuxedo, when she suddenly heard that laugh like glass going tinkle, tinkle, tinkle out of a tipped-over garbage can. *Oh no*, Rhiow thought, but there was nowhere to escape to: Anya Harte was heading straight for her. The queen had on another of her flouncy little dresses, in a deeper blue this time – more a peacock’s feather color – all scattered with a brittle glitter of rhinestones; and she was collared in a choker of what might or might not have been diamonds, but in any case made her look to Rhiow like a Park Avenue Peke. The little high heels came tap-tap-tapping off the ballroom floor, where she’d apparently been dancing with some tom. “And look there,” Anya cried to several of the group of toms who’d followed her out of the ballroom, “there’s one of the darling kitties! Oh, aren’t they all so adorable? And that’s the prettiest one, absolutely dead black, unlucky for most people of course, but not for me -- !”

Rhiow threw a horrified glance at Urruah, who was sitting exactly a foot to the right of where he had been – safely out of tripping range, and sidled. *It’s a good thing*, Rhiow said silently as Miss Harte snatched her up, *that I’m not so paranoid that I’d ever suspect you of setting this up.*

“What a sweet face he has! Isn’t he lovely? And such big golden eyes! And – oh, my, his breath smells so fishy! Is it a fishy wishy kitty then?”

Rhiow closed her eyes in what she hoped would be mistaken for a lazy friendly expression. “Woman, you *reek!*” she said softly. “It’d make anyone’s eyes water.” The overpowering scent was mostly that of roses, but other rather mismatched scents seemed to have been haphazardly added to this basis -- as if the wearer had mixed the bottle-remnants of several expensive perfumes together, assuming that the result would be all right just because they’d all been expensive. “Oh, Queen Iau,” Rhiow said, “please let her just put me down before I have to shred her tatty dress. Oh, *not* upside down!”

“But they’re dear Mr. Runyon’s friends, so we have to be nice to them,” Miss Harte said, in one too-expert move inverting Rhiow and holding her cradled on her back in her arms, exactly as Hhuha had used to do. But Hhuha hadn’t squeezed her as if she was a rag doll, and had spent her time holding Rhiow talking to her; whereas Miss Harte was talking over Rhiow’s head at the crowd of toms who were using the excuse of admiring Rhiow to admire the parts of Miss Harte she was being squeezed against. Rhiow opened her eyes again – had to, they felt like they were popping -- and looked up into that pretty face, all smiles, but not a smile-line in sight, and all wide blue eyes, though those eyes were only looking into the toms’ eyes for the purpose of seeing her own reflection there. “They’re the only friends he has now, I suppose, though everybody does their best to help him along. It’s so nice that he has some company at home, it must be so hard for him to be alone so much after that dreadful woman ditched him, though I suppose everybody was expecting it, we all know what *those* types are like! But you wouldn’t believe the terrible kind of people he’s been keeping company with, I ran across him at lunch at Musso and Frank’s today, and the whole back room was simply aghast, because...what?”

Miss Harte trailed off, slowed down by what Rhiow thought was the only thing that could have done it, short of Iau Herself appearing in Her glory and starting in on the buffet: the toms’ faces turning away. All around them, another stillness like the one the

Silent Man's entry had produced now fell, but this one much differed in quality, as about fifty tom-*ehhifs*' breaths went in and didn't come out.

Helen Walks Softly stood in the middle of that open double door from the front hallway, wearing more than any other woman in the place...and somehow less. Her dress was sleeveless, off-the-shoulder, nipped in at the waist, full-length, and a shade darker than the wine she'd been drinking at lunch. The fabric seemed unornamented, except for a subtle shimmer toward darker shades when it swung away from the light. But a half-inch or so above where the cleavage became truly interesting, the fabric simply seemed to start fading away like fog. By the time it reached Helen's collarbones, it was completely gone. The effect seemed calculated to distract even the most single-minded viewer from the single blood-red cabochon garnet hanging by a chain in the hollow of Helen's throat... and to instead leave one wondering whether the boundary between fabric "being there" and "not being there" might possibly shift without warning, and in which direction.

Possibly the focus of even more attention, though, was Helen's hair. In a time when all the other queen-*ehhif* seemed to be wearing it put up or fairly short, in rolls or curls, and some in structures that looked more like architecture than hair, Helen had simply pinned the sides of her long hair back and let the rest flow untrammelled in raven waves down her back. Numerous of the tom-*ehhif* watching her were doing so with expressions suggesting that they only saw queens with their hair down so in far more private circumstances. Some of them had plainly begun wondering how such circumstances, involving Helen, might be organized.

Miss Harte simply dropped Rhiow. Rhiow was ready for this, indeed grateful for it, and landed on her feet in a state of wicked amusement as the toms, trying not to look like they were hurrying too much, went around Rhiow on either side and headed for Helen. Elwin Dagenham, meanwhile, materialized from out of the middle of the crowd and went hurriedly to greet her. Helen strolled over to him, put out a gracious hand and began complimenting him on the beauty of his house. Toms from elsewhere in the room started to gather around the first group, beauty rather obviously on their minds as well.

"Helen," Urruah said, having come unsidled again and strolling back in and around her, "is that a little of your head-fur sticking up back there...?"

Whack! "Oww!"

"So perverse," Siffha'h said, wandering back past Urruah and off through the center of the room, where approximately three-quarters of the guests had abruptly lost interest in the People, the buffet and the bar, the males apparently out of admiration and many of the females out of sheer pique.

"I was kidding!"

"Yeah, sure," Arhu said, going after his siste, who was heading through a door opposite to the ballroom entrance. "If he's not careful, somebody's going to get born an *ehhif* in his next life, and is it ever going to be *messy!*"

"Never mind them, Helen," Urruah said, after shaking his ears back into kilter again: Siffha'h's southpaw clout was one of Arhu's chief complaints about life. "Which designer did you trade a wizardry to for that?"

Helen smiled as a glass of wine was put into her hands by one of the crowd of toms she'd suddenly acquired. *It's an Elie Saab from a few years ago, my time,* she said

silently as she toasted her admirer and had a sip, *but otherwise nothing out of the ordinary.*

Prêt-a-porter?

Oh, come on, 'Ruah, like I can afford couture on my salary! But I did have a word with the material.

"The right one, I'd say," Rhiow said: the toms were third-day-of-heat thick around Helen. *If there are any secrets worth hearing in this place, I suspect she'll be the one who gets told them...* She glanced around. "Now where's Miss Harte gone?"

"Wouldn't think you cared, fishy-breath 'boy,'" Urruah said, putting his whiskers forward. "Or would have thought you would have been ready with some suggestions."

"Please," Rhiow said. "The Queen would have words with me if I'd done what I was thinking of doing." She glanced around. "It's too much to hope for that she'd have left. No, there she is, back with the Silent Man and his friends again."

"Or trying to be," Urruah said, for no one at the table of senior toms was giving Miss Harte so much as a glance, though she hung over them and chatted about what she saw on the Silent Man's writing pad and otherwise tried to look as if she was welcome with them. "Never mind her: she's just salving her wounded ego by 'playing' with the old toms instead of the young ones. They'll soon see her off if they get tired of her eavesdropping." He stood up, glanced over his shoulder at Helen, who had drifted off toward the buffet with her sudden entourage, and looked to be as much in danger of being fed by hand as Rhiow and the other People had been. "She's got their tails under her paw; let's leave her to get on with business. I'll go see what the youngsters are up to."

"You do that," Rhiow said, and stood there watching Urruah, for a wonder, actually walk away from food. Then she flicked an ear at her own sarcasm, possibly something left over from the annoyance of being half-squashed against Anya Harte's peculiar-smelling chest.

Enough, Rhiow said to herself: that doesn't have to happen again. If she tries it, I'll inflict on her a wardrobe malfunction the likes of which these people have never seen. For the moment, I'll have a wander.

The wander went on for quite a while. Rhiow went out through the back doors of the ballroom, and found that the house seemed to have three wings reaching out from behind the curved façade, and the two outer ones had upstairs levels as well. Then behind it all was a terrace and a pool, and past that a smaller structure, a poolhouse, from which Rhiow could hear the voices of People carrying across the water. One of them was the queen that Sheba had called "Maiwi"; Rhiow could actually smell her all the way from the other end of the pool. *No, she thought, I'm not going down there.* She eyed the plantings up behind the pool, which went for a little way up the hillside before the native manzanita scrub asserted itself. The two stuccoed outer wings of the house reached right to the hillside, each vanishing under the shade of peppertrees down at that end.

From the darkness, a shadow materialized beside her. "Not going down to visit with our social betters?" Hwaith said.

Rhiow snorted. "Please! I prefer it here with the peasantry. Hwaith, what in Her name's the matter with Maiwi? Doesn't she groom? How does she bear herself?"

He waved his tail in an "I don't know" gesture. "Sheba once told me she thought she might be sick somehow," Hwaith said. "But what way, I'm not sure. Maybe physically. Maybe in the mind. I don't understand for myself how someone can get so

lazy they won't walk to their own foodbowl, or can't be bothered to get up to make *siss* somewhere away from themselves...."

Rhiow breathed out. "Ah well," she said, "we've got enough problems in our own foodbowls at the moment: can't solve all the world's troubles in the flick of a tail." She glanced around. "Where did the youngsters go? Did you see?"

"They're inside someplace. But this place has a lot of inside..." He looked over his shoulder. "I'll go look for them, if you like."

"No hurry," Rhiow said. "If Arhu's using the Eye on something, it's best not to disturb him. He'll let me know, or Sif will, if they find anything germane."

"All right," Hwaith said, and headed off toward the plantings up at the far end of the pool.

Rhiow watched him go, then padded over to the side of the terrace. In the shadows over there, along with some lounge chairs and planting boxes, there was a birdbath, not nearly high enough to protect any unfortunate bird from a Person. But at this time of night, it wasn't birds she was interested in: it was water. There had been plenty of things for the *ehhif* at the buffet to drink, but not much for People: and Rhiow knew better than to drink pool water. *Besides the chemicals*, she thought, *Iau only knows what the ehhif have been doing in there...*

She tensed, leapt, balanced on the rim of the birdbath. There was indeed water in it, and there in the shadows she crouched carefully and drank. *I could drink this whole thing*, Rhiow thought; *I had no idea I was this thirsty. Still, better to leave some for somebody else --*

"-- not sure I want to be involved," said an *ehhif*-queen's soft voice from over by the ballroom doors. "You know how some people are if they get word that anyone's trying to upset the status quo."

"But this wouldn't be like that," said another voice, a tom's. "Dolores, it's just not fair to you. You see how you keep getting passed over just because you wouldn't --"

"It's not that, Ray. It's the methods. Just because they're being unfair to me doesn't mean it's right for me to be unfair to them."

There was something about the pain in the queen-*ehhif*'s voice that brought Rhiow's head up, held her where she was. The woman was short, slight, wearing a long pale gown; her hair was dark and short, her face in shadow and hard to make out in this light. The man was tall, slim, wearing a tuxedo as many of the *ehhif*-toms were this evening; his hair and brows were dark, but there was little else that even a Person's eyes could make out with bright light behind him and his face turned away toward the pool and the hillside. "Dolores," he said. "This 'fair' and 'unfair' stuff, you've got to let it go. It's doing you no good. What point is being the only principled actress at the studio when you're also the only one whose contract isn't going to get picked up?"

The queen-*ehhif* was sniffing. The tom took her by both arms, holding her that way even when she pulled a little to be let go. "All I'm asking is that you give it a try. It's not like you're going to be sticking pins in dolls! It's nothing so stupid or primitive. It's a straightforward way to get the forces that actually run the Universe, the Higher Forces, to pay attention to you and get Them to do what *you* want Them to do, for a change, instead of just shooting off all Their energy randomly. It's a purposeful direction of a natural power, like electricity. Some people have a talent for it and don't even know it, never know why they have good luck and the people around them have it bad. But it can be

taught, it can be learned, and when it's learned and used, it *works*. Did you see what happened to Millie? Her manager ran off to Rio with her last six pictures' wages, her agent dumped her, Charles left her and took up with her hairdresser, for Pete's sake! – it was about as bad for her as it could get. Then she went to one of our group's little sessions and went through the reconstruction routine. She wasn't any more certain about it at first than you are, but she gave it her all. And two days later, RKO picked up her contract at three times what her weekly had been at Loew's. It's worth it, Dolores! All the Universe wants back from you, all the Forces want, is commitment. Commit yourself and you can have it all. The Strong Ones and the Great Old One they work for are willing to be on your side, but you have to stand up and commit to being strong yourself, first. Be Their friend, and They'll be yours."

The sniffing had stopped. Rhiow didn't move a muscle, unwilling to misstep and make some sound that might break whatever was happening here: for in the silence of the terrace and the back of her mind, she could hear something she had heard only very occasionally before – the Whisperer, silent, breathing, listening.

"I don't know," the queen-*ehhif* said, after a long pause. But something in her voice told Rhiow she did know, she was just waiting for some one thing to push her over the edge into the choice. "What if it doesn't – "

"It will," the tom said. "It will. I promise. You've had so much that's gone wrong. This is where it starts to go right." He turned her face up to his gently with one hand, and lowered his head to hers.

Silence.

Many of Rhiow's breaths later, many of the Whisperer's, the young queen put her arms around the tom. "All right," she said, and it was strange how close to tears she sounded again. "For you, all right. How soon?"

"Not right this minute, first thing," the tom said. "Come on, let me get you a glass of something."

They broke the clinch, though the tom kept one arm around the queen's waist. "No, I have to know, I'm going to have to change some appointments – "

They walked toward the ballroom doors. "What's today?" the tom-*ehhif* said.

"The sixteenth."

Rhiow jumped down as soon as they passed and their backs were turned to her. "Tomorrow evening."

"Where should I meet you?"

Hold still, hold still! Rhiow thought, but it was too late, they were halfway into the house already. Into the ballroom. "We meet here first and then we..."

Rhiow ran toward the doors...and the swing band struck up, an impenetrable wall of sound, especially the piercing solo clarinet that made it impossible to hear anything further. She stood a moment outside the door, watching them vanish into the largish group of *ehhif* who were making their way onto the dance floor.

All right, she said to the Whisperer as she sat down just outside the door, frustrated, and scrubbed one ringing ear, then the other. *That was worth hearing. And now we have someone to listen to a little more closely this evening.*

She sidled and headed through the ballroom, looking closely at the *ehhif* there: but Dolores and Ray hadn't stayed in the room. Rhiow trotted through into the buffet, and found Urruah standing off to one side, looking at a crowd which had already grown

significantly larger just in the relatively short time since they'd come. What had not changed was the broken-glass tinkle of one particular voice rising again and again over the rumble of other conversation and laughter. The jewels around Anya Harte's throat flashed, her eyes glittered, her laughter was increasingly frequent; and the edginess and the brittleness of it grew every time her eyes came to rest on Helen Walks Softly, and the small, intent, fascinated group that had gathered around the dark woman in the wine-dark dress.

"It's the ultimate fascination, isn't it," Urruah said.

"What?"

He was watching the tom-*ehhifs* with the amusement of someone who knows a secret. "Her. She's got something unique, and they can't quite identify it. That tang of something foreign and exotic..."

"In the most foreign way she could be," Rhiow said, waving her tail slowly in agreement. "What's another country, compared to another time?"

"What's sad about this, though," Urruah said, "is that though they're pretending to be fascinated by her, it's not what Helen is that's attracting them: it's what she represents. A prize, a way to get one up on the other *ehhif*. In fact, almost none of these people are enjoying themselves. Maybe the Silent Man and his friends. But the rest of this isn't about enjoyment, or seeing people you like. It's just one big game of *hauissh*. Everybody jockeying for position, for advantage, while trying not to be *seen* to be doing that. Talk to the right person, and make sure everybody sees you talking to them...or not talking to them. Or else let everyone see how obviously you're not talking to the people who don't have anything to offer you. Hide what won't get you something, reveal what will." His tail jerked to one side, a gesture of distaste.

Rhiow gave him an odd look. "That caviar sour your stomach?"

"No," Urruah said, and shook himself. "Something else. I was about to come looking for you."

"Oh? Why? What is it?"

"I'm not sure," Urruah said.

Rhiow flicked an ear in mild surprise. Except in the professional arena, where precision was an absolute requirement, Urruah was rarely afraid to theorize in the absence of facts. "Why? What have you got?"

"I don't want to prejudice your first impression," he said. "Just come see."

They made their way down a hallway, turned a corner and passed down between some closed doors: turned again and found two *ehhif* kissing passionately in a love-seat set into an embrasure in the wall on one side. Quietly they all passed by on the far side of the hall, Urruah flicking an amused glance at the very preoccupied and already partially disrobed *ehhif* as they went. "A lot of that going on down some of these back hallways," he said. "You'd think they wanted to be found."

"In this crowd," Rhiow said, "why would this surprise you? Assuming your theory of movie-*ehhif* behavior is right, which I'm assuming it is." She looked down the hallway, which stretched for quite a way in front of them, the right-hand of the two wings that reached toward the hillside.

They passed a broad stairway on the left that led up to the second floor, and then more doors. At the very end of the hallway, straight ahead of them, was a door, partly open. They slipped in through it. The room was a library, a large and handsome one done

in dark wood paneling, with thin brass rails keeping the books in their shelves. Thick dark-brown carpeting kept noise to a minimum: during the day, the russet-curtained windows would have views of the pool and terrace on one side, the driveway on the other. Now, though, the curtains were drawn.

At the end of the room was a large, luxurious-looking leather sofa, the kind of thing that made your claws itch just to look at it; above it hung a framed landscape, a watercolor of some distant misty lake set about with trees, the dusk coming on. Sitting in front of the sofa, staring into the middle of the room, was Arhu. Sitting by him, her eyes closed, was Siff'hah.

Rhiow just stood there for a moment, keeping quiet, as there was no mistaking the feeling of wizardly power building in the room. But suddenly it evaporated, as quickly and anticlimactically as the air going out of a balloon that an *ehhif* had let go of. Arhu opened his eyes and swore.

The Ailurin word was so vile that Rhiow was tempted to go straight over and clout him one, except that there might have actually been a good reason for the anger. "What?" she said.

He glared at her, then at Urruah. "Nothing," he said. "I can't see a thing."

Urruah looked over at Rhiow. "It should be easier to feel now that he's let that go," he said to Rhiow. "Rhi, can you feel it? It's as if there had been a gate here once. But not now. And no way to tell when."

Rhiow sat down on the carpet, and half-closed her eyes to see better. All around her, the hyperstrings that ran through the structure of everything became clearer to her view – an insubstantial weft and weave of light, like interwoven harp strings, piercing through the room from ceiling to floor and crisscrossing it from windows to walls. Normally, except for local gravitational disturbances or other strictly natural perturbations, hyperstrings ran straight. But here the straightness of many of the strings was interrupted by slight curves, places where the strings' supracolors shifted unreasonably. *As if local space remembers how a gate was here once...*

Hwaith? she said silently.

Yes?

I need you to have a look at something.

In absolute silence, Hwaith appeared. Urruah and Arhu and Siffha'h all started.

Rhiow flicked an ear. "He does that," she said. "Hwaith, take a look at the strings in here."

He got that unfocused look, then glanced over at Rhiow, confused. "A characteristic perturbation," he said. "But *here*?"

"is there the slightest possibility that your gate's ever made its way over this far in its travels?"

"In my time?" Hwaith said. "Never. That big a jump, I'd have noticed. In my predecessor's time? I don't think so – I'm sure he'd have mentioned. Before that? No idea. I'd have to check the gate's logs."

"Something you should do when we're done here," Rhiow said. She wandered around the room, looking to see where the strings were showing the most alteration. "It's mostly over by this wall, isn't it?" she said.

"Seems so to me," Hwaith said.

"Arhu?"

“I had a look at the wall, too,” Arhu said. “I can’t see a thing.”

“Not even with me boosting him,” Siffha’h said.

“I’m no expert in the Eye,” Urruah said. “But I know someone who is...and she tells me that, with sufficient power and intent, it can be blocked.”

“Yes it can,” Rhiow said. “And she has some other concerns, too. At least one person here tonight is friendly with the ‘friend’ of the Lady in Black. That person, and I think some more such friendly types, are going to be meeting here, for a while at least, tomorrow night. We need to be ready for them, and ready to find out what they have to do with *this*.”

They all stared at her. “What did she tell you?” Urruah said.

The scream of utter terror from the upstairs level could be heard right through the ceiling. “Dear Queen around us!” Urruah said, and tore out through the open door.

Everyone was sidled before they’d gone more than a few yards down the hall. The crowd of *ehhif* plunging up those stairs in the next few moments were quite unaware of the invisible shapes running up the stairs with them, in Urruah’s case even jumping up onto the banister to be able to run unhindered by all the *ehhif* legs. At the top of the stairs they turned right, for the sound had come from further down, and ran on to where a door on the left-hand side of the hall stood open, and a tall blonde queen-*ehhif* in silks and diamonds was comforting another one who huddled against her and shuddered and wept.

It was a bathroom, ornate with golden faucets in the sink and bathtub, brocaded curtains hanging down, reeking with expensive *ehhif* fragrances. The wide, mirrored medicine cabinet over the sink stood open: there were bottles open on the counter, spilled-out pills scattered across it and onto the floor. And on the floor among them, a pale-gowned body with short dark hair lay sprawled on the thick soft rug, loose-limbed and inert as a puppet with its strings cut.

Like the *ehhif* all around them, the People stared. Then Rhiow looked over her shoulder at Hwaith.

“You were saying,” she said to him, “that the *ehhif* here do something *besides* kill each other? I’m beginning to wonder.”