

*SEVEN*

Rhiow slipped in past the *ehhif* and went to more closely examine the queen lying there on the floor. As soon as she got within touching distance of the queen, though, she realized that the situation was both less grim than she'd initially thought, and more complicated. The she-*ehhif's* scent had none of the chill about it that to a Person would speak of death within seconds, while the body was still warm. Rhiow put her face down by the queen's pale one, felt the slightest stirring of breath. *But not normal breathing at all. And no way to tell whether it's going to last much longer.* She glanced up at the *ehhif* crowding the doorway, none of them coming close as yet. *But how long will it take an ahm'vhuwlanss to get here? And bringing what kind of care?* In a city of this time, *ehhif* medicine wasn't advanced all that far. Possibly not far enough to do this poor queen any good before her body failed --

*All right...* Rhiow thought. "Ruah," she said as he came in behind her, "she's not dead yet, though I can see why this other poor queen started screaming: she looks the part. I've got to try to put her right. Or at least find out what's happened here, if I can't fix what's wrong. Make sure no one kicks me or anything, will you?"

"No problem, I've got a forcefield ready...."

Rhiow hurriedly slipped behind the toilet, well away from any *ehhif* who might come to help the one on the floor. There she crouched down and closed her eyes. *I hate having to do this at such short notice, but not much choice --* Any gate tech working in the train stations in New York routinely found herself having to deal with sick or injured *ehhif*: hurt ones got down onto the tracks sometimes after a mugging or a chase, or else they tried to hide there in the dark for some reason and came to grief afterwards, usually by making contact with a third rail... or a train at speed. *At least there's no big external damage with this one,* Rhiow thought, settling into the dark place in the back of her mind where she kept pre-assembled spells that worked on *ehhif* in a strictly physical mode. *But as for what else might be going on --*

One of the spells lying dormant in her mind was a diagnostic. Silently Rhiow wove together its words in the Speech, then knotted the spell into action with the Wizard's Knot. In that interior darkness, the queen-*ehhif's* body began to describe itself in networks and areas of light, a shifting play of interwoven energies. Bloodflow traced itself outward from the heart in a slowly throbbing network; a faint stuttering lightning of neural fire ran up and down the nerves. This pattern in particular looked very uneven to Rhiow, and it was one she'd seen before in some of the unfortunates who wound up collapsed on the tracks down in Grand Central. *Drugs*, she thought. *And there were all those pill bottles scattered around by the sink. But at the same time – what pill works so fast? It makes no sense –*

In the spell's darkness, Rhiow got up and paced over to more closely examine the simulacrum of the queen's bodily processes. The breathing was steady enough for the moment, but still very slow: too slow for Rhiow's liking. *Urruah*, she said, *do me a favor. Go smell her breath.*

Rhiow looked more closely at the bloodflow, then reached into the lightweave of the diagnostic and hooked a claw into one of the Speech-words which would shift the view so that it focused on the *ehhif's* body chemistry, pointing up anything that didn't belong there. Immediately, as she concentrated on the big vessels around the heart, where the volume was best for diagnosis, she saw the subtle glittery light of a myriad tiny shapes floating in the blood: not only the expected lines and tangles of alcohol molecules, but a lot of something else, a shorter molecule, with a double branch at one end and hydroxyl radicals hanging off it. Outside the darkness, *That's strange!* *Urruah* said.

*What?*

*Her breath. It's a fruit smell, I'd say. Pears. But I didn't see anything with pears in it downstairs...*

*Since when would you be interested in the fruit salad?* *Arhu* said from behind him.

*Oh, come on, I don't want to eat it but I'd have noticed –*

*Our resident foodie has you there*, Rhiow said. *Where's Helen?*

*Coming*, said Helen's voice in her head, sounding unusually dark and grim. *Did you say you smelled pears on her breath?*

*He did. Helen, what is this? Her respiration's very depressed: I've got to do something before it stops. But what kind of stuff acts this fast? It's too early for what your kind call date rape drugs, and anyway those don't act this way --*

*If Urruah's smelling pears, then it's chloral hydrate*, Helen said silently. *Maybe something else as well, though I'm not sure. It doesn't*

*matter: chloral by itself can act really fast if it's concentrated enough. It was a favorite ingredient in what they used to call a Mickey Finn-- knockout drops was another name for it. And she'd been drinking, too: that'd speed things up considerably. What are her eyes doing?*

*Wait a moment, Urruah said. Rhiow could feel him walk carefully up to the queen-ehhif's face, put a cautious pad against one eye and pull on it a little, just enough so that the eyelid moved. The pupils – they've gone very tiny. Don't think I've seen an ehhif with such tiny pupils, ever –*

*Pinpoints, Helen said. That's it: it's either chloral or an opiate. But no opiate they've got right now works so fast – at least none you'd take by mouth.*

*All right, Rhiow said, and thought hard for a moment, looking again at the ehhif's breathing. It was slowing. I'd just pull all those drug molecules out of there if I had more time to make sure I wasn't compromising her blood plasma, but I don't have that kind of time. Makes more sense to just break the molecules so they'll stop functioning. Might as well break the alcohol as well – it's only making things worse. Her liver'll detox the fragments soon enough --*

*Abruptly the diagnostic image moved, like a puppet of light that had had its strings suddenly tugged upward: the body was being lifted off the floor. Rhiow ignored this for a moment, being more occupied with finding the Speech-words she needed to ask the chloral hydrate and alcohol molecules to kindly break themselves into pieces. What's happening out there?*

*Some more ehhif are in here, Urruah said. This one's a tom. He's picked her up a little. Another one's just given him a bottle, they're waving it under her nose –*

*Oh, not really, Helen said, and her interior grimness lightened a little. Smelling salts! What a time this is. Be there in a moment –*

*Rhiow strung together in her mind the words that she needed, knotted the spell closed, turned it loose. Simple chemical compounds like these, when spoken to politely, rarely argued the point of dissolution with a wizard: unless they were very complex, they tended not to consider participation in a compound to be their major job in life. The joined hydrogen and oxygen atoms in the alcohol and the chloral hydrate obligingly came undone along the lines that Rhiow was suggesting, leaving water behind and not much else but some free hydroxyl radicals that the liver would deal with in due course. Rhiow shifted her view of the ehhif's physical structures once more to concentrate on the breathing and neural structures. The nerves are a little better already. But the breathing – better have a word with the brain --*

The body she was working on changed position again. *Okay, I'm here,* Helen said. *Yes indeed, smelling salts, I can't believe it... I've taken over the job of waving it under her nose from her friend. I'm assuming that's who this is, Rhiow? You said this lady was talking to a gentleman earlier?*

*More than talking,* Rhiow said. *All right...let's see how she does now. I had a word with the receptor sites in her brain that were already blocked up with latched-on chloral molecules.* She looked down the length of the diagnostic: the heart was already beating a little better. *Some improvement there –*

*She's moving a little, Rhi,* Urruah said. *Not conscious yet, but she will be in a bit.*

Rhiow let out a long breath and came out of the darkness, blinking a little. Her breath was coming hard, her heart pounding, the inevitable result of doing a moderately complex wizardry on such short notice and without enough prep time. She gulped, licked her nose a little, and stayed where she was for the moment, peering out from under the toilet at the strange tableau which the bathroom had become. The door was still crammed full of *ehhif* staring in, open-eyed, open-mouthed, whispering, and not one of them doing anything useful. Inside, the tom-*ehhif* who'd been talking to the queen down in the garden was partially supporting her, looking distressed: across from him, Helen was patting the queen's face. "Dolores! Dolores! Come on, wake up, that's right... come on, Dolores, you had a little faint, that's all..."

Rhiow blinked at that. From behind the *ehhif*, Hwaith came skirting carefully around them, sidled, and crouched down by Rhiow. "Are you all right?"

She licked her nose again. "I'm fine. Or I will be in a few minutes. You know how it is, though: you do a wizardry you weren't anticipating, and without a lot of prep – "

"It takes it out of you," he said.

Rhiow was surprised to see those big brassy eyes were looking at her with such concern. She waved her tail a little, intent on reassuring him. "Hwaith, believe me, I've had worse! I'll be all right."

In the middle of the floor, Dolores stirred, moaned a little. After a second a hand came up to feebly try to push the bottle away: an understandable reaction, as the stuff in the bottle stank vilely enough to make Queen Iau lying on the hearth of Heaven sneeze. Then Dolores's eyes opened: she looked hazily around her.

One by one, Urruah and Arhu and Siffha'h came around to join Rhiow and Hwaith, all of them huddling down well out of the way. The room had started to become increasingly full of *ehhif*, which was amusing in that this

was only happening now that the trouble seemed to be resolving itself. Helen, glancing unnoticed at the four in the corner, straightened up a little. "She's all right," she said to the people who were starting to crowd into the room. "It was so hot downstairs, it's no surprise someone might feel a little faint – "

The misdirection was typically wizardly: not a lie as such, but designed to suggest to the hearers that something besides the obvious was going on. Rhiow, however, thought with regret that the suggestion wasn't likely to affect this group of listeners much. Their expressions generally indicated that they were far more interested in believing the worst than in giving anyone the benefit of the doubt.

"Listen," Siffha'h said, twitching an ear. Distantly, Rhiow heard sirens approaching.

"Finally," Urruah said. "Took them long enough!"

"Ruah, this isn't Manhattan," Rhiow said, "and it's not our time, either. And consider this city's size. Either way, she'll be all right: we were here, lucky for her. Or maybe it was more than luck: it's not as if there aren't Powers that work for *ehhif* as well as against them." Her eyes narrowed a little as she glanced up at the pills scattered over the counter by the sink. "Except for us, this would most likely have been a murder scene now. Or, as the *ehhif* would have thought, a suicide. Now all we need to know is how she was drugged so quickly, and why, and who did it."

"But who would drug her? And why?" Hwaith said.

"I had no time to tell any of you," Rhiow said. "Just before we went down to the room where the strings were strange, I heard this *ehhif* having a very interesting conversation with her friend there." She eyed the *ehhif* called Ray. "Now I find myself wondering – did someone else hear some of that conversation, and not like what they heard? Did somebody maybe not want this poor queen to go to the meeting the tom-*ehhif* was proposing she attend?"

Rhiow looked over at Arhu. "This would normally be your department," she said.

"Normally," he said, sounding very annoyed. "But remember about downstairs – "

"I know. Try again," Rhiow said. "And hurry, before too many more *ehhif* come in here and start making it harder for you to See."

Arhu sat up straight, curled his tail around his feet, and went unfocused for a few moments, holding perfectly still. Then his tail started to lash. "Nothing clear," Arhu said, his eyes going down to slits in anger. "It's as it was downstairs. Like the whole place is fogged over. It's impossible to

get a focus. Shadows, moving in shadow – ” He sounded unnerved. “She came in here, all right: that’s hardly news, since here’s where we found her. But I can’t see anyone else here for certain until that other she-*ehhif* came in and found her – “

Rhiow breathed out in annoyance. “Well, when she wakes, she’ll be able to tell what happened. One of us at least will need to be with her when the police are asking her to tell her story.”

“And there’s another question,” Siffha’h said. “Who called the cops? And what were they told?”

Sif slid out from behind the toilet, glanced around to make sure that no *ehhif* seemed to be heading her way, and jumped up on the bathroom’s windowsill, peering downward. “Because there’s no ambulance out there,” she said. “Two police cars, though. No, here comes a third one.”

“Maybe it’s running late?” Urruah said.

But the people who came up the stairs in the next few minutes, more or less in a crowd, and talking fairly loudly, were policemen, not any kind of ambulance crew. “Okay, okay, could we have some room here please?” said a voice from outside. “Thanks, sister – Come on, how’re we supposed to move in here? Thanks – ”

Into the bathroom came a big beefy sandy-haired man wearing a dark blue police uniform and a huge gun at his hip. He looked around the room and at the people in it with what to Rhiow seemed like an expression of faint scorn. “So where’s the corpse?” he said. “Lady who called said there was a stiff up here.”

“I think the report may have been premature,” Helen said, standing up over Dolores and Ray. Her tone was cool: Rhiow could just imagine what she was thinking about this policeman’s way with a crime scene.

“Okay, what happened?” said the cop, glancing around the room, taking in the expensive people, the expensive clothes, the spilled pills, and finally Dolores, now sitting up on the floor half-supported by Ray, and looking very woozy and sheepish. “You pass out or something, lady?”

“I don’t know,” Dolores said. “I was downstairs and I didn’t feel well. I thought maybe it was the heat. I came up here to try to freshen up – and then – then I – ” Dolores stopped suddenly, as if she was having second thoughts about what she was saying, how it might sound. And indeed the pressure of all those eyes on her – and the expressions on the faces looking into the bathroom, like people trying not to look too eager to hear something that would turn into juicy, sordid gossip later – “I don’t know,” Dolores said. “I woke up here. Oh, Ray, I’m so sorry, I feel like such a fool!”

“It’s all right,” Ray said, “it’s all right...” He was rocking her a little, stroking her hair and trying to soothe her.

Watching this, the cop’s expression let go a little of its previous scorn: he started to look more kindly, though annoyed. “You want my advice, lady,” he said, “lay off the sauce. Don’t think I didn’t see the spread downstairs. Had to be enough booze to float the *Queen Mary* in.” He turned around and, no longer seeming inclined to use his annoyance on Dolores, pointed it at the people in the doorway and the hallway instead. “Okay, what’re the rest of you doing? Come on, nothing to see here, let the lady have some air, you’d think you *wanted* to see a corpse or something!”

The shocked expressions and their owners backed away from the door as the cop headed for it. “Don’t know what’s the matter with you folks,” he said as he pushed through the door and out into the hall. “What I want to know now is, who called us and reported a dead person when there wasn’t one? Hah? Ever heard of being charged for wasting police time? Hah?”

The increasingly loud sound of footsteps out in the hall suggested that people were starting to leave the area quickly, before someone in a uniform started asking the question of specific persons rather than the region at large. Shortly there was no one left in the room but Helen, Ray and Dolores, and the four unseen People.

“Come on, let’s get you up,” Helen said. She took one of Dolores’s arms: Ray took the other. Between them they pulled Dolores to her feet. She staggered a little, then leaned against the edge of the counter with the sinks, getting her breath.

“I can’t thank you enough, Miss,” Ray said, “Miss – ”

“Just call me Helen.” She smiled at Ray, then turned her attention back to Dolores. “Miss, are *you* all right now?”

Dolores had turned herself around and was looking at herself in the mirror. A wan, sad sort of look it was, hopeless and helpless, as if the world had betrayed her one more time. “I think so,” she said, looking at Helen in the mirror. “But I feel so...so...” She shook her head.

“It’s all right,” Helen said, and turned away.

“Oh, but it’s not!” Dolores said. It wasn’t Helen she was saying it to, though, but Ray: she turned to him, clung to him. “You know what’s going to happen now! This is going to be all over the magazines next week. Or on that horrible radio show of Parsons’. How Dolores Canton can’t hold her liquor, how I passed out so cold that everybody thought I was dead, and the police were called, and...” She gulped as if something horrible had just occurred to her. “There are even going to be people who’ll claim this was

some kind of publicity stunt to get my career going again. Oh, Ray, what studio's going to hire me now? *What am I going to do -- ?*"

"You're going to do exactly as we agreed," he said softly into her ear. "We'll go to that meeting like we planned...and things like this are going to stop happening to you. Okay? Okay. Just trust me, Dolores. Come on, I'll walk you downstairs and we'll get your wrap."

"You mean you're not afraid to be seen with me after this? Oh, Ray, what if they -- "

"They won't. Of course I'm not afraid. Now come on, darling. – Yes, all right, you're a little wobbly. It'll pass. Too much excitement, and okay, maybe one glass of wine too many – "

They paused, for suddenly standing there in the doorway was Elwin Dagenham, actually wringing his hands in distress as his gaze took it all in, especially the scattered pills. "Oh, Miss Canton, are you – did you – "

"I'm all right," she said. "No, truly, Mr. Dagenham. I'm fine. I'll be going now."

"It's all right, you don't have to do that – "

"I do," Dolores said. "I'm sorry. Ray, please – "

"Yes, all right," Ray said. He nodded at Helen and walked Dolores slowly out of the room, murmuring to her as they went. Just for a moment, as he went out, Rhio saw a glance pass between him and Dagenham: a strangely neutral look, as of people who mean to say something to each other later on. Out in the hall, the last few people lingering there stared at Ray and Dolores, watching them, and then hurried away in various directions, whispering. But Dagenham stood there still, his glance darting nervously around the bathroom.

Rhio ignored him for the moment, coming out from behind the toilet. "Arhu," she said, "if you can't see, you can hear. Follow them. Listen to them. We have to know just when and where that meeting is. Go home with them if you have to, but *find out*."

He flirled his tail "yes" and headed for the door. "Sif?"

"With you," Siffha'h said, and went after him.

Watching Ray and Dolores go out, under his breath Urruah said, "It's a shame that you didn't have time to 'tailor' Dolores's cure a little more."

Rhio looked at him. "What? How?"

Hwaith, sitting next to Urruah and peering out into the room, now glanced at Urruah and flicked an ear in agreement. "So that she'd have come out of this sick enough to have to spend a night or two in the hospital," Hwaith said, "and couldn't make it to this 'meeting' they're talking about."

Rhiow considered what he was saying and then lashed her tail “no”. “There wasn’t time for that kind of tweaking,” she said. “Though I understand your concern -- ”

Helen meanwhile had turned to the mirror as Ray and Dolores went out and was apparently intent on adjusting her hair, not that Rhiow could see that it particularly needed any adjusting. Dagenham was looking at her, and Helen was coolly failing to notice the look without actually ignoring it: a delicate business, one worthy of a Person.

“Miss, uh, Walks -- Walker -- ?”

Helen looked at him at last. “I’d like to thank you,” Dagenham said. “That could have been very -- uncomfortable for Miss Canton.”

“I’m sure she just had a little too much heat,” Helen said, “a little too much excitement. There are so many ... attentive people downstairs.” She allowed her smile to warm a few degrees. “Some of them very attentive indeed.”

“Yes, thank you, that’s partly why I’m still here -- ” *When I really need to be downstairs talking to the police?* Rhiow thought to herself. *Yeah, I just bet.* “There are some gentlemen downstairs who very much want to talk to you before you leave. One of the vice-presidents from Goldwyn, and the casting director from Paramount -- ”

Helen’s eyes widened just slightly. *One above us, what now?* she said silently in the Speech.

*As if I know?* Rhiow said. *On a night like this, when everything’s happening at once? Ride the moment, cousin!*

“Oh dear,” Helen said, “I don’t know what they’ve said to you, but I couldn’t possibly -- ”

“Miss Walker,” Dagenham said, coming into the room and actually reaching out and grabbing one of Helen’s hands. She started. “Please. I promised them you’d talk to them before you left. Just talk to them, that’s all. Oh, *please!*”

The desperate urgency in his voice was very strange. But then Rhiow thought about it, considering what kind of local political capital a climber in these particular show-business regions could make of the introduction, the “discovery”, of some new starlet. *And what’s in it for him after word gets around that the ‘new starlet’ got her big break at one of his parties? He’s more sought-after than ever: every girl in town wants to get in here. Who benefits? Not him directly. He doesn’t look the type --* But then Rhiow stopped herself. *Whisperer dear, listen to me, I’m spending time speculating about some ehhi’s chances of sexual success! Sif’s right, it’s too perverse --!*

“Well,” Helen said after a moment. “If it’s just to talk to them – ” She flicked a glance into the mirror at where Rhiow, Urruah and Hwaith were sitting. *And then what? What happens when one of them offers me a contract?*

Urruah flicked an ear at her. *Hire an agent?*

*Oh, thanks a lot!*

*Go on, Rhiow said. There are some other things we can be looking into. And we’ll check on the Silent Man in the meantime.*

“Please, Miss Walker!” Dagenham said. “They’re not used to being kept waiting – “

Helen smiled into the mirror. “Then perhaps it’s as well they are,” she said, “for a few minutes at least. If they’re thinking I’m something out of the ordinary, perhaps there’s no harm in reinforcing the impression.” She straightened, turned away from the mirror. “Shall we?”

Dagenham practically fled the bathroom, hurrying down the hall. Helen threw a glance over her shoulder at the three People, then headed out after him.

Urruah, Rhiow and Hwaith came out into the room and all stretched: being cramped up into that little space behind the toilet had left them all feeling a bit tight in the joints, psychically if not physically. “Interesting development,” Hwaith said, glancing around and wrinkling his nose at the many *ehhif*-scents still lingering in the hot little room.

“Not half as interesting as the one that probably brought poor Dolores here,” Rhiow said as she headed for the door and glanced down the hall in Helen’s wake. The hallway was empty; Helen and Dagenham had gone straight downstairs. “Take a moment, hear it as the Whisperer heard it with me – “

Urruah and Hwaith both went silent as they all headed down the stairs, keeping carefully to one side in case any *ehhif* came up. But the hallways in this side of the house were now very quiet – whatever *ehhif* had been here had cleared out in a hurry, most likely with the arrival of the police. Halfway down the stairs, as they turned at the landing, Hwaith looked over at Rhiow, and she wasn’t entirely surprised to see him bristling. “Are you thinking what I am?” he said. “That these *ehhif* are dabbling in what their kind call black magic?”

She switched her tail as she headed down the second flight of stairs, a tense “yes”. “It was so cunningly couched,” Rhiow said. “It’d be easy for a careless listener to think they were hearing somebody talk about one of the Powers that Be -- ”

Urruah's eyes were narrow as they came down onto the ground floor level. "Ugly," he said. "The Strong Ones', my tail -- it's the Lone One's jackals they're talking about!"

"Yes," Rhiow said. "Its hangers-on, the decayed entities that suck and tear at the edges of life. They always love it when some poor deluded bunch of *ehhif* get suckered into thinking they're 'Higher Forces' that can be called and commanded to make their lives work. No good ever comes of it!"

She was bristling too now, and it took some effort for Rhiow to calm herself. "Sorry," she said to Hwaith. "We've had run-ins with such *ehhif* before. They're always looking for dark places to make contact with sa'Rraah's jackals. Too often they wind up down in the train tunnels."

"Some of them have died of their meddling down there," Urruah said. "Other *ehhif* have thought they'd fallen foul of the trains. It would've been lovely if it'd been that simple. Or that clean." His tail was lashing. "But I'm thinking about something else. 'The Great Old One' – "

"Yes," Rhiow said. "The Dark Lady's friend?"

"I suppose," Hwaith said, "the lesser hatreds wouldn't mind latching onto a greater one, if they thought it meant a better feed..."

Rhiow growled a little in her throat at that. It had never occurred to her to think of sa'Rraah as the lesser of two evils. Queen Iau's dark daughter was Entropy's mistress and inventor, mother of the love of pain and death, heart of all the things wrong with this universe. *But now, she thought, there are more universes than ours to think of. A whole different sheaf, perhaps. Where other gods work and move...*

The Whisperer was silent in the back of her mind: unusually so. *It's strange, she thought: we tend to think of the Queen as the ruler of everything. But it seems there are boundaries even to Her power, for the Dark Lady's friend seems to come from beyond them. And then...what's beyond that?*

Silence still from the Whisperer as they threaded through the corridors that led back to the parts of the house where the party was still going on. Rhiow's tail was twitching with unease. *Arhu, she said silently, what news?*

*They're on the way home, he said. We're in the back seat of their car. Any useful conversation as yet?*

*Nothing new, Arhu said. She's arguing with him a little. Doesn't really want to do what he's suggesting – it's making her uneasy.*

*He's not letting it lie, though, Siffha'h said. Keeps telling her that the Strong Ones are the answer to all her problems. Rhiow could feel the fur lifting along Sif's back in revulsion. He'll wear her down again, especially in the shape she's in at the moment.*

Rhiow flicked an ear in unhappy agreement as they came out into the front hall, all still sidled, and crowded off to one side of the doorway to eye the crowd gathered there. *Get that date and time!* she said. *And especially the place. If we can get there and check the spot where they're meeting beforehand, it may be useful.*

*Leave it to us,* Arhu said.

The front hall was full of *ehhif* gossiping away at high speed. One of the cops was actually still standing there with a drink in his hand, surrounded by people talking at him, and apparently much flattered by the attention. Urruah looked at this in surprise. "Oh well," he said, "a different time, after all – " He waved his tail in bemusement as they headed through into the room where the band was still playing.

This room too was still full, though not many people were dancing now: most of them were gathered into knots of gossip and increasingly raucous drinking, and the band was playing with the resigned air of men trying to pretend that there was actually still someone listening to what they did. The Silent Man was where they had left him, listening to something Walter Winchell was saying: but his eyes were on Helen Walks Softly, who was off to one side of the room by the French doors, surrounded by a group of four men variously dressed in tuxedos or dark suits. One of them, younger than all the rest, slim and dark with a narrow, thoughtful face, was standing by Helen in a pose that to Rhiow somehow looked strangely proprietary. Behind them, trying not to hover too closely, Elwin Dagenham was nonetheless in a position to hear and see everything that was going on. Helen overtopped all the men around her by at least a head, and as the sidled People headed toward her, she threw them a swift glance of acknowledgement over her audience's heads.

As they got within hearing range over the blare of the dance band, one of the *ehhif*, a little round man with little round glasses, was saying to Helen. "And, uh, Miss Walker... as for your other skills... can you perhaps act?"

Helen merely bowed her head a little – he was considerably shorter than she – drooped her eyelids slightly, and looked at him from under her brows, allowing a curve of smile to show and slowly grow. "Who knows," she said, "I might be doing it right now."

All three of the older men sucked their breaths in at the range of sultry and tempting implications that were suddenly lurking under the surface of Helen's voice. Reading their reactions, the slim young man acquired a lopsided and somewhat mercenary smile that vanished a second later.

Rhiow glanced over at Urruah and Hwaith. “I suspect this might take a few minutes yet,” she said, putting her whiskers forward. “Let’s go on outside.”

They strolled out through the French doors. Even out here on the patio there were party guests were drinking and talking like mad, and a few determined dancers holding one another in the shadows and swaying together to the slightly distanced music. “Plainly it takes more than a guest collapsing and the cops showing up looking for a murder to shift this bunch,” Urruah said as they headed over to the edge of the patio and sat down under a table surrounded by some deck chairs near the pool. “You wonder how big an emergency you’d have to set off to get them to take notice for more than a few minutes...”

Rhiow gave him a look. “Don’t get any ideas,” she said, for Urruah was getting one of those wicked looks in his eye. “We’ve got questions to answer right now. Particularly, just who called the police? Besides someone who wasn’t in the bathroom or anywhere near Dolores, as far as we can tell – but was also sure there was a body upstairs.”

“If ‘lady’ is the word we’re looking for,” Urruah said, sounding very dry. “I think I know who you suspect.”

“Suspicion is all we’ve got at the moment,” Rhiow said. “I’m not going to do the Lone One’s work for It by accusing someone without evidence.”

Hwaith stood there waving his tail for a moment. “Well, there are ways around this problem,” he said. “I’ll go have a word with the phone.”

Urruah looked at him in confusion. “What?” he said. “It’s 1946, you don’t have caller ID yet – “

“What’s caller ID?” said Hwaith. “The phone’ll tell me what we want to know if I ask it. In a house this size, there’ll be three or four phones to ask, sure, but...”

Rhiow put her whiskers forward again, flirted her tail at Hwaith in agreement: he wandered off to head down toward the front hall.

“Sometimes,” she said, “I think we get a little too reliant on our time’s tech to help us out.”

“You might have something there...”

After a few minutes Hwaith came trotting out the doors again with a satisfied look in his eye, and joined them under the table again. “The phone in the upstairs library remembers who used it last,” Hwaith said. “A woman. And it remembers her voice. Little and tinkly like a bell...”

Rhiow’s eyes narrowed. “Did it remember what she said?”

Hwaith switched his tail in negation. “Our phones don’t know words,” he said. “Just sound. This phone system isn’t sophisticated enough to handle meaning. It’s –” He glanced at Rhiow, as if looking for words.

“Analog,” she said, “not digital. And not computer-managed, like the phone system in our time.” Rhiow knew from her old *hhau'hif* associate Ehef, who worked with other wizards on the CATNYP system at the New York Public Library, that a digital system was structurally much more liable to sentience than an analog one: the advent of the transistor and the densely-packed circuitry that made digital signaling possible had left the vast matter substrate of the phone system itself able to become half-alive even very early on. What state it had now reached in her home time, with quadrillions of synapses stretching across continents and under the seas and now even into space, Rhiow couldn’t say. *But Ehef always talks about the Net and the Web as if they’re alive in more than the normal “inanimate-object” way...*

“Well,” she said after a moment, “that’s more than we had to go on with. You’re pretty sure it meant Anya Harte...”

“I don’t think there’s any other possible reading.”

“One thing though, Rhiow,” Hwaith said. “She didn’t make just one call. She made two.”

Rhiow blinked at that. “Who was the other one to?”

“Another woman. Beyond that, the phone wasn’t sure. All it said was that the phone at the other end was tired, said it never had any rest, just kept getting a lot of calls at all hours of the day and night...”

Rhiow’s tail was lashing as she wondered what to make of that. But her thoughts were interrupted by a tall silhouette paused between the open French doors. Helen stood there, gazing out into the darkness.

Urruah let out a small but unmistakable “meow” from under the table. Helen’s head turned that way: a second later she casually made her way over, put her drink down onto the table, and gazed out across the pool toward the darkness of the hillside.

“Well,” Urruah said, “you had a nice crowd of suitors back there...”

“Please,” Helen said softly, “that’s an image I’ve been trying to avoid.” She sat down for a moment on one of the deck chairs by the table, pausing to rub one foot, then the other. She sighed. “Heels,” she said. “I don’t mind them every now and then, but I’m really more of a flats person...”

“So what was the outcome of that little meeting?” Urruah said.

“Well, among other things, I hired an agent,” Helen said.

Rhiow stared. “You mean –”

“There were at least five of them downstairs in the main room,” Helen said, dry. “They were already fighting over me by the time I got downstairs.” She chuckled. “I have a feeling our Mr. Dagenham gets some kind of commission on his ‘finds’.”

“So which one did you pick?” Rhiow said.

Helen smiled. “The one who was least interested in my secondary sexual characteristics,” she said. “Sometimes my fellow *ehhif* can be unusually easy to read, and the only figure *this* one saw when he was looking at me had a lot of zeroes attached.” Her smile acquired that feral quality again, and Rhiow, seeing it, wondered at how unusually feline the expression was for an *ehhif*. *Contagion*, she thought, amused. “Once I had representation sorted out, I went to talk to the studio people. I think it went fairly well.” The smile got broader, and if possible, more smug.

Urruah, surprisingly, looked a little concerned. “You don’t think this business might interfere with your work?” he said.

Helen sat down and pushed her hair back with a thoughtful look. “I’m not sure now that it’s not part of it,” she said. “Normally I’d certainly have seen them off. But you know how it is when the events of the moment suddenly put tools in your hand that you weren’t expecting, but that’ll be useful. The Manual says that when the universe itself is imperiled, it may try to find ways to help you that won’t get it, or you, in trouble.” She looked thoughtful. “I find myself wondering whether some of those offices, especially the ones at the studios, are going to be places it’ll be useful for us to have entrée, and an alibi for being there.” She looked over at Rhiow. “And there’s at least one of those studios that’s of interest to us: the one that had the fire. It’s one of several that’re making me a job offer. I imagine I could tell my agent I’ve got a preference for that one.”

Urruah sat switching his tail, thinking. Rhiow watched this process with interest for a moment, then said to Helen, “But, cousin, when we’re through with all this – “

Helen shrugged. “I can ‘vanish,’” she said. “Starlets did that sometimes. A moment of fame, then suddenly something takes them away: marriage, a change of heart...”

Urruah looked up suddenly. “Murder,” he said.

Helen looked shocked. “I’d never stage such a thing,” she said.

“I wasn’t saying you would,” said Urruah, sounding uneasy. “But it’s occasionally been an occupational hazard. *Ehhifs*’ reactions to the she-*ehhif* held up before them in movies as desirable can be... complex. And sometimes deadly.”

Helen breathed out, stretched. “I know,” she said. “Well, I’m not going to be the usual starlet: there can’t be that many who’re also wizards. And killing a wizard isn’t all that easy. So let’s not worry about that right now.” She stood up again. “I should go in and deal with Freddie, he needs contact information for me...”

“Freddie?” Rhiow said.

“My agent,” said Helen. “Freddie Fields. He’s a new young agent with a company called MCA.” Urruah’s eyes went wide: Rhiow made a note to ask him why later on. Helen, though, was now wearing a somewhat considering look. “Shouldn’t take more than a moment to do a wizard-spoof on my own cellphone so that it thinks it’s got a ‘40’s local phone number.” She looked down at Hwaith. “You think the local phone system will talk to mine?”

“If properly introduced,” Hwaith said, “shouldn’t be a problem. Make an excuse to use the queens’-room for a few minutes and we can take care of it.”

“Good,” Helen said. “And we can go touch base with Mr. Runyon and let him know what’s happened.”

“He was interested?” Hwaith said as they headed back toward the French doors.

Helen laughed softly. “Are you kidding? If we’re not careful, this little escapade’s likely to wind up in one of his stories. I want to make sure he conceals the facts sufficiently to avoid any time paradoxes. But to say that he found what was going on funny – I think it’d be an understatement.”

They headed back into the main room. The music had thankfully gone quiet now, the band having taken advantage of the general disinterest in what they were doing to take a break and get themselves some booze and food. Over by the table that Runyon and Winchell were sharing, the studio people were arguing in lowered but intense voices, and Runyon was jotting on his pad – not the normal bold block letters he used for casual communication, but something quick and flowing. *Shorthand*, Urruah said silently to Rhiow. *Look at him go!* He put his whiskers right forward. *They may be sorry some day that they didn’t go have this conversation somewhere else. Do they think just because he can’t talk that he can’t hear?*

*It does make you wonder,* Rhiow said.

As Helen strolled smiling back over to the group, their conversation got a little more hushed, then changed course and picked up again. “Miss Walker,” said one of the men, “Goldwyn would be most interested in testing you for a new romantic drama – “

“Miss Walker, wouldn’t you be more interested in trying something less predictable, possibly even a musical! You could – “

“Paramount is going to be the forefront this year of a whole new idiom in film, we’re calling it film noir – “

They were all talking at once now, and it was impossible for Rhiow to make much sense of anything that was going on. Helen merely stood there exchanging an amused look with slim young Mr. Fields, who stood with his arms crossed and was taking everything in. Rhiow, for her own part, sat down and watched the Silent Man scribbling away, a faint smile on his face. *Cousin*, she said to him silently, *how are you holding up?*

*Just fine*, he said: *just fine*. He didn’t stop writing for a moment. *How about you?*

*Well enough for the moment*, Rhiow said, flicking an ear at the sound of the front door opening again for someone to leave or some new guest to arrive. *I can hardly believe they’re still turning up here. How long do these things usually go on?*

*Pretty late sometimes*, the Silent Man said. *You’d be surprised, sometimes they --*

He stopped. She could feel a shock of surprise go through him. On the pad, the Silent Man’s hand froze in place; his eyes went to the doorway to the front hall, to the sound of a woman’s voice speaking, footsteps --

Rhiow got up, turned toward the doorway. There was a woman standing there: dark blonde hair, a high broad forehead, dark down-slanting eyes – handsome enough for a queen-*ehhif*, Rhiow thought, but by no means up to the standard of the beauties who otherwise were everywhere at this gathering. The woman wasn’t dressed for a party, but in a relatively dark and conservative waist-level jacket and below-the-knee skirt and a dark hat with a veil, like someone who’s just gotten off a train in an old movie. The Silent Man was looking at her like someone who sees coming toward him something he’s dreaded for a long time.

Next to him, Walter Winchell looked from the Silent Man to the blonde woman, and back to the Silent Man again. “Damon – “ he said.

The Silent Man shook his head as the woman began walking toward to them. Then he stood up to greet her, as Winchell did. Helen, for the moment, stood her ground, and it obscurely reassured Rhiow to see her new agent do the same. But the other studio people standing around each edged backward a little, as if both anxious to dissociate themselves from something that was about to happen, and unwilling to miss seeing it.

“Well,” the woman said, and looked at them all: and looked Helen up and down.

Helen merely nodded to the woman courteously, but said nothing. “Patrice,” said Winchell.

The woman looked at him. “Walter,” she said, and turned her eyes away to Runyon again.

“I called the house to try to reach you, Damon,” Patrice said. “And stopped by afterwards. You were out. But I managed to catch up with you eventually.” She glanced around. “Surprising to see you out and about – especially since all I’ve heard from you and the doctors lately is how sick you’ve been.”

The Silent Man made no move to reach for his pad. He simply stood there and looked her in the eye.

She came closer to him, looked up at him. Patrice was about a head shorter than he; when she looked up to meet his eyes, her face twitched a little, almost as if her neck hurt her from having done this a thousand times before. “I just had to see for myself,” Patrice said, “how you were.”

Runyon opened his mouth. “Been better,” he said, in a nearly inaudible whisper. To Rhiow’s ears, the pain in the two words was incredible, and it had nothing to do with the merely mechanical agony the Silent Man was suffering from the ruin now present where his vocal cords had been.

Patrice looked from him to Helen Walks Softly: a still look, chilly and assessing, and one which Helen did not try to avoid. “Yes,” Patrice said, “I’d say you have.”

Out in the rest of the room, a circle of relative quiet was gradually spreading away from them as if the two words that Runyon had managed to utter were working some kind of dire sympathetic wizardry of their own on the place. Heads were turning toward the frozen little tableau: Patrice, the Silent Man, Helen, and the agent and the studio people standing like embarrassed statues behind them. For a couple of breaths there was no movement, no words were spoken.

Then Patrice said, “I just wanted you to know that I’ve been down here from Reno the last few days to fetch the last of my things that were in storage. I’ve also sent for my boxes from the New York apartment and the Florida house. Everything’s on its way to Reno now. So don’t worry about getting in touch with me again when you get back to New York. There’ll be no need.”

The Silent Man’s mouth moved. *Patrice*, his lips said: but this time there wasn’t even a breath of sound. Somewhere across the room, ice tinkled in a glass: out in the front hallway, heels clacked across the tile, went quiet.

“Damon,” Patrice said, “I’ve been putting it off, but it’s time. I can’t just keep putting off living my own life any more. It looks like you’re finally letting go of me, which is good. I won’t ever forget you. How could I? But it’s all over. I just thought I had to say it to you at last before I left.”

He simply looked down at her, his face frozen, the brittle bright light of the room’s crystal chandeliers glinting off his glasses.

“The car’s waiting,” she said. “I should go. Goodbye.”

She turned away. Quietly and without stopping to speak to anyone else, Patrice made her way out through the bright room, past the people who stood and watched, out through the front hall, out the front door. Behind her lay a wake of glances that looked first in her direction, then in the Silent Man’s. Out in the front hall, just quickly there and gone again, though nowhere near Patrice, Rhiow caught a flash of a sky-blue dress, heard a faint tap of heels.

Slowly the Silent Man sat back down in his chair, then reached out to the coffeepot on the table, picked it up, tried to pour himself another cup. But the pot was empty. The hand that held the pot was shaking, and Rhiow thought this did not entirely have to do with caffeine. A dark *ehhif* came hurriedly across the room, picked up the pot and took it away.

Winchell was still looking after her. The Silent Man picked up his pencil again, pulled the pad over to him, and stared at the shorthand-covered page on top as if having trouble remembering how it had gotten that way. After a moment he tore that page off, laid it aside, and wrote on the pad, pushed it over to Winchell as the coffeepot was brought back full.

“Wonder how she knew I was here...” Winchell read under his breath.

He looked off to one side, where a sharp-faced, sharp-eyed woman in a dark evening dress and an extravagant hat had been watching the whole passage most keenly. Now that woman looked away, picked up the cocktail she had briefly put down and started an animated conversation with a short bald man in a tuxedo. “My money says somebody called our little Hedda over there,” Winchell said, “and Hedda called Patrice.” His face creased into a fierce frown. “You know as well as I do that she and Louella Parsons have been digging into your story for months, dropping little hints in their columns. And Hopper wasn’t here earlier, Damon: she turned up after the excitement with the cops. Could’ve been that after she got the call from whoever told her you were here, she called Patrice herself, then came to see the excitement. Dollars to doughnuts it’ll be on the radio when she does her show in a couple of days...”

Rhiow glanced around at Hwaith and Urruah. *I'd start getting unsided if I were you,* she said. *Somehow I doubt we're going to be here much longer.* She jumped up on the empty chair on the near side of the Silent Man, looking at him closely.

The Silent Man was writing on his pad again, shaking his head. After a moment he shoved the pad at Winchell.

THE STORY'S BEEN OTHER PEOPLE ALL MY LIFE. NEVER GET USED TO BEING ONE MYSELF. TIME TO GO.

Winchell glanced at the words, frowned, poured Runyon another cup of coffee. "One for the road?" he said.

The Silent Man nodded. Helen came to stand by the table on the far side. "I'll be heading out shortly as well," she said, apparently to him, but also to Rhiow, and then to Urruah as he slipped out from under one of the buffet tables and Hwaith as he came in through the French doors. "Mr. Fields and I have some matters to discuss, and some appointments to set up for tomorrow. Mr. Runyon – thanks again for your kindness." *And I'll be in touch with you all first thing in the morning,* she added silently to him and the others, *so we can discuss what we can do with what's started happening to me. Rhiow, anything from Arhu?*

*Not as yet,* she said. *Go ahead, Helen. Call if there's need. We'll see you in the morning.*

*Dai stihó, my cousins,* Helen said, and moved off, heading for the pool terrace in company with Mr. Fields.

Winchell was looking out across the room, staring down the many eyes still stealing glimpses at the other man at the table, who was now looking at the torn-off pages from his pad. "Damon," he said, "you want me to drive home behind you?"

The two men's eyes met, and though the look was very still and composed, Rhiow was surprised at the warmth hidden in it. *This is his only real friend,* she thought, *and he's going to need his friends, this next while...* But the Silent Man shook his head, reached for the pad. MAY HAVE SOMETHING FOR YOU IN A FEW DAYS, he wrote. FOR THE COLUMN, AND YOUR OWN SHOW. BIGGER STORY THAN MINE WILL EVER BE.

Winchell looked at him for several moments, then nodded. "All right," he said. "Drop me a note about it tomorrow, if you can. And keep me posted."

The Silent Man nodded, put his pad away, got up. Behind him, on a chair nearer the wall, Sheba had been sleeping for some time, fed and petted into doziness quite early in the proceedings. Now Runyon picked her up: she

purred as he settled her into her accustomed place on his shoulder and almost immediately dropped off into a doze again. The Silent Man looked around the room, sketched an ironic salute to the gorgeous crowd who were still watching him and trying not to look as if they were. Then he headed for the door. Rhiow leapt down from the chair and went after him, Urruah and Hwaith following after.

In the front hallway, Elwin Dagenham was standing by the front door, talking in a low voice to a fair-haired young man – *working for whom?* Rhiow wondered. *Possibly some PR person, a flack for one of the local columnists or fan magazines -- ? Whose secrets, whose pain are being sold off at the moment?...* But the Silent Man paused by the front door, looked at Dagenham, nodded to him, mouthed the words: *Thank you for a lovely evening.*

Dagenham looked at him with an odd stricken expression, and nodded. “Thank you for coming,” he said.

The door was opened for Runyon, and he walked out and headed down the stairs toward where the cars were parked. Out past the house, away down the hill, the lights of Los Angeles glittered. As Rhiow and the others followed him down the stairs, she found herself suddenly feeling as if she was being stared at by many cold, distant, heartless little eyes. But whether the ones before her or behind her were more heartless, she couldn’t tell.

The fur rose all over her. Behind her, she could feel the house watching, silent, waiting, almost like a live thing itself: and in it, something else that watched as well. *But what?*

*Dear Whisperer, let us soon find out...*

The car parked again, the doors shut, the cat food dishes outside the rear French doors replenished, Rhiow had thought the Silent Man might now want to get caught up on some of the sleep he was surely still short on after the previous day’s work. But instead he changed out of his party clothes into silk pajamas and bathrobe and slippers, brewed himself a fresh pot of coffee, sat down at the typewriter, and began to transcribe his notes.

Over on the sofa, Sheba was dozing again. Urruah and Hwaith had tucked themselves up on the bookshelves, meatloafed and compact, with eyes half closed; Rhiow was sitting looking out the garden doors into the darkness, digesting the evening’s events and debating the team’s next move

with herself while waiting for news from Arhu and Siffha'h. Behind her, the typing went rattling along, paused, rattled on again.

*I hate to ask,* she thought, studying at her dark reflection in the dark glass. *He's in enough pain. There's always the Whisperer.*

And indeed the Whisperer could tell her much of what she needed to know. But She could not tell Rhiow the truly important thing, which was what the Silent Man thought and felt about it all. *Am I sure we really need to know about this? Is asking him about it merely needlessly increasing the local entropy of emotion, and doing sa'Rraah's work?*

*Yet he's in this quest with us, willingly. We have to know his issues to make sure they don't interfere with his ability to do this work.*

Rhiow sat there quite straight, her tail wrapped around her feet, while the typing went on, stopped, went on again. A page was pulled out of the typewriter, laid aside, coffee was drunk, another page was rolled in, the typing started again. Two or three more times this process was repeated, and Rhiow sat and thought and listened to the night. Outside, to her surprise, she caught the distant sound of something she had only heard in Central Park before now: a nightingale. This one was hidden away up in the gray-needled scrub pines over the wall behind the house, pouring out its little liquid bursts of song and apparently quite untroubled by the staccato song of the typewriter. *Amazingly noisy thing,* Rhiow thought. *Computers have spoiled us, truly --*

The noise stopped a few seconds later. Rhiow looked over her shoulder and saw the Silent Man pouring himself another cup of coffee. As he drank and leaned back in his wooden typing chair, staring at the page still in the typewriter, Rhiow stood up, stretched, wandered over to the desk. "Truly," she said, "as the Queen's my witness, I've never seen an *ehhif* drink coffee the way you do. It's a wonder your brain's not just one big bean."

*The Queen?* he said, and yawned.

"God," said Hwaith.

*Oh.*

Urruah opened an eye and looked down at Rhiow. "He'd love our --" She shot him a look. "Where we come from," Urruah said, closing the eye halfway again. "There's this chain of stores, they have this coffee that --"

"*Urruah,*" Rhiow said. The last thing they needed right now was a discursion on grande frappucinos.

"He'd really like them," Urruah said, "that's all I'm saying..."

Rhiow waved her tail. "Cousin," she said to Runyon, "are you finished with that?"

The Silent Man gave Rhiow a tolerant look. *Come on up.*

She leapt, sat down over to the typewriter's left, wrapped her tail around her feet again. "Cousin," Rhiow said, "forgive me this. I dislike having to ask about something that caused you the discomfort we saw. But I must, so that we're quite clear about what happened tonight. Who is Patrice?"

He sighed, leaned further back in his chair, folded his arms across his chest. *Patrice Amalfi del Grande Runyon, he said. My second wife.*

"You said earlier that she was away on business," Urruah said.

*Monkey business, said Runyon, as usual.*

He was silent for a few breaths. *We were married in '32, the Silent Man said. Knew each other for a long time before my first wife died.* Another silence fell. His face didn't change, staying still and cool. But the pause felt so spiny with suppressed guilt and anger that Rhiow wouldn't have dared break it. *For a long time we were happy together. Then, though – I got sick –*

Another long silence. Rhiow looked away: Urruah, though, gazed steadily at the Silent Man, in quiet support of something Rhiow could tell was very much a tom-ish kind of pain. *She took up with a younger guy, Runyon said. They've been living in Reno, where they met when Patrice was posted there for national service during the war. It's been an open secret in town for a while now. Mostly the publicity people have kept quiet about it.* The cool look broke: Runyon smiled bitterly. *If you've still got enough clout in town to get them in trouble, enough friends at the studios who'd be angry on your behalf, the gossip columns and the two big name ladies with their radio shows know better than to foul their own nests by opening their yaps in public.*

The smile faded. *But when your star starts to fall, when you start losing that clout, all bets are off. And most people here have noticed that I don't have any new projects going. Some have noticed that I'm closing the last few down. The real estate agent's been fielding offers for the house, on the quiet. I'm only here for a little while, before going back to New York --* He did not say "for the last time": it was implicit in his tone. *So now the gossip columns see that they've got a little while left to get some mileage out of me before. Now they think I'm game. Well, I've got news for them. The game won't run.*

He reached out to his cup and took a long swig, finishing the cold coffee in it. *And why should I? What they're pulling doesn't really hurt. Neither does what Patrice just pulled, said the Silent Man. He put the cup down again. Love's a mug's game anyway.*

He leaned back again, stretching out his legs. To Rhiow there was nothing even slightly relaxing about the gesture: the tension underlying it was terrible. *Romance is nothing to me any more. Nothing for anybody, most of the time, not really. But me, I gave it up way back when I realized which way the wind blew.*

Rhiow glanced over at Hwaith: he glanced back, his eyes still half-closed but shadowed with pity and pain. Urruah, though, stood up, stretched, stepped down from the bookshelf, and lay down on the desk on the other side of the typewriter, in the pool of light from the single lamp.

He stretched out his own hind legs out thoughtfully, giving the Silent Man a dry look. “Staying right there in character,” Urruah said. “Just what you’d expect in one of your stories from some guy with a glass in front of him in the middle of the night.”

His tone was wry. The Silent Man looked at Urruah and let out a breath, a short one, as if considering and then holding back some other response. *No glass for me, he said after a moment. I don’t drink. It always made me sick, even before my present – physical problems. Now I’ve got all these pills, too, and the doctors told me not to be tempted to mix them. I listen to my doctors...like I have a choice.*

He turned his coffee cup around on the desk. *...Not many choices left to me now, he said. I’m making my last few. Don’t need romance. Sex wouldn’t be high on the list, either: there’s too much to do before I go. But your priorities have to be different.* He gave Urruah back a look at least as wry as Urruah’s had been. *You’ve got the looks of a brisk young tom about town. Got all the necessary equipment.* Urruah’s whiskers went forward, an appreciative response: Rhiow restrained herself from any comment, verbal or nonverbal. *Your whole life’s in front of you. And you –* He looked over at Rhiow. *You’re his doll?*

“This is getting a little personal, isn’t it?” Rhiow said.

The Silent Man grinned at her: the expression was a bit brittle, but genuine enough. *You started it, Blackie, he said. So you’re not his dame, then. Got a boyfriend somewhere else.*

Rhiow commanded herself not to bristle. The Silent Man’s eyes glinted a little. Enjoyment? But not of her discomfiture. There was something else going on. This was what he did, in his life: he looked into the fine detail of the lives of the beings around him, and exposed them to view. What he was doing was healthy, his way of fighting the Lone One, even in these depths of pain... though it still made Rhiow twitch.

“Not at present,” Rhiow said. “In your words, I’m missing some of the ‘necessary equipment.’ With us, you need one for the other. It’s – “ She shrugged her tail. “Just a physical thing.”

The Silent Man turned the coffee cup around a few more times, stared past it. *So you don't do love, then.*

Rhiow was shocked into wide-eyed silence. Hwaith opened his eyes all the way and looked at the Silent Man with an expression of incomprehension. But Urruah simply flicked an ear and put his whiskers forward. “Of course we do,” he said. “What are we, animals or something?”

The Silent Man looked at him sharply. Then he bowed his head. *Sorry,* he said. He rubbed his face.

“*Ehhif,*” Urruah said, “hardly have a monopoly on the personal version of the force that drives the stars. Life’s about lots more than sex for us. We have our romances, our frustrations. Our tragic loves and our triumphant ones – “

“Sehau,” said Hwaith rather suddenly, “and Aefheh.”

The Silent Man looked up. “What?”

Urruah’s whiskers went forward again as he glanced at Hwaith, then back at the Silent Man. “Not what,” he said. “Who.” His tail twitched slowly. “If you walked up to a cat anywhere on this planet and said the words ‘true love’,” he said, “probably those two names are the first words you’d get back. A story from a long time ago, when the world was young. Two People who loved each other, and let nothing stop that: nothing at all.”

The Silent Man looks away. *The world is full of things that stop it,* he said.

“Full of things that’ll try,” Rhiow said, “and one in particular.” She looked from Urruah to Hwaith, her mood shifting toward amusement.

Hwaith flicked an ear. “Might want to give him the shorter version,” he said. “The middle sections might be tedious for an *ehhif.*”

“The short version,” Urruah said, “but not the simple one.” He glanced at Rhiow.

She settled herself down into what Iaehh still called “meatloaf” mode, all paws tucked under, and shot Urruah an amused look. It was not so long ago that she and Saash had been taking turns making sure Arhu knew this story, part of every educated Person’s knowledge, which circumstance and the lack of a dam’s tutelage had denied him as a kitten. Now, of course, Rhiow’s part in that education was done – as Arhu could hear what he needed from the Whisperer Herself – and Saash had since taken up the narrative in a way that none of them had quite expected. “No,” Rhiow said, “there’s nothing simple about it. Maybe Urruah’ll sing you one of the casual

lyric versions sometime. But the best known spoken version's formal, and a bit archaic: let it stay that way."

She half-closed her eyes, not better to hear the Whisperer – for she didn't need Her for this – but to summon up the memory of Saash's old intonation, which to Rhiow's mind had always been better, both more precise and more heartfelt than her own. *Why do you always hold back on this?* she could remember Saash saying one night down in her old home in the parking garage. *Let it run loose and give it full value, for Iau's sake; what's it for but to shame the Lone One? Since it's all about old Shadowpelt having the grace to be ashamed in the first place –*

She put her whiskers forward. "There was a time," Rhiow said, "when it was afternoon in Heaven, and the Queen's light lay long and low across the Hearth. Then as evening drew in, the dark shadow of her daughter sa'Rraah fell across that light –"

The Silent Man reached over to the bookshelf and pulled out a spare pad and a pencil. *If the Queen is God, he said, this is possibly the Devil?*

"Close enough," Urruah said. "But more conflicted."

Runyon raised his eyebrows, nodded. *Okay --*

Rhiow shot a glance at Urruah. *Conflicted, indeed,* she said. "Well. When they saw that shadow, the Queen's other children drew aside to make room for the Shadowed one, for it's rare that She comes home to the Pride, and all hope that someday She'll come to stay.

"For a while sa'Rraah lay in the warmth of the Hearth, and none spoke. And finally the Whisperer, impatient of knowledge as always, said, 'Sister, where have you been?' 'Out and about in the Worlds,' said sa'Rraah, 'seeing how the light and shadow strive, and which comes best from the strife.' Now this is always the Shadowed One's way, seeking victory rather than justice, and endings rather than beginnings; so most of those who lay about the Hearth turned their eyes away at hearing she was yet walking her old path as always, and tails twitched. But the Queen lay quiet, and said, 'And what have you found?'"

"'Life, and Life again,' said the Lone One; 'but never so robust that it cannot be snuffed out, or its intentions made to fail. You were unwise, O Mother, to make it so weak a prey.'

"'Perhaps it is less weak than you think,' said Iau the Queen, 'since despite all your efforts over the vast expanse of Time, Life yet persists.'

"Now, sa'Rraah is no fool to taunt the Queen to Her face; yet like any Person, sometimes the desire to play overcomes her. And the Queen ever sees the kitten in the Person full-grown, and will look aside and let Her tail be chewed... within reason. So each knowing this of the Other, sa'Rraah

then said to the Queen, ‘Are You so sure of that that You will let me put some corner of creation to that test?’

“Hearing that, Aaurh and the Whisperer growled low in their throats. But the Queen stretched and said, ‘Daughter of mine, if you think I will let you play this play with the fabric of reality, you think wrongly. If Life is the throatball you gag at, then Life will be what bears your enmity: some small corner of it, as you say. But do not be too sure the play will go your way.’

“‘And You will not interfere?’ said sa’Rraah.

“‘I am in Life and cannot be separated from it,’ said the Queen. ‘But I will of Myself not act... any more than usual.’

“‘With this the Shadowed One had to be satisfied. Yet she growled and licked her chops. ‘And what Life shall I test?’ said sa’Rraah. ‘There is no joy in the wager unless You run some risk.’

“‘Risk there shall be, for you shall test People who are dearest to me,’ said the Queen. ‘And in this time that will be Sehau and Aifheh, whose time it is to be born now, and for whom I have waited long.’ And She purred so that all Heaven heard it. ‘I have wrought and intended them for each other since the deeps of time: they will express love as it will ever be best expressed among my People, and as it ought to have been before the ways were darkened and love’s time became brief.’ And just for that moment Iau opened one Eye, and its terrible light rested on sa’Rraah.

“‘All the Queen’s other children held utterly still, and even sa’Rraah crouched down, all dismayed: for her own work it had been that the ways of the worlds were darkened by her invention, death. Yet after a moment the Shadowed one looked up again, emboldened to spite by Iau’s forbearance. ‘Queen and Mother,’ said sa’Rraah, ‘there is nothing You can make that I cannot mar.’

“‘The Queen merely closed her Eye again, and said, ‘That the event shall prove. Go your ways, my daughter, and do your devoir.’

“‘So sa’Rraah rose and stretched and padded away from the Hearth of Heaven. And in the outer circles of reality, in the world where the People dwell, Sehau was born outside a city of *ehhif*; and far from him, in a wild place into which her dam had been cast, Aifheh was littered.”

The Silent Man glanced up from the pad on which he’d been scribbling. *What city?* he said.

Rhiow looked at Hwaith, for this was a part of the story that she’d never given the slightest thought to. Hwaith shrugged his tail.

“‘Pittsburgh,’” Urruah said.

Hwaith stared at him. Rhiow rolled her eyes. Urruah immediately tucked himself up into a more compact shape, suitable for running away suddenly if he had to: but the look in his eyes was still full of mischief.

Rhiow let out a breath. “*Anyway!* Sehaul was a tom: Aifheh was a queen – “

*But not God,* said the Silent Man.

“Not God,” Rhiow said, realizing that no matter what she did, with this audience there was no hope that the telling would go smoothly. “Sehaul was a brindled kitten, and Aifheh white with a black-patched pelt. Each one grew quickly, and when their kittening days were done, each did as many People do: began to roam the world, departing territories that were too full of their own kin to search for places where they could become part of new prides, and their own kits would prosper when the time came. And it was in woodland between the city and the wild that they met for the first time. Each was hungry, for they were very young, and neither was expert in the hunt as yet. Sehaul had found a place in the woods where inside a little bank he could hear the fieldmice moving and speaking to each other. He meant to wait till night to catch them, when he would have the advantage: and from a hidden place in the brush he watched them go in and out of their den. But the longer he watched the less his stomach could bear it any more, nor could he wait till night. When the next fieldmouse came rustling out, he jumped on it. And from the brush behind the little bank, where Sehaul could not see, Aifheh jumped on it at the same moment.

“In their shock and surprise, they fought over the mouse, and it got away. They were angry with each other: but they were so young that they soon forgot their anger, and looked at each other curiously, and exchanged names. They met again in the days that passed, and shortly they began to hunt together, because they had each been alone for so long and each missed the sound and smell and touch of other People. Soon they were friends. And before much longer Aifheh came into heat, and Sehaul was ready for her; and then they were not just friends, but lovers.

“Now the Shadowed One had been watching for this; for if the loves of these two were what the Queen Herself had been awaiting them, then surely they were worth thwarting. Aifheh kindled from that first joining, and grew great with her litter: but sa’Rraah so twisted the kindling of the new life in her that the kittens all died in her womb, and their death poisoned her, so that she too was soon to die.

“Sehaul was wild with fear and grief, and cried and licked Aifheh and prayed to the Queen for her life. But Aifheh said, ‘My love, this body is only the first. We are People, and there are lives to come. I will be born again, and

I will await you. Make no unnatural haste to meet me, for that Queen Iau forbids. But be born again, and I will cross the world to find you, and we will have our love again: this I swear.’

“Crying with his pain, but seeing her hope, and that it was the only way, Sehaui swore by the Queen that it should be so. And Aifheh died.

“Sa’Rraah laughed at her death, and if Sehaui had any fears of a long life, they were vain: for the Shadowed One saw to it that while crossing ice on a frozen river that winter, the ice broke under Sehaui and the water’s flow under the surface trapped him under the ice, and there he drowned. At this sa’Rraah laughed again and went off into the shadows of the world, pleased with her frustration of the Queen’s great desire, and waiting to see whether there would be any need for another move in the game.

“She was more amused than surprised when a brindle kitten was born no more than a month later in the wild, and knew her own name to be Aifheh: and Sehaui was born again with a white pelt and black patches, not two months after that, in another *ehhif* city nearby. Sehaui was thrown out of her dam’s home by some *ehhif* as an unwanted thing, one more kitten in a place where there were too many People for too little food, and he took to the roads alone and hungry, thought searching for something more than food. Aifheh went out into the woods very young, almost before she was full weaned, knowing there was someone she needed to meet. And there in the autumn of that year they met again as kittens, and leapt on each other, and played and rolled and laughed and wept, though the sorrow was from another life, not this one: this one so far was all joy.

“Of course sa’Rraah knew of their reunion: for the game she played was new, and she had been listening at the boundary between life and the depths within life, waiting for the scent of their returning souls as Sehaui and Aifheh had once waited for the rustle of the fieldmouse to come out of the bank. ‘My Dam and Queen is yet a fool,’ thought sa’Rraah, ‘to play the same move twice.’ And this time she let Aifheh and Sehaui grow older, for the amusement of watching them grow and love their small doomed love, while thinking of how she would end them, this time in some way more cruel and amusing. And this time Aifheh bore her kittens live, and raised them until their eyes were just open, and they were at their most helpless: and then in those woods under the shelter of the mountains, the wild dogs found them and her and Sehaui, and tore and devoured them all. But even as they died, Aifheh and Sehaui renewed their oath: and sa’Rraah went away, pleased with her sport.”

The Silent Man was scribbling away at speed now, the same shorthand he had been using at the party. Now he paused and looked at Rhiow. *I am detecting a pattern,* he said.

Rhiow bowed her head to him in the human gesture. “Their third life,” she said, “came a few months later: for after such trauma the soul takes longer to remember its shape. And once again a brindle kitten and a white-pelt with patches like night were born, though this time the queen was the brindle again and the tom the day-and-night. This time sa’Rraah was listening more carefully for their souls, and twisted the path between the depths of Life and the world in such a way as to cause Aifheh and Sehaui to be born a thousand miles apart. Alone they grew, and alone they sought for each other through a decade’s worth of years – neither ever taking a mate, each speaking to every Person they met to find some word of the other. And a legend grew up right across a continent of the two People who each sought a mate they had never met but whom they knew intimately. Eventually they found each other: and sa’Rraah saw to it that it was not until the two old age-crippled People finally set eyes on each other, across a rainy hillside clearing no more than ten feet wide, that the earth quaked in the place where they were, and the rainsoaked land slipped away from the hill and buried them alive. But in the single look they exchanged, Sehaui and Aifheh remade their oath before they died.

“Sa’Rraah looked upon the crushed bodies in amusement and departed that place. But now her temper was a little on edge, for she was not used to being so thwarted by mere mortal things, crude matter with soul trapped inside. Long ago she had mocked the Queen for making mortal life, a thing neither honest matter or honest spirit, but a strange unwieldy hybrid, never to be truly at home in either Heaven or the world of concrete things. Now sa’Rraah began to suspect that she was the butt of a joke. And there is no more dangerous being anywhere than a God who thinks someone is making fun of Him.”

Urruah’s tail was twitching against the desk gently and rhythmically, an amused gesture. The Silent Man, for his own part, paused again in his shorthand. *It gets worse now, I take it,* he said.

“Lives four, five, and six,” Urruah said, “vary from version to version, depending on who’s telling it and how. But they boil down to: mid-length lives in which each has the most alluring possible lover presented to them – “

“Usually sa’Rraah herself in disguise,” Hwaith said.

“ – and they both refuse her, and die. Long lives during which both are repeatedly kept from meeting each other until they die. And then both killed in their mothers’ wombs, never even drawing a breath.”

*And still they come back, looking for each other,* said the Silent Man.

Rhiow bowed her head again. “By life seven,” she said, “when once again the brindle and the night-and-light pelted kittens are born, sa’Rraah isn’t even watching at the borderland, so certain is she that they won’t come back. But they do, and once again they’re born and find their way to one another, and they live their love for many years. Sa’Rraah, as you might guess, is furious. She comes to them in her full splendor – which is considerable: even a fallen daughter of God will command your attention when she turns up staring at you across your food bowl -- and she offers them a bargain. She’ll kill them now – painlessly, peacefully – and renounce her vendetta against them, if they’ll renounce their oath. ‘I warn you,’ the Shadowed One says, ‘die now, and part, and be done with it. Die now and come again without your oath and I will release you from my enmity: you may live your lives apart, with other loves even, and go into the dark at last in peace, no more my prey. But come again and try to keep your oath and I will hunt you without mercy to the boundaries of life and into the darkness beyond: for you will sooner have a tenth life than you will have your love in my despite.’”

The Silent Man paused in his writing and glanced swiftly at Rhiow. Urruah put his whiskers right forward, looked away.

Rhiow flicked an ear at her colleague in amusement. “But they looked at each other,” she said, “and then to the Shadowed One’s astonishment and fury, they laughed at her. ‘We don’t fear you, Shadowed One,’ said Seha. ‘Rather we pity you. Seven of our lives you have destroyed, yet you still don’t see that the fieldmouse’s nest always has one more mouse in it!’ And Aifheh said, ‘Daughter of the Queen, we put you another proposal. Give up your hunting of us and we’ll let you go free! For you’re the one who’s bound and in torment. You’ve made our oath your chain, just as you’ve done with your own old oath in the deeps of time, to kill the Life the Queen made. Break this chain, break that one as well, and go home to Heaven where your pride waits you by the Hearth!’”

The Silent Man nodded and pushed his pencil aside. *And I think,* he said, *that’s probably the end of life seven.*

“You think right,” Urruah said. “Sa’Rraah killed them out of hand.”

“But soon enough they came again,” Rhiow said. “And this time the Shadowed One actually missed them when they crossed into life: for now Aifheh and Seha had grown bold, and decided that if sa’Rraah would play

with them, then they would play with *her*. At the borders of Life they hid themselves just on the far side, where they could not be so clearly scented, and watched sa'Rraah pass to and fro in her rage, hunting them: and when they saw that for a moment or a month she was looking the other way, they slipped over the borderline and were born. Five whole *ehhif* years they lived in the world, raising their kittens and glad in each other's love. And all that while sa'Rraah prowled the borders endlessly, looking and peering, scenting and searching for those who were not there. Finally it was one of her jackals, one of the small dark spirits that follow at her heels, that came running to her and told her where the lovers were.

"Sa'Rraah was enraged almost beyond the rage that drove her first from Heaven. Without a moment's pause she flashed to where Seha and Aifheh lived in the wild, and with her own claws stripped their souls from their bodies and flung them once more out into the dark. Yet even as she killed them, she saw their eyes meet and their oath remade.

"The Shadowed One's fury was now even more terrible than before, and she was a prisoner of it, as the two had said: their lives and their obstinate love were a burning abscess in sa'Rraah's side, set there by the claw of perverse fate. And above all things, she was outraged that they should dare to play with *her*. The Queen's wayward daughter swore she should not be gulled so again. Now she patrolled the borders of life without rest, so that life in the world seemed almost to have a time of peace. And finally, as they began their ninth life, sa'Rraah caught the two souls just at the borderline, at the very place where matter and spirit are joined: and just as their souls were being knit into their dams' flesh, she slew that flesh for the last time."

Rhiow glanced at Urruah, whose eyes were closed now, and at Hwaith, who met her look with whiskers forward, anticipating the final kink in the story's tail. She looked over at the Silent Man, who was still writing, and now paused, waiting.

Rhiow put her whiskers forward too. "There sa'Rraah stood over the images of what their bodies would have been had they come to full age – the brindle and the light-and-night pelt, lying there stark and unmoving now. And she laughed. But then, around her in that shadowy place on the borders between deep Life and the shallows of mere concrete existence, suddenly there stood the Queen in Her majesty, and her daughters the Whisperer and Aaurh the Mighty, and even Urrau Lightning-Claw, come down from those dangerous places in Heaven where the Queen's mate prowls alone. But sa'Rraah faced them all down, and laughed again.

“O my Mother and my Sisters,” said sa’Rraah, “and O my wandering Brother, I call you all to witness: the play is over. And it is as I said. Even these two who were Your pride, my Mother, both they and what they had, even those I have marred. I have won.’

“So it would seem,” the Queen said.

“Yet then as all watched, all eyes but the Queen’s widened as something stirred about Aifheh’s shadow body. And about Seha’s as well, an inner light shifted to be free. Then beyond all expectation each of them slowly rose up in a body that was neither wholly spirit nor wholly matter, but a new joining of the two, one brindle and one night-and-light. There Seha looked on Aifheh, and Aifheh on Seha, and they rushed together and rubbed against one another and bumped their heads together, and all the Queen’s children stared.

“And the Queen began to purr.

“Then the Shadowed One’s eyes went dark with fury, and she threw a bolt of her own dark fire at them to destroy them utterly. But Aifheh and Seha shook it off as one would shake off the leavings of a dustbath, and fell to licking one another’s ears. At this sa’Rraah turned to the Queen, crying, ‘What mummery is this?’

“None you did not give them to play out yourself,’ said the Queen. ‘For *you* said they would sooner have ten lives than live their love in your despite: and are you not yet my Daughter, with power to ordain and endow? From the moment you so pronounced and they yet went on to live their love in your despite, then ten lives they would and must have; for what a God promises must be performed. And what they have, other People may now have also, thanks to you.’

“The fury of the Shadowed One turned her dark as the empty void. ‘I undo my ordainment! I abolish my endowment!’ cried sa’Rraah; but though the Heavens trembled at her roar, the two lovers were no whit troubled, nor even slightly distracted from their rubbing against one another and the twining of their tails. And even Aaurh the Mighty was fain to turn away and hide her laughter at her sister’s rage.

“Nor may the gifts or acts of Gods be withdrawn,’ the Queen said, ‘as you should know. So you see how your marring has fared. Though I stirred not a paw to help them, at every turn they forestalled you, even from life to life. That Life is their weapon, and sustains them as it sustains you, whether you admit it or no. Nor can you wholeheartedly will the end of that Life, for it is in you as well. Will its abolition wholeheartedly, and it will take you at your word and abolish *you* as well.’

“Then, furious, seeing there was nothing else to be done, sa’Rraah departed from that company, growling low. She took herself away into the darkness, and was not seen again on Heaven’s floors for long. But the Whisperer looked at the Queen and said, “Royal Dam and Queen, now tell us how You brought this about.”

“I brought about nothing,’ said the Queen, ‘save through her Word, which still bears power in the worlds. And see what lengths your sister went to make it true!’ She put her whiskers forward and stretched, fore and aft. “Sa’Rraah’s own error has brought about the Gift She will never be able to undo, though she spend all this universe’s store of Time trying to do so.”

“And this Seha and Aifheh have done by their strife against her in life after life,” said the Whisperer.

“Yet they could not have become who they became, so stubborn in strife, without my daughter time and again undoing their lives,” the Queen said. “Long I waited in fear, dreading that their time and this fate should approach, and sa’Rraah would *not* have that moment of spite that brought her to the Hearth and set these events in motion: for my daughter’s will must be as free as all others’, if she is to come back to the Hearth at last.”

“So our sister is part of creation again, as she has been for long,” said Aaurh the Mighty to the Queen. ‘But this time she knows it. And now she has back something that was once hers once and was taken from her; and of her own will.’

“And the Queen said nothing, but merely purred, as is Her way when She feels it wise to let the moment’s silence speak its own word. She and Her daughters returned at length to the Hearth, the fire of which burned on, and burns still. As for Seha and Aifheh, none have seen them since they crossed into the Tenth Life. Now they are Love personified, and Love does not need to be seen to be known. But no uncertainty of their whereabouts can change the fact that not even the Lone Power could destroy what they had – for while we have their story, we have both them, and what they had.”

Hwaith was looking a little unfocused. Rhiow glanced over at Urruah, who was studying his toes. The Silent Man, who had stopped writing a little while ago and had been sitting with his hands clasped loosely in his lap, the pencil still sticking out of them, now opened his eyes, looked sidelong at Rhiow and Urruah, and said, *Malarkey*.

Urruah looked at him in bemusement. Rhiow said, “Excuse me?”

*Malarkey, he said. Especially about Pittsburgh. Nothing like that ever happened in Pittsburgh.*

Urruah gave him an amused look. “It could have been New York...”

The Silent Man thought about that, and after a moment, smiled just the slightest smile, nodded. *So it could.* He put his pencil down and reached out to the coffee cup, drained it, made a face at the cold stuff. *Anyway, that's some love story,* he said. *Make a good long opera.*

Urruah put his whiskers right forward. "That's one of the ways it's done," he said. "It's often sung – part of it, or the whole thing -- when there are enough queens in season, and enough toms in the neighborhood..."

The Silent Man smiled a little sourly. *Bet I've heard it, some nights.* He pushed his pad away. *Love conquers all, huh?*

"If it's smart," Hwaith said, "and careful... and lucky."

But slowly the Silent Man's face slipped out of that smile; his eyes looked off into some preoccupied distance. They *got lucky,* he said slowly. *Doesn't happen often...*

"Not often enough," Urruah said, "no. But we're working on that." He looked at Rhiow.

Rhiow idly wondered why. But the Silent Man was looking at her as well. *A myth?* he said.

"No myth," Rhiow said. "Some of us get that last chance...that tenth life. But we get something more than just that. In Sebau's and Aifheh's lives we know that not even sa'Rraah herself can stop someone who's just one play more determined than she is."

The Silent Man nodded, and rubbed his face.

"It's been a long night," Rhiow said, feeling a shadow of his physical pain without even trying to get into synch with him. "Let's call it over. There's no point in you staying up for any news from the youngsters, cousin: we'll wake you if anything urgent comes up."

The Silent Man nodded, turned off the desk light, got up and headed for his room. In the dimness he paused by the couch to pick up Sheba: she stirred and muttered and dozed off again almost immediately in his arms. He nodded at the People and headed off to his bedroom. A second later the door closed.

Urruah got up and stretched. "I might go have a bite to eat," he said, jumping down and heading for the cat food dishes.

"*After that buffet?*" Rhiow said, incredulous. But he was already out the back door.

"I think the Silent Man's got the right idea," Hwaith said. "I'm going to go check my gate.... I'll be back later. If you hear anything from Arhu –"

"I'll let you know," Rhiow said. "Go well..."

Hwaith vanished.

Rhiow stayed as she was, listening to the darkness. In it she could hear an echo, distant, a voice telling itself something it really wanted to believe – and telling it at one remove, so that it was more believable: *If I have all the tears that are shed on Broadway by guys in love, I will have enough salt water to start an opposition ocean to the Atlantic and Pacific, with enough left over to run the Great Salt Lake out of business. But I wish to say I never shed any of these tears personally, because I am never in love, and furthermore, barring a bad break, I never expect to be in love, for the way I look at it love is strictly the old phedinkus, and I tell the little guy as much...*

Rhiow crouched there quietly in the darkness, hearing the thought fade away into others as bleak as the Silent Man started what would be a long struggle toward sleep. The muzziness of his pain medication was slowly starting to descend: something he welcomed. *I must see what can be done for him*, she thought, starting to doze a little herself: *if anything. Best to get some rest now, though. Helen will be in touch in the morning, and by then Arhu and Sif will have some answers for us.*

*Tomorrow's going to be busy...*