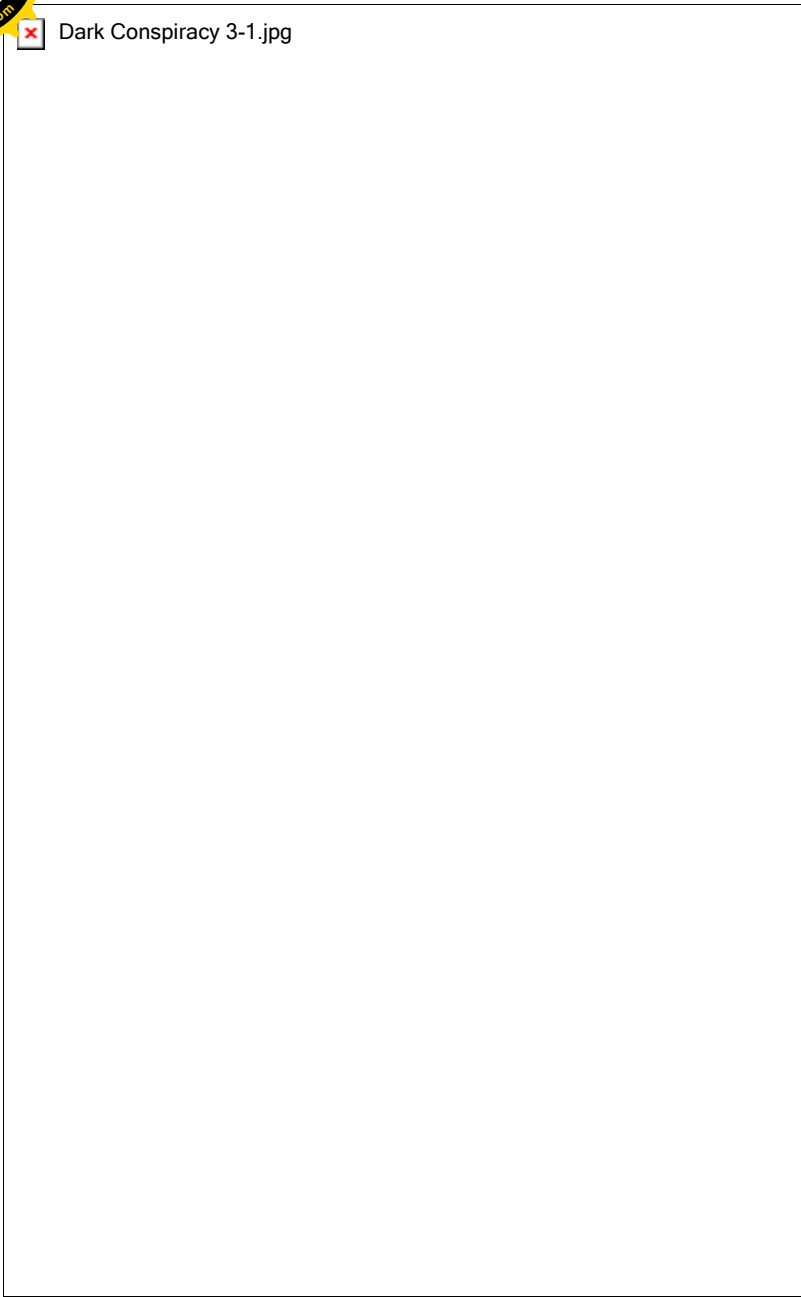
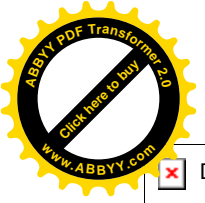


Dark Conspiracy 3-1.jpg

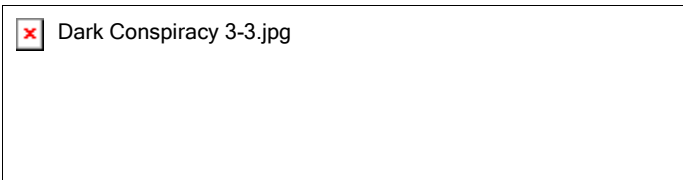




Dark Conspiracy 3-2.jpg

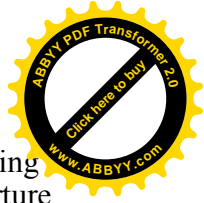
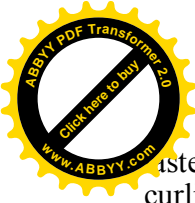


Dark Conspiracy 3-3.jpg



Awakening to the sensation of talons being dragged along the inside of your skull is not a pleasant experience. It is made less so when you realize it heralds the impending arrival of a Dark Lord. Most people live in the unconscious twilight of ignorance concerning the Dark Lords. Those who do not, those who have experienced the rude sort of awakening I and my companions had, normally ran screaming from the sources of their discomfort.

My two companions and I waited for the Dark Lord in a dark and cold dimension that smelled of a charnel house. The thick fog took on a pinkish hue when it came close to us, and by that time we could



aste the coppery favor of blood it carried. Things fluttered through the black skydome above us, sending curling swirls down through the mist. The crack-snap of their wings marked their approach and departure, but they never drew close enough to attack us.

I turned to the man standing next to me. In the dimensions outside Earth he appeared as nothing more than the silhouette of a slender man with a goatee. "Was this meeting place his choice or yours?"

Crowley shrugged and glanced at the open bolt of

the Mac-10 held in his right hand. A gold ring glinted on the fourth finger of that hand, providing the only color in his outline. "Mine. It is tantalizingly close to Pygmalion's home dimension and has certain properties that should annoy Fiddleback."

I raised an eyebrow. "But he is our ally now."

My second companion shook his head vehemently. "You, of all people, Coyote, should know that the Dark Lords ally at their own whim, for their own purposes. Think to trust him, and you paint a target on yourself."

I nodded to the Yidam and well understood the hint of bitterness in his voice. His whole life and being had been changed by the Dark Lords. (Unlike Crowley and me, the Yidam had started life on another planet. He had come to Earth with his wife on the crew of a what most people would call a CIFO. When Fiddleback managed to exert power over the crew, the Yidam lost his wife, placed his daughter in stasis, then took up refuge in a Tibetan monastery where he was shielded from Fiddleback's influence.

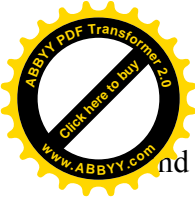
At one time, I have been told, the Yidam had been known by the name Vikram and had looked remarkably human. Three decades in the monastery had changed him. The same prayers and chants that protected him from Fiddleback psychomorphed him into the Yidam, a four-armed Buddhist guardian spirit, standing over 10 feet tall, with thick tusks jutting up from his lower jaw and four arms stacked one pair above the other. Even his daughter barely recognized him when they met again.

"I have no intention of trusting Fiddleback, but we have all agreed we need his power to defeat Pygmalion." Pygmalion was another Dark Lord, a former protege of Fiddleback's, who had managed to take away with him the heir to the throne of Japan, Ryuhito. The current

emperor, Ryuhito's grandfather, feared the warping and use the power inherent in his family's god-blood. "The only way to defeat a Dark Lord is to set another Dark Lord upon him."

Crowley's face tightened, suggesting a shadow-hidden smile. Try as I might, I could sense no emotions from him, and I knew that he kept his emotions on short enough a leash that I could not even trust the smile. "You have to remember, Coyote, that once we use Fiddleback to vanquish Pygmalion, we will have Fiddleback to contend with again."

I nodded as a shiver went down my spine. In the back of my head I heard a buzzing, like that of a million flies covering a corpse. When I realized I was hearing the sound as if my consciousness were trapped within the dead body, I knew the Dark Lord was playing games with me. On my left, the Yidam winced,



and I knew he had been similarly bedeviled by Fiddleback.

As if a yellow-green submarine surfacing silently in a black ocean, the Dark Lord known as Fiddleback pushed into the dimension Crowley had found. Fiddle-back's eight arms and legs moved slowly, as if the fabric of this reality were an invisible webbing trapping him. His ellipsoid head reared back and his mandibles worked as if trying to slice through to reach us.

I sensed his frustration rising, then it spiked sharply and exploded outward with palpable force. It shuddered through me and knocked me down, then the hot wind drawn after it burned the fog away. A tear flood gushed from my eyes and ran down my cheeks. I slowly stood and wiped my face dry on my sleeve.

The Yidam had been similarly affected by Fiddle-back's rage, but Crowley had withstood it somehow. Again I got nothing from him, though his relaxed posture suggested smug satisfaction. He looked up at

the huge creature towering above all of us, then nodded once. "I don't think we need formal introductions."

«/Yo, *it iz not nezezzary*.^{*} The familiar voice I had heard in my head too many times before resolved itself out of the fly-buzzing. «*Theze two are creaturez of my creation.*»

«*You arrogate yourself*, monster,^{*} the Yidam hotly shot back at Fiddleback.

Crowley held up his left hand. "Mind speech is not necessary. This proto-dimension and its sister are *sound* permeable. The barrier between us prevents any impulsive action from taking place."

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

Crowley leveled the Mac-10 at Fiddleback and stroked the trigger. I heard a trio of explosions and saw cartridges arc out of the gun in the glare of the muzzle-flash. The bullets themselves flew out about 20 meters, then stopped in mid-air. They did not flatten or ricochet away, but just stopped as if they had burrowed into an invisible medium that slowed and trapped them.

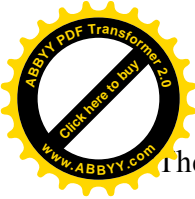
"In addition to sound, these dimensions allow the passage of sentient creatures, within limitations." He inclined his head toward Fiddleback. "He is limited."

"Only in this plaze, man-thing." The Dark Lord's head labored to tilt back down, then all eight of its eyes focused on Crowley. "You have chozen well and cautiously. I rezept thiz, and will call you by Crowley inztead of your true name az your reward."

"True name?"

Crowley turned toward me, and his silhouette shrugged. "He likes to think he knows everything." The shadow man looked back at the Dark Lord. "I would say you know me as well as you knew Pygmalion, Fiddleback."

Anger rose in the Dark Lord and radiated off him like heat from Arizona desert. "It iz Pygmalion we are to deztroy. Remember thiz, for our failure will be the death of your prezious world." His anger cooled.



"There iz only one way to accomplizh this end. You will get me to hiz ztronghold."

I frowned. "You can travel through the dimensions. You should be able to find that place yourself. You do not need us."

The Yidam shook his head. "He does need us, Coyote, for the entropic nature of reality is against him. There are, within the dimensions, barriers to power, energy and matter. To circumvent those barriers, he needs agents among the populations of certain dimensions."

Crowley nodded in agreement. "Just as he needed people to create the maglev train circuit in Phoenix and turn it into a dimensional gateway, he needs us to enable him to get to Pygmalion's home dimension."

"That iz prezizely what you will build for me." Fiddleback raised his two foremost arms and they telescoped out to their full length. "You will uze the planz for the dimenzional gateway that Nero Loring onze created for me."

A thudding pain began in the top of my brain. "That is impossible. That circuit is over 23 miles long. It has a diameter of over five miles. The whole thing took more than 20 years to build. Unless I missed something, I do not think we have 20 years to play at this." The image of a fully grown and exceedingly effective warrior created by Pygmalion out of a 5-year-old boy came to me. "Pygmalion escaped with Ryuhito two days ago—he could already be on his way back. There must be another way."

"There iz none, Coyote." Fiddleback's limbs shrank

back down. "You have zome time, for dealing with Ryuhito'z power will not be zimple. If it were, I zhould have had him long ago."

"Fine, give us two weeks, or two years, it doesn't matter. What you ask is impossible."

Crowley reached over and grabbed my right shoulder. "I think we can do the job, and far faster than you imagine. Remember, the emperor of Japan has pledged whatever resources we need to aid us. Lorica Industries is not without both technical expertise and resources of its own."

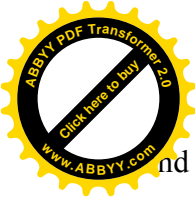
"I know that, Crowley." My hands tightened involuntarily into fists. "Can't you see it? We are being asked to create a highly technological device in a place that will be, at best, hostile territory. The labor needed to clear the land and lay out the circuit is incredible. Not only do we have to secure the area, but we have to supply fuel, spare parts and personnel to drive the machines we will need to do the work. It would have been easier for Kennedy to remodel the Kremlin during the Cuban Missile Crisis than it will be for us to do what he wants us to do."

"Does my *pet* have another zolution?"

The Dark Lord's use of the word *pet* draped the emotional equivalent of white sheets soaked in ice-water over me, chilling and weighing me down. "You were the one who created me, Fiddleback. Did you not mean me to be the assassin that killed your enemies? Am I not your hunter?"

"Yez, that you were." The arachnoid Titan tried put a beneficent expression on its features as it looked down at me. "But that waz before Ryuhito."

Crowley nodded. "Just having Ryuhito in the vicinity means Pygmalion would likely be able to find you



and destroy you before you could kill him."

"Great. That means he can also detect our work against him. How will we find an area where we are to work?"

The shadow man took a step back. "Concentrate on me, Coyote. What can you get?"

I did as he instructed me. Using the skills in which I had long been trained, I pushed away conscious thought and let my mind drift out like a net floating on the ocean. Behind me, I caught the Yidam, easily recognizing him from countless clues I had learned to detect while in Tibet. To my left, I felt Fiddleback as a hard-edged crystal pulsating with dark colors and darker emotions. He scintillated in a most hideous and yet seductive way.

He was power incarnate.

Crowley, on the other hand, did not exist. As if he were no more substantial than the shadow he wore, my mind-net swept past him without noticing him. I could see him, and I knew if I reached my hand out I could feel him, but he was blind to the senses that enabled me to feel and discover so much within the dimensions.

"I cannot feel you."

"Neither will Pygmalion. I can pinpoint him and detect blind spots in his defenses." Crowley pointed beyond me at the Yidam. "He can likewise shield himself and will be able to scout as well."

"Okay, I accept that we can find him and remain, for a time, undetected. We still need supplies and labor."

"Skilled labor we'll have to supply." Crowley jerked his head toward Fiddleback. "It seems to me that he can supply much of the heavy labor we will need. The Plutonians, given direction, will be most able labor."

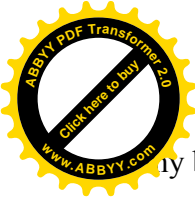
I recalled all too clearly the huge denizens of a proto-dimension called Plutonia. The size of elephants, these chocolate-brown animals resembled ants in structure

and social organization. They exhibited an ability to spin a fairly strong web and communicated largely through scents. Crowley had pointed out that the Russian author, Vladimir Obrutcev, in his 1924 book *Plutonia*, had not ascribed enough intelligence to Plutonia's residents, but I still doubted our ability to use them as labor.

"How will we give them that direction, Crowley? I don't see you arming yourself with a bottle of perfume to act as their foreman."

"I will accomplish that, my *pet*."

With Fiddleback's words there came a ripple through the dimension that even seemed to affect Crowley. A piercing shriek lanced into my brain, then fragmented into a billion separate voices, each one screaming in mortal agony. Pain exploded in my head and pulsing pressure pounded at my forehead as if



ny brain struggled for freedom.

Looking up, I saw the flesh on Fiddleback's forehead begin to bubble. Blisters formed and burst in rapid succession, spraying fluid down the long face. Layer after layer of skin boiled away, opening a raw, red wound in Fiddleback's green-yellow face. A dark, viscous fluid filled the hole, but before it could pour in black rivulets down to Fiddleback's mandibles, its surface thickened into a clear membrane.

The hellcoal light in Fiddleback's eyes flickered for a moment, then died altogether. When it reappeared, I had the feeling it was diminished. It still burned with malevolence and hatred, but not quite as hot as it had before. At the same time, I saw a pale shape materialize beyond the membrane.

That shape struggled for a moment, then exploded out. In the time it had taken for the shape to form, the membrane had gone from a placental consistency to

that of a brittle lense. When the shape burst free, the membrane scabbed off and the fluid flowed out like an ameboid thing trying to restrain the shape.

Ivory and pointy, the shape unfolded itself as it sailed free of Fiddleback's head. It fell to the ground between two of the Dark Lord's legs and its own limbs collapsed beneath it. The afterbirth splashed down, coating it and threatening to drown it. Struggling against that flood, the creature reached out with its limbs and thrust itself up from the ground. As its head rose and its thorax took a more upright position, it looked to be a miniature of Fiddleback sculpted from ivory.

The creature moved forward through the invisible barrier separating us from the Dark Lord. At first I took it for nothing but an automaton that moved by Fiddle-back's will alone, but the creature slowed in its transit. It stopped at where the bullets hung in the air and, cranking its head left and right, examined them. I saw intelligence in its eyes and sensed the impatience of its master.

"Thiz is Vetha. Her eyez are my eyez. What zhe knowz, I know." Fiddleback, the hole in his forehead crusting over, reached down as if he meant to caress her, but his forelimb could not reach her. "Az you require that which I may contribute, zhe will communicate it with me."

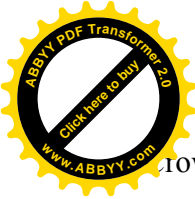
Fiddleback's form began to waver as he withdrew from the dimension across from us. «Do not *even think of betraying me, my pet. I created you. I can deztroy you. Zukzzed, and I will grant you dominion ouer all you zave for me.*» Before I could reply, Fiddleback vanished, and I could sense him no more.

Crowley turned toward me. "Something?"

"Nothing." Looking around, I shook my head. I stood alone in a place that smelled like a slaughterhouse with


a man made of shadow, a Buddhist godling and an ivory creature born of a monster that wished nothing short of universal conquest in his name. With them I was supposed to marshal an effort that would locate an enemy and build a modern technological device in a relative heartbeat, while maintaining secrecy and operational surprise for an attack against that enemy.

I smiled. "You know our chances of doing what we have to do are between slim and none, don't you?"



Crowley nodded. "So?"

"So," I laughed aloud, "let's see what kind of betting action we can get on slim and start working."

 Dark Conspiracy 3-4.jpg

Crowley led the four of us back through the proto-dimensions to Earth. He made our destination the facility in Tokyo that had been given to us by the emperor. Arrigo El-Leichter had created the Galactic Brotherhood Institute on Kimpunshima, an artificial island in Tokyo harbor where the majority of foreign nationals lived in Japan. He had been one of Fiddle-back's minions and had even contributed to the training I had been given as I grew up at GBI. Yet, despite my having spent virtually all of my life in that one place, it did not seem at all like home.

I realized, as we stepped through into the office El-Leichter had once claimed as his own, that the lifetime I had spent in GBI, being forged into a weapon for Fiddleback to use against Pygmalion, was a past lifetime. Not literally, of course, because I had not really died between then and now, but in a cognitive sense, that life had ended. When Coyote, my predecessor in the Coyote identity, had arranged for my capture and a chemically induced amnesia, he had destroyed the person Fiddleback had created.

Coyote had also rebuilt me, but he did so in his image. He groomed me to be his heir and managed to

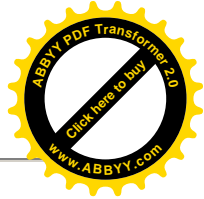
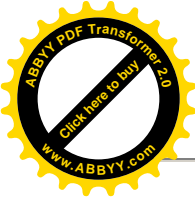
show me why his legacy, his legend, had to be continued. He put a face on the evil malaise that worked to grind humanity down to nothing, and he showed me how to fight it. He showed me that I *had* to fight it.

The office in which we appeared had all the expensive appointments one would expect in the domain of a successful executive. The thick, plush ivory carpeting matched Vetha's flesh-tone so perfectly she seemed for a second to be a piece of sculpture somehow grown up out of it. The Yidam's jet-black skin and golden talons likewise were appropriate, as the wall-to-ceiling bookcases behind him were made of ebony, and the glass doors were fixed with gold hinges and latches.

Only Crowley and I did not look like part of the furniture, and Crowley appeared uncomfortable there. Freed of the shadow that covers him in the dimensions, the slender, well-groomed man did look as if he could have claimed the office as his own, but he would have required a more suitable wardrobe. While perfect for extra-dimensional travel, the black fatigues, Kevlar body armor and a web-belt bristling with ammo pouches and twin Mac-10 submachineguns was not quite the thing for corporate board meetings.

I also wore body armor, but it was not as thick or as obvious as Crowley's. It was barely noticeable beneath the green polo shirt I wore. The shirt, in combination with the khaki slacks I wore and the white, V-neck sweater on the chair behind my desk, marked me as a prosperous corporator who had just stepped in to the office before heading out to the links for a quick nine holes.

Or it did after I removed my two shoulder holsters and tucked the Colt Kraits in a cabinet beside the desk. I glanced at my watch and noticed the hands read 9:15 a.m., but the digital window in it had the time as 1 p.m.



I had gotten used to time moving faster or slower in the proto-dimensions than it did here on Earth, but the mismatched settings on my watch were an unwanted reminder of the paranormal reality of the universe. If not for the watch and its evidence, I could always try to imagine what I had seen and done as one long nightmare.

"It's already afternoon here." I dropped into the big chair behind the XR-8500 datadesk and looked at its broad, flat surface. The whole glassy desktop was a touch-sensitive computer screen. I pressed my finger against the flashing clock icon and it exploded out into a time-stamped memo from my executive assistant. I scanned it, then frowned.

"Lilith has picked up Mickey's father and sister from the airport. They should be back here very soon, which means I'll have to deal with that situation straight away."

Crowley nodded thoughtfully. "You have my sympathies." He turned to Vetha. "If you will come with me, I will get you situated. If you can tell me your needs as far as food and housing are concerned, arrangements will be made."

The ivory creature nodded her head, then followed Crowley out through the office's side door. Looking up, I saw the Yidam's scarlet eyes focused far away. "You are welcome to stay for this. They have both seen your daughter, which means they might be ready to understand you..."

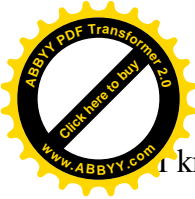
The Yidam shook his head and folded both pairs of arms across his chest. "No, I do not think they are ready for me. It is just that I know the boy's kin will doubtlessly feel about the truth as my daughter must feel about me. I was lost to her, and now I am found, yet I am not the same person or being she remembers." He

opened his arms in a gesture of helplessness that mocked his powerful build and fearsome aspect. "Somewhere inside of me there is much that remembers her, but the past three decades have changed me a great deal."

I tried to smile sympathetically. The Yidam and his daughter Rajani were both members of an extraterrestrial race called the *Jes'da*. The race is psychomimetic, which means it conforms its physiology to that prevalent among the dominant race where they grow up. Such protective coloration made evolution easier for them, but the ability to change deserted most of the *Jes'da* by the age of 6. Practitioners of a philosophical discipline known as *c'dithrta* retained their psycho-morphic abilities and could even, through long years of meditation, direct their change.

Rajani had spent nearly 30 years in isolation and stasis so she could change and become a tool to be used against Fiddleback. Her father had hidden away in a monastery in Tibet. While the monastery kept him safe from discovery by Fiddleback, the prayers and beliefs of the monks deprived him of the isolation given his daughter. As a result, the monks' influence managed to remold him into the form of a Buddhist godling and guardian.

"You and I have not had much chance to see your daughter, but the information I get from the rest of my people is that she is very open and bright." I let a genuine smile cross my face. "Sinclair is very high on her, and his judgment is not to be dismissed. Rajani is more than capable of being self-reliant, so she will not depend upon you, but she does *need* you because you are the only link she has back to her mother and her heritage."



I know, and I see her as my link to the future." The

Yidam smiled, which was not a terribly pleasant thing to see. "It is just that the transformation I have undergone is more than physical. The monks made me over into a deity and, while I do not have the powers and abilities ascribed to a Yidam, I have been given some of *a* god's perspective on the world. I do not like it."

"Perhaps getting to know your daughter again will provide you a counter-balance."

"Indeed, I hope this is so, Coyote." He looked out my window toward one of GBI's internal courtyards. "She is down there with Mickey and Bat. I will go speak with her."

"Good luck, my friend."

My desktop sounded a pleasant tone as the Yidam left through the door Crowley had used, then shut it behind him. I hit the icon of a speaker. "Yes?"

"I have Mr. Farber and his daughter here, Mr. Loring. Shall I bring them in?"

"Yes, Lilith, please do." I hit the icon again, severing the connection, then stood and moved around in front of my desk. The door across from me opened, and my blond executive assistant ushered the two guests into my office. "I am pleased to see you made it. I'm Michael Loring."

"Tadd Farber." Mickey's father offered me his hand, and I shook it. His palm was wet and his pale flesh looked almost corpse-like compared with my tan. He wore a suitcoat and slacks that almost matched, but had clearly been bought off the rack a dozen years before. He had lost a lot of weight since then, for it hung on him as if he were in an advertisement for a drastic weight-loss clinic. He had combed his thin, straw-colored hair sideways over his head, exposing a broad expanse of forehead above brown eyes.

"This is Dorothy." His daughter stepped forward and

offered me her hand. She seemed ill at ease wearing a floral-print dress, white gloves and socks and black patent leather shoes, but she tolerated the situation bravely. I took her hand in mine and found a stronger grip than her father's in it. Her honey-blond hair had been combed and trimmed, and her bright blue eyes were full of curiosity.

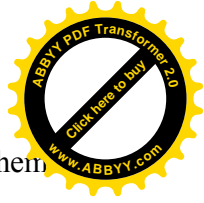
I pointed the both of them to the chairs in front of my desk. "Before we begin, can we get you anything? Coffee? Soda? A beer?"

Tadd's eyes lit up when I mentioned beer, then dulled down again. He looked at the floor rather than at his daughter, then shook his head. "I'm fine."

"Dorothy?"

"I'm fine, too."

"Very well," I smiled. "We will get something later. I'll buzz you if I need you, Lilith."



lith left us alone and closed the main door. I returned to my chair and sat down, then looked up at them. "I must thank you for coming all this way on such short notice. I know my people were less than communicative. I appreciate your willingness to trust me."

Tadd raised his eyes to meet my gaze. "They said you had information about Mickey." His left hand unconsciously sought and found his daughter's hand. "Do you, Mr. Loring?"

I nodded and leaned back in my chair. I knew in an instant that I could spin a tale that Tadd Farber would believe because the world had hammered him with tragedy after tragedy. I knew, from what Rajani had told me and from the files Jytte had coaxed out of computers half a world away, that Tadd Farber had sold his proxy for voting to Daizaimoku, the *zaibatsu* that all but controlled the northern half of Arizona. His wife died after a protracted illness, and alcoholism had

sucked him down. He had sunk so low that he had arranged to have his children sold off. Then, when they were returned to him and he started the slow climb back to respectability, Mickey had vanished.

Fooling him would be no problem. He was a man who had been broken by the world. He accepted what corporations told him was the truth. He no longer wanted to think critically about the world, and his skills at doing so had atrophied away to almost nothing. He would be easy, but his sharp-minded and street-smart daughter would be something else entirely.

"I do, Mr. Farber, and you must call me Mike. I heard that your son Mickey had gone missing..."

Dorothy's cerulean eyes narrowed. "You did? But we didn't tell nobody."

I met her stare openly. "I have many sources, Dorothy—may I call you Dot? Your brother refers to you that way, so I have come to think of you as Dot."

The girl gave me a cautious nod, but still watched me with the interest of a mongoose watching a cobra. "You know where Mickey is?"

"I do indeed. You see, when I heard about him, well, Mickey is what I was called when I was growing up. I don't know why, but finding him became something personal with me. I was determined to find him, but I didn't disturb you with my efforts because, quite frankly, I didn't want to get your hopes up in case I failed."

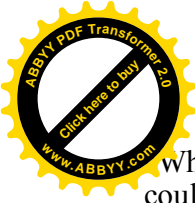
Tadd grunted, and Dorothy's expression eased a bit, but she remained wary. "Can we see him? Is he okay?"

"All in good time and, yes, he is fine." I chose my words carefully. "He is also changed."

Tadd's head came up. "Changed?"

"The individual who abducted your son is, well, is psychotic. He is an individual of incredible talent and, in addition to being a egomaniac, fancies himself a

sculptor of sorts. His choice of medium is the human body, and his work would be celebrated worldwide except he chooses to perform his work on those who do not or cannot stop him."



"What are you saying, Mr. Loring, Mike?" Anxiety vibrated off Tadd like tones from a tuning fork. "How could he do anything to Mickey? What kind of sicko monster is he? Mickey's just a 5-year-old little boy."

How do I explain what a Dark Lord is to someone like Tadd Farber? "You're right, he is a monster. What he did to your son, though, is welcome in many ways. He fixed your son's cleft palate. He repaired all the damage done by the chronic ear infections. In Mickey, I can see bits of you, just as I can in your lovely daughter here." I stood and purposefully refrained from glancing out the window. "I don't want to scare you, because Mickey is in far better shape than any of us could have imagined. I just want you to be ready, because he is not the same little boy you remember."

I laid my left hand gently on Tadd Farber's forearm as he rose from his chair. "One thing I do want you to understand, Tadd, is that Lorica Industries is pledged to seeing to it that Mickey will be taken care of for his entire life. You need not worry about him or your daughter or yourself."

"Why? You're not responsible, are you?" Tadd regarded me with the haunted wariness I'd expect from a beaten animal.

"No, I am not, but that does not excuse me of feeling an obligation to your son. May I be frank?" As he nodded, I tightened my grip on his arm and brought his hand up to eye level. "Your watch was made in Bulgaria. Your suit was probably sewn together in a Belizan factory. Your trip here was your first time on a plane and quite probably the first trip outside the

United States. Your monthly income in dolmarks barely covers your expenses, and I imagine that the food you had in the airplane is probably the best and most nutritious of meals you've had in over a month. Am I close?"

"Yes," he whispered hoarsely. I could feel him trembling and saw that he did not look at his daughter while she stared daggers at me. "I don't understand why you want to help us."

"The world is an evil place, Tadd. Your son and daughter have been touched by that evil—with Mickey facing the brunt of it. Even so, your children are resilient and have a will to survive. Nurturing them, and people like them, means the world may become a little less evil."

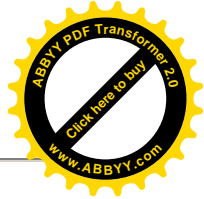
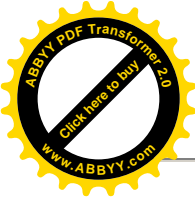
I gestured at the finery in the office. "All of this, Tadd, is very expensive, but it is worthless if it is not used correctly. Others would see what I have here as a goal, but I see it as a means to a goal. I know life has not been easy for you, and I suspect it will get worse before it gets better. I just want you to know that it will get better because it is imperative to me that the world gets better."

I felt the emotions rippling through him as if my fingertips were reading some ethereal Braille. The insecurity and self-doubt that had begun as I spoke gave way to pride in his children. Part of him resented the directness of my approach; he felt honored that I thought his children were worthy of salvation. Finally, as I pledged to help him and them, he grew stronger because the burden of their future had been lifted from his shoulders.

"Shall we go see your son now?"

"Please."

Leaving through the side door, we crossed the tiled



landing, and I hit a button that summoned the elevator. The doors opened to reveal a glass-walled cage that went up and down on the outside of the Galbro building. Dorothy preceded the both of us into the box and pressed her hands against the window of the far side. "Hey, someone's fighting down there."

I smiled and pressed the button marked "Ground." "Some of my people use the courtyard for martial arts training."

Tadd smiled. "Mickey would like that. He always liked watching karate movies on the TV."

I nodded but said nothing. As the elevator descended, it became easier to see the two combatants. They fought in the center of a rain forestlike garden with walkways paved with crushed stones of white. In the central area, where the walkways became a wide, white ring edged with slate-gray stones, the two men circled each other cautiously. Just judging from the comparative size of the two men, the outcome would have seemed obvious.

The larger of the two men looked huge even from a distance. Heavily muscled, he had countless scars criss-crossing his bare torso. The dark-haired man towered over the other fighter by almost a foot, yet remained back and in a low crouch. Bat feinted with his balled fists, but did not step in and pound his foe to oblivion.

The other fighter moved with a fluidity that matched his slender, whiplash body. His dark brown hair trailed behind his head fakes, and a broad smile lit his face. Like Bat, he wore only a pair of gym shorts, so it was easy to see the intricate intaglio of thick and thin black lines swirling over his body. The lines followed and defined his musculature as if they were tattoos, but watching closely I once again saw that the line moved

with his muscles, not above them as a tattoo might.

Bat's left fist hooked in hard at the smaller man. Before the fist had gotten even halfway to its target, the tattooed man danced back and to the right. His right hand swatted the fist out of the way like a kitten batting at a ball of yam. The small man ducked his left shoulder and lunged forward in a move that sent his fingertips grazing across Bat's washboard stomach.

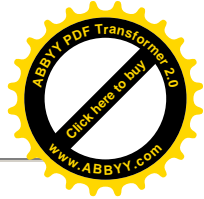
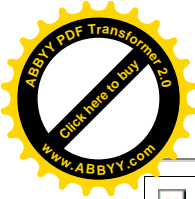
The tattooed man retreated, then giggled aloud. "I tickled you again!"

The explosive oath Bat offered in reply seemed to shock his foe, but the thick foliage and wall surrounding the courtyard cut off any vision of the two fighters at that point. Tadd stood on his tiptoes to catch any last glimpse, then smiled. "That was Bat, wasn't it? I've seen him in some of the fights televised from Eclipse."

I nodded. "Yes, that was Bat."

Tadd shook his head. "I seen him fight a whole bunch, and he's always been a winner for me. That guy he's fighting, though, he's a razor. He's incredible. What's his name?"

"I'm glad you think highly of him." I waved the two of them toward the opening elevator door. "He is Mickey Farber. He is your son."



 Dark Conspiracy 3-5.jpg

"My son?"

"Your son," I replied, nodding as Tadd slumped against the elevator wall. "Dorothy, the path here will take you directly to him. You father and I will be along presently."

The girl looked up at him and reluctantly accepted her father's weak nod as confirmation of what I had said. She ran off, and I kept the elevator door open. "There is a bench over there. I can try to explain."

Tadd's head came back up. "I hope you can explain." He rolled his shoulders, then straightened his jacket and walked to the bench. Confusion and anger and sorrow surrounded him like a cloud, but he kept his head up and exerted control as he sat down. "How can that be my son?"

I took a deep breath and read the emotions Tadd was putting out. Rajani, the Yidam's daughter, had reported meeting Tadd once. She said he had some inner strength, but it was fragile. She felt he had reordered his life around and for his children after she brought them back to him. She also strongly suspected that losing Mickey and the shock of his returning in this modified form might crush him.

And now, to that, I had to add an utter shift in his whole worldview. I stood before him, keeping my feet shoulder-width apart and my hands open. "Mr. Farber, do you think of evil as something you can touch, something that is personified?"

My cautious tone and the nature of my question cut through his growing sense of self-doubt. "Evil? I guess so, I mean, I don't think there is a devil or anything but I guess I think some people are born evil."

"Good, because there are creatures in the universe that are born evil or choose to become evil. For lack of a better term, I will refer to them as Dark Lords. Consider their outlook one where black is white and white is black. A kindness repels them, but misery draws them like a flame draws moths."

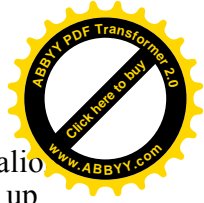
His face tightened. "Dorothy told me about fleeing from a loup-garou in the forests near Flagstaff. I thought she was..." His voice caught in his throat. "Was that real?"

"As I understand things, yes, it was. The creature they faced was not a Dark Lord per se, but was one of a legion of creatures that Dark Lords are capable of using to further their ends." I let my hands knot into fists, then forced them open slowly. "Your son was abducted by a Dark Lord we call Pygmalion. Like the sculptor, he made your son over into a work of art. He also made him into a prototype for a killing machine,"

"Mickey?"

"Yes. Luckily, we have dealt with the problem."

"What's been done to him?"



shrugged. "I don't know all of it. The Dark Lords have unbelievable powers at their disposal. Pygmalion has access to a place where time moves at an accelerated rate. There he was able to let your son grow up a bit and train. You obviously will not recognize the

package, but it is your son inside."

Tadd Farber looked down at the ground and shook his head. "This is insane, you know that, don't you? If I told anyone what you have just told me, I'd be locked away in a booby hatch faster than I could spit."

"Which is exactly why your son was chosen. If he did return to you and if he was able to recount all that happened, you would be thought mad when you reported it."

Farber's head came up sharply. "How do I know you are not one of these Dark Lords?"

His question lanced up into me. To him, to billions of people like him, I was as far above him as Fiddleback was above me. I described Dark Lords as having incredible power, yet to Tadd Farber the fact that he was in Japan talking to *a* man who ran a multinational corporation was nothing short of miraculous. For all he knew or could determine, I might have changed his son, then brought him here to emotionally torture him with my handiwork.

"That is a fair question." I dropped down into a squat. "I am to the Dark Lords what Lucifer was to God. I was groomed by a Dark Lord—without my knowledge—to become his weapon against other Dark Lords. I have rejected the power offered to me in favor of opposing Dark Lords. Right now, Pygmalion is at the top of my list and your son Mickey is very important to the effort to stop Pygmalion. However, he is still a minor, so I have a legal and moral responsibility to have you make his decisions for him."

"If you were a Dark Lord, you would have just used my son regardless."

"Something like that, yes."

Tadd nodded, then added a little shake of his head at the end. "I accept that, but your role model does not

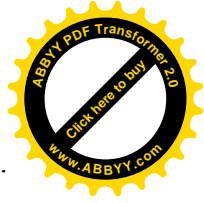
inspire confidence. Lucifer wanted to overthrow God so he could rule in his place."

I shook my head and straightened up. "I was trained as a killer, not an administrator."

"Dad!" Mickey's shout from the edge of the courtyard reached us barely before he arrived. Mickey came to a stop without spraying stones around and lifted his father from the bench. Like a father tossing a toddler in the air, the youth let his father fly upward, then caught him in a hug.

I pulled back, riding the tide of joy away from the embrace. Dorothy, breathless and crying, streaked past me to join the rest of her family. I walked away to leave them to their private reunion, and headed on into the courtyard. The Yidam and his daughter had withdrawn to one of the small conversation nooks deeper in the forest. I left them alone and zeroed in on Bat and the two other people standing with him.

Natch Feral's smile dimmed slightly as I approached. A petite woman, she seemed an embodiment of the idea of America being a melting pot. While her almond eyes bespoke an oriental heritage, her *café au lait* skin and long, kinky brown hair suggested blood originating in Africa. Her blue eyes were a clue to



northern European ancestry as well, but the caution in her eyes was nothing short of American Urban. She wore a thin white tank-top and some baggy black fatigue pants over combat boots, with her only adornment being the twin diamond studs in each earlobe.

The other member of the trio towered over both Bat and Natch. Hal Garrett had made his living for years playing basketball for the Phoenix Suns. The tall, balding black man had bulked out enough that his height wasn't readily apparent until I got close. He still looked a bit drawn, but he had recovered from two

gunshot wounds relatively quickly. A sense of self-doubt lingered on him, but day by day it got weaker as he realized that he could not have prevented the death of his wife in the same white supremacist attack that wounded him.

"What is the verdict on Mickey?"

Bat grunted, which was more response than I had actually expected. The fact that he stayed down on one knee gave me a clue as to how much of a workout the boy had put him through. I knew that I had no desire to fight with Bat in a one-on-one match. I felt certain I could have killed him, but what Mickey had done was more impressive because he struck at will without Bat's being able to repay him for that indignity.

Natch gave me a thumb's-up which said a great deal. "Mickey's an ace. If he ever gets a raditude-baditude, blood will flow."

Hal flinched almost imperceptibly as Natch spoke. "Mickey is impressive. You were right, the tattoos are really poly-carbon fiber armor that protects muscles and his major organ groups. Pygmalion replaced his bones with ferro-titanium analogs, then fine-tuned his metabolism so he heals incredibly quickly, strikes even faster, and possesses unbelievable physical skills."

The retired basketball star chuckled lightly. "Mickey and I played some hoop earlier this morning. I have a foot and a half on him, and he stuffed me—repeatedly."

"From what I saw when Pygmalion brought him here and in this battle with Bat, you're lucky he didn't kill you."

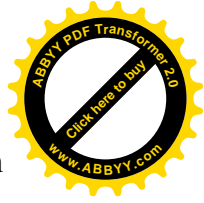
Hal shook his head. "Not luck at all, Coyote. Mickey understands playing and has an unbelievable amount of control over his body."

Bat stood and opened his arms wide. "Not a bruise."

"I'm missing something, then." I frowned. "Pygmalion

made Mickey into the ultimate warrior, didn't he? I thought he was a bomb just waiting to go off."

"Rajani disarmed him." Hal smiled and gushed pure pleasure. "When Pygmalion put Mickey together, he apparently subjected the boy to training that included the loading of a combat protocol into the boy's brain. It consisted of three sections: Acquisition, Imprinting and Termination. On command, Mickey would locate his target, match it to a mental template that told him what the easiest way to kill it would be, then he would kill it."



I knew that. For that reason we have isolated Mickey from the wolfmen Pygmalion first had him attack." I narrowed my eyes. "Are you telling me that Pygmalion's program has been disabled?"

"Exactly." Hal knitted his long fingers together. "When Pygmalion told Mickey to kill Rajani, he acquired his target in an instant. Imprinting Rajani proved to be the problem, as Pygmalion had never provided a template for her. Before Mickey could synthesize one, Bat tackled him and Mickey switched over to trying to imprint on him. Because Bat was behind him and had him in a full nelson, Mickey failed the imprint. Rajani reached into Mickey's mind and blanked both his short-term memory and the place from which the imprinting code had been drawn. She broke the cycle."

That made sense. "So Mickey no longer has the ability to kill?"

"He is no longer *compelled* to kill, which is decidedly different. We think he may yet harbor a compulsion to kill those on whom he has imprinted previously, hence keeping him away from the wolfmen down in security." Hal sighed. "Mickey wouldn't want to kill them, but he couldn't help himself if he saw them."

"But he can still kill, can't he?"

"Can, yes, but he won't."

"Why not?"

Hal looked at me in horror. "He's 5 years old!"

"So?" Bat looked from Hal to me and back. I shivered.

The African-American spoke slowly through clenched teeth. "Mickey is not inclined toward violence. The way we got him to fight you, Bat, was to tell him it was play. He was concerned it would be too rough, and he noted that he would not want to hurt any of Rajani's friends."

Hal turned back toward me. "As nearly as we can make out, Pygmalion trained him to kill using creatures and settings that allowed Mickey to believe it was all unreal. He fought Magilla Gorilla creatures. He saw the wolfmen as a villain from some Ghostbusters cartoon. Because Mickey knew those things were fantasy, and because he was praised for his efforts, he continued to perform. Even now we have not told him that he actually *killed* anything because Rajani and I think it would cause him to shut down mentally and emotionally."

"Do you think he would kill himself?"

Bat grunted. "He'd have to—no one on this planet could do it."

"I don't know." Hal glanced off back over my shoulder and smiled. "Seeing his family has picked up his spirits."

I turned and followed Hal's line of sight. Mickey appeared very animated as he alternated between sitting beside his father and standing to hug his sister. I could see from his hand motions and how he moved that he was miming his basketball game with Hal. Even in the courtyard I could hear his father's laughter and feel the man's sense of relief.

I looked back at Hal. "Can they reinstate his imprinting program?"

The flesh around the big man's dark eyes tightened. "I don't know, but I don't think so. Why would you want to do that?"

I swallowed hard. "I am the weapon Fiddleback created to destroy Pygmalion. Mickey is Pygmalion's masterpiece and very much more effective than I am. I would hate to think we could not employ such a powerful asset if and when we have no other choice."

 Dark Conspiracy 3-6.jpg

I left my friends in the courtyard and exited through another pathway that did not lead me back to intrude on Mickey and his family. Entering the Galbro complex through one of the many doors that opened into the central courtyard collection, I paced on through nondescript institutional walls. Beyond a set of double doors I found a little alcove that had a door with a scanner plate beside it.

I pressed my palm to the scanner plate. A greenish light bar started from the top and descended, then rose again. I felt no heat from the light and began a slow detachment. I felt as though I had withdrawn and was watching myself go through the motions of opening the door. I found the sensation oddly unpleasant, yet I clung to that sensation because it marked the change between the person I had been and the person I had become.

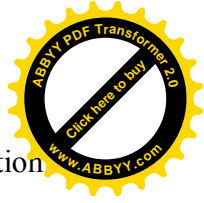
The door slid noiselessly up into the ceiling, and I stepped through into zenly spartan quarters. Open, light and airy, with high ceilings and sunken, hardwood floors, the whole complex had nothing higher than a half-wall to mark the rooms one from another. I realized that the method of construction meant that the

entire suite had superior lanes of fire for a gunfight. I knew that was not the sole reason for the design.

The furnishings were few, yet appropriate for Japan. *Tatami* mats covered the floors and the traditional low table made up the bulk of the furniture present. Off in the back I knew I would find a sleeping mat and pillow— less because I had been here before than because I knew that was where I would have placed it. The kitchen even featured a traditional firepit, though it had been fitted with an electric grill.

The bath proved to be the suite's greatest luxury, though a few pieces of antiquarian art were scattered around the room. Each had been situated to make it the focus of the roomlet in which it had been placed, and I was able to associate specific memories of specific jobs I had performed with my having been given each piece as a reward. I felt an immediate affinity for the small piece of Anubis statuary in the first room, but whether or not that came from my having assumed the role of Coyote or because it seems most appropriate as a reward for an assassination, I could not say.

The bath, too, had been a reward of sorts. Taking a bath had been manufactured into a symbol for me as I grew up and was trained. Just as Pygmalion had made Mickey believe his training and killings were



ings of fantasy, Fiddleback had kindled in me a belief that total purity could be gained through ablation. Physical cleanliness became linked with mental, emotional and spiritual purity for me.

I had lived my first life in this suite. The open construction had its utilitarian aspect, but it also served to do one other thing. It denied me privacy and, growing up without it, I felt no need for it. Likewise, the lack of personal possessions worked to do exactly

what Fiddleback wanted. It allowed him to create in me an agent of considerable skills with so malleable a sense of self that I could go and become anything or anyone for the purpose of carrying out Fiddleback's bidding.

This lack of personal identity proved vital for Fiddleback and me. Because of it, I was able to slip between dimensions like a shark moving through still water. Since I did not have a strong sense of self, greed and a need for personal power was not something I developed. Fiddleback correctly guessed that he could train me in things the way he had trained Pygmalion, but since my identity came as a reflection of Fiddleback, I would never rebel. As long as I was in his control, I could not and would not rebel.

There Fiddleback's incredible arrogance failed him. Coyote, my predecessor and possibly the first Coyote, anticipated my being used in Phoenix. He initiated an elaborate plan that forced me to discover my own identity. Following clues he laid out for me, and building upon the basic virtues with which I had been raised, I created the persona of Tycho Caine. I discovered I was a highly skilled assassin and, while looking at the world through the glimpses of it that Coyote provided, I discovered that the person I had become did not want to have anything to do with Fiddleback and his machinations.

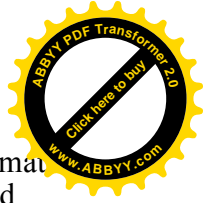
My first life, the life I had lived in this place, had ended when Coyote had me kidnapped and chemically induced amnesia in me. Out of Fiddleback's control, I had found my true self. The loyalty which had kept me bound to the Dark Lord had been changed over into a loyalty for my fellow human beings, and that led me to oppose the creature that had created me. That opposition started me on my second life, and that second life

included taking up the mantle of the man who had given me that second life.

I became Coyote and rediscovered the powers that I had been given by Fiddleback. As Coyote, I made them work for me, and that proved to be to Fiddleback's detriment. If not for the intervention of Pygmalion, Fiddleback might have destroyed me. As it was, Pygmalion made off with a prize that meant my old master and I had to join forces or both be consumed by whatever grand plot Pygmalion had devised.

The suite to which I had come felt familiar, and I hungered for that. I knew my surroundings would not seduce me back to Fiddleback. They would, however, provide me some peace, and that, in turn, would allow me to concentrate and rest. Both of those things were vital because the game we would play out over the next few months would not forgive mistakes or condone stupidity.

Our penalty for failure would be death. My reward for success would be surviving to again oppose Fiddleback.



kicked off my shoes at the door. In stocking feet I walked to the back and lay down on the sleeping mat. I set my watch's alarm for five hours and hoped for a peaceful sleep. I knew that when I awakened and we started the planning for the campaign against Pygmalion, peace was the last thing I would have for a long time.

I emerged from my sanctuary after a dreamless nap and soothing bath. Wearing a green shirt and cuffed black slacks, I headed through the GalBro complex until I reached the briefing room in which the first planning session was to take place. The long, narrow room had been filled to capacity, with everyone finding a seat around the lozenge-shaped maple table.

I patted Tadd Farber on the shoulder as I worked my way past him and toward the front. Aside from the people I had seen earlier in the day, others associated with the effort to oppose Fiddleback had assembled for the planning session. I took a mental census of the room and felt a momentary bit of embarrassment as I realized I was the last person to arrive before we could begin.

Standing next to the Yidam's daughter, I saw Sinclair MacNeal, a tall, handsome young man whose family owned the largest construction contracting company in Arizona. He had been my agent in Japan and had located the Galactic Brotherhood while I had been training in Tibet. Fiddleback had pierced the secret of his identity and would have killed him had Rajani not intervened on his behalf.

Rajani stood between the Yidam and Sin, but remained closer to the dark-haired human than her own father. Like the Yidam, her flesh was jet black, but her eyes shared the same golden hue as her fingernails. Though her yellow blouse and blue sweater hid her arms, on the backs of her hands I could see the tattooed gold lines that ran from her fingernails along the backs of her fingers and on up her arms. Her blond hair had been pulled back into a pony-tail and would have made her look like any college co-ed had she a more carefree expression on her face.

Reaching the head of the table, I nodded to the group of people. "Thank you for coming here this evening. I especially appreciate Lt. Colonel Yoshirnitsu Asano leaving his hospital bed to be here." I bowed my head at the bandage-swathed member of the Japanese emperor's Internal Defense Cadre. "The emperor's support and the role of the IDC will be vital if we are to succeed."

"Our task can be summarized in rather simple terms—stop Pygmalion and recover from him the emperor's grandson, Ryuhito. Accomplishing this task will be far from easy, and I know some of you have already begun to work on aspects of what we will need to do to succeed. As always, any job can be accomplished with two of the following three elements: It can be done quickly, it can be done inexpensively and it can be done perfectly. Luckily for us, with the emperor's resources and the resources of Lorica Industries, expense is not a consideration. Bear this in mind as you plan—no reasonable request for equipment or personnel will be denied."

I pulled out the chair in front of my place at the table. "Clearly, though, the first step in dealing with Pygmalion is learning who and what he is. Any insight we can get into his personality will make destroying him more and more possible." I hit a button hidden beneath the edge of the table that lowered a panel at the far end of the room. Behind it, a video screen blinked to life with a blank blue field displayed on it. "Jytte, if you want to begin the briefing."

The statuesque blond woman nodded stiffly. By any but the most twisted standard, Jytte would have been identified as being gorgeous. She eschewed cosmetics and jewelry and wore her hair unadorned and loose, so it fell to mid-back. Her dark eyes flashed with fearful intelligence, as if she were a wild creature



apped in a most beautiful cage. Her gray jumpsuit had been tailored for a man and likely had been chosen in an attempt to make her more androgynous and less appealing, but it failed.

Jytte Ravel pointed a remote control at the screen, and a picture flashed up on it. A black-and-white snapshot that had to have been taken back in the mid-

20th century, it showed a smallish child wearing a cowboy hat, checked shirt, jeans and a pair of toy pistols holstered on his hips. "This is Nicholas Hunt in 1957. He is 4 years old in this picture. It was taken at his family home by a relative."

Jytte's voice came almost as mechanically as the motion with which she punched the remote's buttons. "This shot is an X-ray of Nicholas Hunt's skull. It was made approximately a month after the picture you just saw. You will note that the right side of his head has been broken. The cheekbone was dislocated in the fracture and a portion of the skull fracture is depressed, right there, above his right ear. Because of the level of medical technology at the time, the skull fragments were removed and a metal plate was inserted to replace them."

Another slide flashed up. It showed Hunt a couple of years later and struck me as a mugshot, but I knew it had to have been a school portrait. The boy in the picture had a lopsided smile and his right eye remained half closed. He appeared to me to be nervous. I could almost feel his uneasiness at having his picture taken.

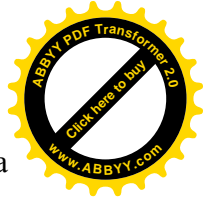
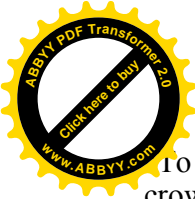
"As you can see," Jytte explained emotionlessly, "the injury left him with significant left-right facial and cranial asymmetry. In addition to that, the brain damage done by the injury made Nicholas lisp ever so slightly. Those who actually knew him and went to school with him recall his childhood having been difficult. Children are cruel to those who are different..."

Jytte's voice changed, and I looked over at her. She still held herself tightly, but I heard anger and sorrow bleed into her voice. I knew she had none for Pygmalion because she hated him more than even I despised Fiddleback. Her comment had been for herself, and

that surprised me because she had never even admitted to remembering her own childhood, much less talked about it.

"Hunt was nothing if very bright, and his social exile meant he spent a great deal of time with books. His home life was no more appealing than his schooling. While his family claimed he had broken his skull in a fall, most people believed his alcoholic father had beaten him. His mother promptly divorced his father and moved away. She took refuge in religion and became involved in a repressive Christian cult called People of the Cross."

Jytte's voice became cold and clinical as she described the sect Pygmalion's mother had joined. "People of the Cross believed that Jesus had attained his divinity through the tortures he suffered during his capture, trial and execution. The group's megaloma-niacal leader, Tilden Tyler, built a theology around personal denial, torture, starvation and deprivation. Members believed that they would attain divinity when they had proved their worthiness by subjecting themselves to the sort of punishments Jesus had endured. Through accepting enough pain, they believed, all their sins *and* their Original Sin would be forgiven, returning them to the original state of grace which meant divinity, since God *had* created man 'in his image.'"



To heal her son," Jytte continued, "Agnes Hunt made him participate in flagellation, the wearing of a crown of thorns and even bouts of mock crucifixion. True and elevated members of the cult often underwent full crucifixion, including the use of nails to hold them to the cross before they were taken down and, through the use of hallucinogenic drugs and hypnosis, were led through the process of death and rebirth. They

formed the Inner Circle and Agnes actually attained that rank."

"Nicholas rebelled secretly. While he attended services and participated in rituals, he grew to despise the God that refused him his cure. He began to experiment with things like magic and the Ouija board, but he found that nothing provided him as much power as science."

Another voice, soft and low, slipped in as Jytte paused to take a breath. "This is not entirely true." Vetha, a pale shadow crouching to my left, bowed her head. "It is during his exploration of the paranormal that my master was able to make contact with Nicholas. The contact was neither strong nor manipulative, but my master deflected Nicholas toward science."

Jytte stared at Fiddleback's representative, drinking in every word, then she nodded perfunctorily. "Thank you. That bridges a gap in my knowledge. Nicholas graduated from UCLA in 1975 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology. He obtained his Master's degree in Neurophysiology in 1977 from Ohio State University. From there he went to work with Dr. Parit Chandra. This brought him into top-secret research that involved Rajani. According to her, Nicholas Hunt was fascinated by her psychomorphic abilities and even began a study of *c'dithrta* in an effort to master that ability. For the last 26 years, since 1984, there are no records or reports about him."

Jytte looked over at Vetha. The alien creature bowed her head respectfully. "The reason your records of Nicholas Hunt end in 1984 is because in that year Nicholas Hunt ceased to exist." Reaching forward and letting her tripartite claws rest on the dark table, she tapped lightly on the wood. "In that year, my master smiled, and in his beneficence, Pygmalion was born."

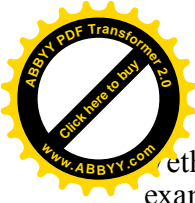
 Dark Conspiracy 3-7.jpg

Vetha's dark eyes, all eight of them, had pinpoints of ivory light at their centers that seemed to whirl around as if they were bursts of energy from a pulsar. "I know that to explain what I have said requires delving into more than just Pygmalion's background. I do not know how much he will allow me to divulge. If I digress to an excess, please encourage a return to the point."

I nodded silently. "Anything you can tell us will help."

Her mandibles parted in a motion I chose to interpret as her equivalent of a smile. "Dark Lords, as you so quaintly label them, are either generated spontaneously or cultured. Those which arise without aid are often eons in reaching their primacy and can be destroyed by a more powerful Dark Lord. This comes from the necessity of their discovering their aspect before they can master it."

The Yidam leaned forward, all four of his hands pressed to the tabletop. "What mean you by aspect?"



Vetha's ivory head came up. "The Dark Lord's focus, his avenue to power and exercising power. For example, my master has as his aspect synthesis. He takes from disparate groups and welds them together

into a new creature. He can do this in a direct and forceful way, as he did with the *Myrangeikki*, or in a subtle way as he did in bringing your mother and father together, Coyote."

I ignored the reference to myself. "*Myrangeikki*? "

"That is what I am. We are, rather Fiddleback is, a synthesis of a dimension's population. He brought us together and absorbed us, melding us into a physical and spiritual alloy that provides him with sufficient power to do as he will as a Dark Lord. I am but one part of him that was absorbed hundreds of thousands of your years ago." She bowed her head. "I am his servant, as I was in the beginning, am now, and will forever be. My power is his power, to wield in that way which pleases him."

As she spoke, the light in her eyes slowed its spinning. I felt a wave of malevolence pulse out from her. Rajani winced and Jytte shivered, while Bat snarled and the Yidam echoed him. Everyone else shifted uncomfortably in their seats, with the exception of Crowley.

A tremor shook Vetha, then her eyes returned to their normal state. "I have been warned about digression."

"Tell us, then, about Pygmalion. What is his aspect?"

"Pygmalion is a builder. His desire for change in himself prompted his study and pursuit of the art of *c'dithrta*. In the meditations demanded by that philosophical discipline, he opened himself again, and my master noticed him. He recalled the sort of seeker Nicholas Hunt had been before, and my master adopted him and trained him."

Vetha drew her forelimbs in and crossed her upper arms over her thorax. "It is almost a compulsion among Dark Lords born to create powerful minions."

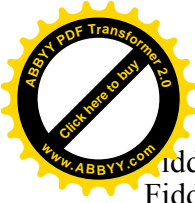
Those minions gather to themselves power, and a portion thereof is passed on to their master. The more training and more abilities the master awakens in minion, the greater the potential for power to be returned."

"And the greater the chance for rebellion." I nodded my head slowly. "Nicholas Hunt rebelled."

"Your concept is correct, Coyote, but it was Pygmalion that rebelled. My master did not think of, and therefore did not instill in him, the safeguards he has placed in you, for example. Against my master's will, you cannot assume the power that would make you a Dark Lord in your own right."

I felt an uneasy tickle work its way up my spine. When my compatriots and I had opposed Fiddleback on the GalBro grounds, I had been offered the unlimited power of a Dark Lord. To suggest the offer was seductive is to suggest the sun's core is lukewarm. With the power I had been offered, nothing could have been denied me, yet I knew such power could not come without cost. I discovered the source in the misery and suffering of the people I would oppress.

I realized that the vision of power I had been shown was a parallel of that which Vetha had described for



Fiddleback. In it, I had absorbed and taken into me all the hopeful fools who had come to worship Fiddleback. My success imitated his success, suggesting to me that my aspect must be that of a synthesizer. As I was now a synthesis of what Fiddleback had molded and Coyote had cast, perhaps all that was necessary for me to assume my place among the Dark Lords was Fiddle-back's assent to my standing by his side.

I shook my head. "It is my hope that your master never stops opposing my elevation."

The *Myrangeikki* nodded almost imperceptibly be-

fore her eyes slowed again. "Venomouz traitorz are not given power, Coyote. Your rejection of my gift, my pet, iz noted and final."

"Ah, then we *can* agree on more than the defeat of Pygmalion." I let a bit of anger into my voice, but mostly used sarcasm to carry my statement.

Vetha recovered herself. "Beneath my master's tutelage, Pygmalion learned to use power in many ways. He rebuilt himself, providing that cosmetically correct image of what he should have been that you saw when he came here. After he betrayed my master, he built himself a complex in which he could carry on the sort of sculpting work he enjoys. Both Jytte and Mickey show he is quite skilled. It is this complex we will have to locate to defeat him."

I nodded. "Okay, it strikes me that our drive to get Pygmalion has a number of obvious parts that have to be completed before we can succeed. The first is that we must find his headquarters complex. I already know someone who can work on that back in Phoenix and if Colonel Asano can get us Prince Ryuhito's electroencephalogram traces from his last physical, we can begin that work. Once we have that place pinpointed, the Yidam and Crowley can scout the area for a nearby proto-dimension that is suitable as a staging point."

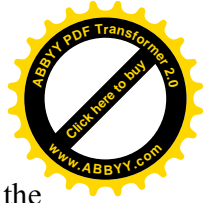
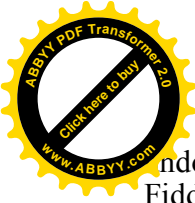
The Japanese cybeminja nodded his agreement. The Yidam and Crowley accepted their roles silently, but I knew each of them would have a list of equipment needed to fulfill their missions. Everyone else started to think about what their part of the battle against Pygmalion would be, and I started outlining the other things we would need so they could slot themselves in.

"We are going against a Dark Lord. Even though we will have a Dark Lord working with us, we need any edge we can get. I need a PsyOps section to prepare a

psychological profile of Pygmalion and suggest symbols, images, times, whatever, that might disrupt him. Jytte, I want you to lead that group. Vetha and Rajani, I need you to work on it as well, because you have background information on Pygmalion. If you want, we can hire some hotshot mindbenders back in Phoenix to toss their best guesses in on whatever you produce."

"Understood," Jytte reluctantly consented. She frowned for a moment, providing her doll-like face more animation than I had seen since I met her. She clearly felt uncomfortable, but she fought to force a victory over that discomfort. Rajani and Vetha nodded at me, then smiled reassuringly at Jytte, but I don't think Jytte even noticed.

"Sin, I'll need you to conduct negotiations with construction companies back in Phoenix, because we'll



undoubtedly need equipment and trained workers to help created the dimensional gate that will bring Fiddleback in to our staging area. Fiddleback will be able to provide a great deal of raw muscle to do the heavy work, but we'll need people for fine work."

The young man nodded. "Do you want me to get a bid from my father?"

"Not unless you want to. Money is not an object here, and I'm willing to spend plenty if your father gets none of it." I glanced at Hal. "I'll need you to coordinate the recruiting of workers. You can do it through your Sunburst Foundation, if you wish. You should feel no compunction to hire any of the white supremists who are on Darius MacNeal's payroll either."

Hal rubbed his hand over one of the healing gunshot wounds in his chest. "Don't worry about that. How many are we going to need?"

I shrugged. "A couple hundred, at least. Having worked construction before will count. It is likely to be

dangerous, so unattached folks would be good. Figure out what the going rate is and triple it, plus add substantial bonuses for signing and finishing the project. First thing you'll need is some screening staff."

I looked over at Bat. "We may need some roustabouts. Colonel Asano and the IDC will provide security for our beachhead, but I may need some people to keep peace inside the camp."

Bat nodded.

"Lilith, see if you can get me booked on a radio talk show or something in Phoenix within the week. Make it a 'Michael Loring of Lorica Industries announces an expansion...' kind of thing. I can use it to get the word out so Hal will have recruits when he's ready to process them. Match, I'll want you with me as someone who has already signed up so you can let folks on the street know this is a good deal in their own language."

"Word up, Caineman."

Lilith smiled at Natch and added, "Consider it done, Mr. Loring."

Tadd Farber raised his hand. "What about us?"

I frowned for a second. "I was hoping you could consent to Mickey offering what he could to both the PsyOps group and the scouts." When I did not see the questioning look in his eyes go away, I continued. "Hal has two children who could probably benefit from being looked after by your daughter during the recruitment drive."

Tadd nodded solemnly. "Fine, that's fine. They'll do that. The kids would like that. What about me?"

"You?" I hesitated. "You have done quite a great deal, Mr. Farber. You... your... Letting Mickey help us is enough."

"No, Mr. Loring." He shook his head. "I guess you don't understand. I'm not so good with words. I have to



do something. I have to."

I tried to give him an understanding smile. "You have been through a great deal, Mr. Farber..."

"Yeah, sure, but what is it in comparison to what he did to my Mickey?" The man's thin eyebrows almost touched in the middle of his frown. "You don't understand because you don't know what it's like. All of you here, you talk about evil things out there. You know what you are facing. You know what you want to do. You know how you will do it. You are ready to do it. Well... I don't know about that."

Tadd thumped himself on the chest with a fist. "What I know about is being afraid. I know about being afraid of not knowing why wherever I stand is bottom. I know about being afraid everyone has forgotten me, and I know about being afraid someone will remember me. I know that alii know is fear, and now I see you and hear you talking about things that don't make sense in the real world, but, damn, they explain a lot of my fear."

He pointed at the Yidam and then at Vetha. "You wanna know why I'm not going crazy with two creature-feature monsters here? Something that's real isn't as scary as something that isn't real. Here, for the first time, I know what the source of my fear is, and that means I can take responsibility for it. Responsibility isn't something I've handled for far too long."

Tadd hugged his daughter with his left arm and rested his right hand on Mickey's shoulder. "This guy called Pygmalion hurt my son. If I leave it up to you to fix that, I'll be no better off. I won't know how to face a problem myself, and if I can't, then I can't teach my kids to do that. If they don't learn it, they can't teach it, and we'll all go to hell in a handbasket." He looked at Vetha. "I gather that's what your master would love."

His gaze came back to me. "Last time I did work, it

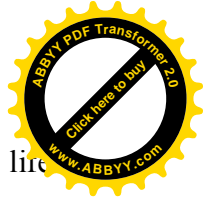
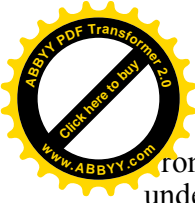
took more sweat than thinking. Whatever you got, I'll do it."

Hal reached across the table and offered Tadd his hand. "He's with me."

"So be it." I smiled and stood. "Pack your things this evening because we leave for Phoenix at midnight. Catch a nap here, because I expect it to be a working flight. When we hit the ground in the desert, I want us running, and I want Pygmalion running scared."

 Dark Conspiracy 3-8.jpg

A week after the return from Japan, I stood in my office on top of the Lorica Industries corporate citadel. Looking west, I saw the dying sun impale itself on the towers of City Center. The massive photovoltaic cell ocean that covered Phoenix gleamed a glossy black, except where sunlight reflected up in blood. Surrounding the city, linking the seven corporate complexes with the City Center hub, the magnetic levitation line that Fiddleback had used as a dimensional gate to invade the city stood tall and looked quite benign.



From somewhere in my memory a line from a song bubbled up about a desert being an ocean with its life underground. Lots and lots of life lurked beneath the black cell ocean that covered the city's lower reaches. Down there, where the sun never hit the ground, the denizens endured a hot, gritty existence in a land that remained perpetually in night. They called it Eclipse, and, as befits living creatures in the desert, everything down there had spines, fangs or a poison sting to ensure survival.

I turned away from the cityscape and looked at Nero Loring. "You're certain we won't have to recreate the maglev circuit to bring Fiddleback into our staging

area?"

The small, balding man in shirtsleeves nodded emphatically. "We built the maglev train because we needed it. The dimensional gateway material was worked in covertly through the efforts of the creature that pretended to be my daughter. It is really just basic circuitry, though it is weird."

From the table before him he picked up a three-foot-long section of fiber-optic cable slightly thicker than his thumb. "Had I known what was really being done, I could have laid out the dimensional gate easily. This fiber-optic cable can be manufactured with the circuitry already burned into it. All we need to do is lay it out, hitch up some lasers to power it, set coordinates through a computer, and we're done."

I felt a shiver run down my spine. "That seems too easy."

Nero shrugged. "Manufacturing the cable is, to be certain, easy. You're still going to need your construction folks to clear a space for it. They're also going to have to make sure you have a stable area for your computer control and laser hookups. That should not take that much time, actually, and that, too, is an easy part of the operation."

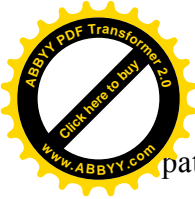
I nodded and walked over to the table where the cable had pinned down some blueprints and several messy piles of notes. "The tough part is finding a place from which we can harvest the energy necessary to power the gate. The one here required everything Phoenix could put out and one of the seasonal lightning storms."

"Two 'AA' batteries will not be sufficient, I fear." Loring slipped one set of plans from the bottom of a pile and slapped it down on top of the whole confused mess. "Windmills are fairly inexpensive, in terms of

labor, to set up. We can also use some solar technology, but that will be tougher to build. Given that Fiddleback will prove a lot of mindless workers, we can actually consider things like diverting a river or creating a crude dam, but installing turbines to make use of the hydroelectric power created will not be simple."

I frowned with irritation. "Well, we knew that power would be the key problem. Not having to worry about building a circuit means we can devote more of our resources to setting up power stations. Still, the proto-dimension that is likely to be very generous with extra energy is unlikely to be all that habitable, and that means transporting energy across the dimensional barrier."

Nero blinked a couple of times. "True, though hydroelectric might be the way to go. I will start a survey of out-of-service power plants from which, if needed, we might be able to borrow turbines."



patted him on the shoulder. "Good. Speaking of surveys, how goes the effort to locate Ryuhito?"

His frown did not instantly reassure me. "It is going, but not as well as I might have hoped. The EEGs the Japanese supplied me were sleeping EEGs. This means I can only detect Ryuhito when he is asleep. If that Mickey Farber's description of Pygmalion's headquarters is true, we can infer a faster timeflow than there is here. In that case, Ryuhito's sleep periods will be shorter than normal."

"Leaving you to find a needle in a haystack."

"Not quite that bad. Once the scanners have a probable match, I will double-check it, then work with Crowley to convert my coordinates into something he can use to scout things out." Nero smiled confidently. "And the Japanese have begun to assemble the computer equipment we are likely to need to build our

controller. Because the last one employed slices from my daughter's brain to control it, we're working with a parallel processor design that may turn out to be rather revolutionary. We're using a software model to project a cognitive network and then burning boards and chips to approximate that template."

"That is perfect." Because the previous unit had been damaged and dismantled after Fiddleback's attempt to enter Phoenix, the computer to replace it had to be built from scratch. Not only did we not know how Fiddleback had managed to build the machine, but we never even considered using the chip substitute that worked naturally for the Dark Lord.

A knocking on the office door brought me around to face the door. Sinclair opened it and walked through. "Hope I'm not interrupting, but I thought you'd want the news straight away. Good or bad first?"

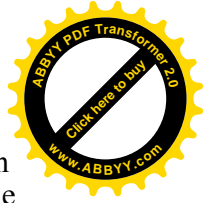
"Good, I guess," I answered as I turned one of the wingback chairs near my desk around.

I sat, and Sin appropriated the other chair. He nodded at Nero, and they exchanged greetings. I sensed a great deal of friendliness between them, which I put down to their having *a* mutual enemy in Sin's father, Darius MacNeal. I was pleased they liked each other because they would have to work more closely together than any other members of my team. Nero Loring would plan our assault base, and Sin would coordinate the forces that would make it a reality.

Sin settled himself in the chair and kept a blue leather binder in the lap of his green-and-yellow checked golfing slacks. "Good news is that I just finished talking with the chief financial officer for Decca Construction. We've got an agreement to provide equipment and supervision for most of the stuff we need done. I'm

meeting Scott at the Tournament Player's Club for 18 holes tonight, and we'll ice the details then. Getting Decca is a real coup because they're the aces at doing high-tech work well and quickly. Moreover, they've worked with the Japanese on some international projects and have experience in working in isolated locations."

I smiled. "Well, then, if we have them, our problem with construction expertise is over. That was *very good* news. So good, in fact, that I'm afraid to ask about the bad just in case it matches up."



in laughed deep in his throat. "It's not that bad." He tossed me the blue binder he had brought in with him. Stamped in gold foil on the front of the blue leather cover I saw the Build-more logo and the title "Andean Computer Center: A Proposal." Opening the binder, I saw a great deal of information about Build-more and pictures of past projects. The computer-generated sketches in the back looked professionally prepared, and the cost quote came over a million dolmarks under what I knew we had budgeted for our forward base.

Sin watched me expectantly. "The Andes site was the project we floated past Case when I made the pitch to them. Obviously, my father has moles there that feed on the specs and bids for prospective projects." "It appears your father wants our business." Sin nodded. "He does indeed. The blue leather binders only go out to impress important clients. Of course, it's not like he needs the work. He's got some hush-hush project going on in Nevada, and that's sucking up most of his crews. Chances are, if we went with his bid, he'd subcontract it out to others, then make a profit based on the kickbacks he got from the subcontractors and suppliers he used."

"Your father knows how to make money."

"Yeah, give him a penny and Lincoln will be cleanshaven when my father spends it." Sin shrugged. "I think you can just ignore the offer, of course, since we never invited them in on the bidding. He wants this job because he wants to control me through you and because he wants to be connected into the Japanese market more fully."

"You're right, I *could* ignore it." I got up and walked around to the chair behind my desk. I hit a button on the desktop, and the unmistakable sound of a phone dialtone filled the room. A keypad came up on the computer screen, and I tapped out the number on the first page of the proposal. The connection came through quickly and an alert voice answered, "Build-more, Mr. MacNeal's office."

"Please inform Mr. MacNeal that Michael Loring is calling for him."

"Yes, sir."

Muzak came out through the phone's speakers, and it proved sufficiently annoying to make Nero Loring look up. He and Sin shared a puzzled glance, then both of them looked at me when the music died and the phone clicked.

"Darius MacNeal here. Did you like our proposal, Michael?"

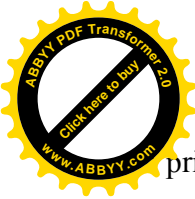
I nodded unconsciously. "I am quite impressed. By the way, I have you on the speaker. My uncle Nero Loring is here, as is your son, Sinclair."

"Hello, Nero. Enjoying your retirement, I hope?"

"Fun and games, Darius, fun and games."

Sin took notice of his exclusion from greetings, and I would have relayed his response, but explaining certain hand signals over the phone ruins their silent eloquence. I managed to keep from laughing at his

antics and flipped open the proposal Darius had sent over. "Darius, the proposal you provided comes in at



price that would save me over a million dolmarks."

"I know." I heard a hearty chuckle from the other end of the line. "When do we start?"

The confidence in his voice made me smile more broadly. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about. You see, I'm refusing your offer."

"What? You can't."

"Oh, I can and, in fact, I am. You have in your employ a group of sociopathic white supremists who killed the wife of a friend of mine, wounded him and have all but incited race warfare down in Eclipse. You have also been a colossal bother to Sinclair, and he, too, is a friend. Moreover, you're a dictatorial asshole with delusions of adequacy." I snapped the proposal shut. "Frankly, sir, I wouldn't let you build me a sand castle out of warm spit and used cat litter even if you offered to pay for the construction."

"You have no idea to whom you are speaking, Loring!" Darius MacNeal shrieked through the phone. "I am not a man to be trifled..."

I hit the phone icon and the dial tone filled the room before I shut off the speaker. "You can't please everyone all the time, can you?"

Sin and Nero laughed aloud, and I joined them. Sin shook his head. "I imagine my father's blood pressure is somewhat higher than the DOW index right now. He'll like the hang-up the least." Standing, he moved over to where he could look at the Build-More corporate citadel to the north and west. "I'd bet we'll see a chair heading out through his window in about four seconds."

I shrugged and stood. "I'll have to listen to it on the news, I'm afraid. I have that radio show shortly. How

many positions will we have to offer?"

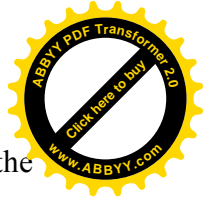
Sin concentrated, then nodded. "Three hundred, give or take. We'll hire based on experience and their ability to see things in proto-dimensions."

"Three centuries it is." I gave both men a confident smile. "You've got things under control, and I thank you. Who knows, we might actually be able to succeed after all."

Despite the calendar indicating the summer giving way to autumn, the blast-furnace of Phoenix still raged on. Despite that, I wore a light jacket over a dress shirt, tie and a casual pair of slacks. Because I was going to be on the radio, I felt no need to dress up fully, but I still wanted to project an image of corporate respectability. The shirt, tie and dark pants did that, while the wind-breaker made me a bit more casual and made spotting my Kevlar vest a tad more difficult.

The radio station, KTAR, sat at 3rd Avenue and Osborn. The station occupied the upper floor of the four-story building, which put it on the level with the upper roadway that ran beneath the Frozen Shade. Because it was located just beyond the western edge of City Center, the fastest way to get to it was to take the maglev in from the Lorica tower, head across the center and walk the half-mile to the station on the upper roadway.

I met Natch at one of the western exits from City Center. She normally dressed to hide her femininity, which was not a bad thing given the generally lawless nature of Eclipse. That meant she wore oversized



nothing that looked older, including a black leather jacket she appeared to live in no matter how hot the world below Frozen Shade got.

The Match 1 met at City Center had changed her

wardrobe rather radically. She wore a light blue suede skirt and matching jacket over a white silk blouse. The western-cut jacket included fringe on the arms and across the back. She wore some leather boots that matched her skirt's color and rose above the mid-calf hemline. The boots had inch-thick heels, but avoided the styling that would have designated them cowboy boots.

She had also made herself over. Her hair had been gathered back into a pony-tail and secured with a light blue bow. Delicately applied cosmetics sharpened some of her features and made her look even more exotic than usual. She wore a small squash-blossom necklace and a pair of star-shaped turquoise earrings that had diamond-chips imbedded at each of the star's five points.

She blushed at my silent nod of appreciation. "I've never been on radio before. I...."

I held up a hand to stop her. "You look fantastic. It may only be radio, but it'll come across, I'm sure."

Match smiled timidly. "Rajani picked out the clothes. Jytte did the make-up and stuff." She glanced down for a second. "Even Bat liked it."

"Of course. He's no fool." I held the exterior door open for her. "We better get going or we'll be late."

"Right."

Natch preceded me out into Eclipse. Walking along on the up-street, we got a good look at the city below us. Lit largely by neon and the old-bone light of weak headlights, Eclipse looked unreal. We could see people wandering around and even hear gunfire in the distance, but pace of life looked torpid. The aimlessness of the people and the dull randomness of sounds made Eclipse lifeless and artificial.

I saw Natch shift her shoulders and read a mixture of

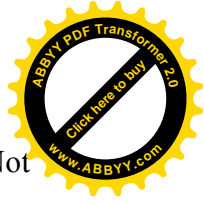
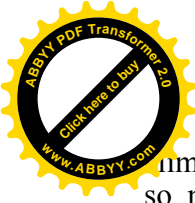
disgust and fear leap off her like an electric arc. "What is it, Natch?"

She shrugged and refused to look at me. "I've always hated the people who I saw up here. I always thought they looked down on us Eclipsers because they were just stuck-up no-brains. But from up here..."

I nodded. "It's true, from up here Eclipse is not a nice place. Down there it's even worse, but from here there is enough detachment that you can really feel the impact. What is important for you to remember is that we're working against the forces that keep people down there."

Her blue eyes bright in the half-light, Natch glanced over at me. "Think that will make a difference, Caine-man? Even dressed like this, I was on my way to being hassled before the guards let me into City Center. I showed them the Lorica ID you got for me and suddenly it was 'Ms. Farrell this and Ms. Farrell that.' The corps have the power and they aren't giving it up easy."

"Just remember, Natch, information is power. We know the forces that prop things up." I smiled. "We



eliminate those forces, and we can make changes. Three months ago, Fiddleback controlled Lorica. Not so, now. Change won't be easy, but it will be possible."

Our conversation died as we came to the KTAR building. Darkened, bulletproof glass doors barred us from entry. I hit the button beside the speaker built into the wall and, as per the instructions on the panel, held it down until someone answered it. While waiting, I noticed off to the left and above the door a surveillance camera.

"Yes?" asked an androgynous voice.

"Michael Loring and Natasha Farrell for the 7 o'clock show with Charles Goyette."

"I'll buzz you into the lobby."

A buzzer sounded, and hatch pulled the door open. We entered and saw one security guard in a glassed-in booth. Two others armed with shotguns flanked a metal detector. We both walked through it without triggering the device and entered a lobby in which every single person I saw had a pistol strapped to their hip or in a shoulder holster. They all appeared quite at ease with the weapons, and the station had a wall full of plaques boasting about how KTAR's staff regularly won the local media marksmanship contests. Beside it, a display case showed some trophies, and behind the largest of the shooting cups I saw a dusty, gold-plated microphone on a stand denoting an excellence in broadcasting award.

Natch and I exchanged glances, and she seemed amused by the discomfort I was feeling. Seldom since finding myself in Phoenix had I been without a gun of some sort on my person. Being in a situation where I was unarmed while all others around me were wearing guns openly did not make me feel at ease. Still, I sensed no anxiety from the guards or people passing back and forth through the lobby, so I assumed they were all well acquainted with their weapons and, therefore, less likely to go berserk and start shooting.

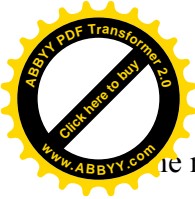
A tall, broad-shouldered, solidly built man with dark hair, an open face and broad smile came out of the corridor on the left side of the lobby. He wore jeans and a green sweater, with a Bianchi shoulder holster and Colt 1911A1 tucked into it. I could tell by the tab on the clip shoved into the pistol's butt that it was a 10mm conversion, not still in the original .45 caliber. That meant, in the big man's hands, recoil would not be a factor and the added clip capacity would be a plus.

"You must be Michael Loring." He offered me a hand

and shook with a strong, dry grip. "And you're Natasha Farrell. I'm Charles Goyette. Come on into the studio and we'll get you situated."

He led us to a security door and punched a combination into the lock. We followed him through that down a Corridor and past a bank of monitors carrying news from the four major stations in Phoenix. Halfway through the newsroom we turned right, and after a short walk through a dark corridor we entered the studio to the left.

Charles slipped behind the control desk and pointed me to the chair opposite him. He put Natch on my right so we both could face him. Beyond her, a huge picture window opened out onto Eclipse. Behind us, a glass wall let Charles look on into the operations room where his broadcast engineer and a member of



The news team were working to produce the newscast droning on in low tones in the studio.

"Just pull the microphones toward you. You want them at mouth level, about two to three inches from your lips. You'll need your headphones when we take callers." He shuffled some notes and glanced at the computer monitor to his left. "This should be a good segment, so I expect the boards to light up. We'll be on a seven-second delay, so if something slips out, we'll get it."

He handed each of us a preprinted card. "Study this and sign it. It's just a precaution, but we have to do it to stay legal."

I took it and flipped from one side to the other before reading. The back had a map of the station and a red line running from the studio to an emergency exit. I assumed, before I started in on the text, it was a fire prevention card detailing the escape route, but the text proved me wrong. It read:

In accordance with the Gwyn-Rogovitch ordinance (**Phoenix Municipal Code 23-491-020-01**), I, the undersigned, have been informed of the evacuation route in case of an armed incursion of this broadcast facility. I certify I have no firearms on my person and all combat will be left to the staff and security personnel to handle in the event of an incursion.

I raised an eyebrow. "Gwyn-Rogovitch ordinance?"

Charles nodded. "I forgot, you're not from Phoenix originally. In the 1980s and '90s, we had a couple of incidents here. A madman, Billie Gwyn, took a local TV anchorman hostage in the studio and forced him to broadcast a statement. In the 1992 a quadruple murderer, Pete Rogovitch, commandeered a radio promotion van to make his escape. The City Council decided that all radio and TV personalities and employees should then go armed to prevent such things from happening again."

I frowned. "Wouldn't increasing police coverage be a better idea?"

Charles shrugged easily. "Ratings battles during sweeps get nasty around here, and Scorpion Security didn't want any part of getting into the middle of that. But don't worry, there hasn't been an incident since the pirate station out in Glendale got involved with a firefight with Ev Mecham supporters in '02."

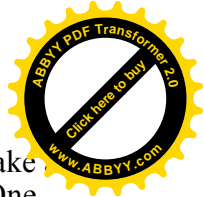
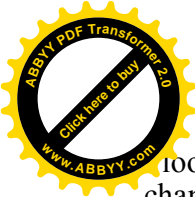
"Charles, on the air in 10," came the engineer's voice through the studio's speakers.

Charles nodded at the man in the room behind us, then watched the clock click down on the computer monitor. As the hour became 7:00:00, our host leaned in toward the microphone. "This is Charles Goyette here with another program in KTAR's long-running

Jobline series. Tonight, we have two delightful guests. With me is the new CEO of Lorica Industries, Michael Loring, and Natasha Farrell, one of the first enrollees in Lorica's 'Adventures in Opportunity' program. Welcome."

"Thanks, Charles."

He looked down at his notes, then smiled. "Lorica Industries has opened a new program that you're calling Adventures in Opportunity. What can you tell us about this program?"



looked up and made eye contact with Charles. "Lorica is starting to hire people who are willing to take chance on getting out of their present circumstances. Right now, for example, we are starting Phase One of the AIO program, and that calls for a total of 300 men and women who are willing to travel away from Phoenix for somewhere between one to three months. We will be providing meals, board, transportation, tools, insurance, benefits and a generous salary, but everyone should understand that it will be hard work and perhaps even slightly dangerous."

"Hence the program title, Adventures in Opportunity."

"Exactly. We're going to be hiring through the Sunburst Foundation, so people can get details through them. We want a wide range of experience, because we'll be forming our own little community while we get the job done."

Charles nodded and looked over at Natch. "Now Ms. Farrell, you're one of the first people to enroll in the program. You've lived here in Phoenix all your life?"

"Y-yes." Natch started a bit nervously, but the host's smile helped cut the tension. "I lived in Eclipse and heard of this program from a friend at Sunburst."

"So you applied ahead of time?"

"Natasha is going to be one of our screeners and project coordinators," I interjected. "She is part of the staff we're using to put this program together."

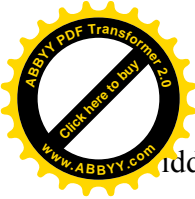
"What attracted you to the program, Natasha?"

"The chance it offered, I guess. Living in Eclipse, like, the Frozen Shade almost feels like a cork in a bottle, you know?" She looked at the window for a second, then continued. "I saw this as a chance at getting out of the bottle. Out from Phoenix, I'll get a chance to learn something about myself. If I don't feel like I'm living under a rock, maybe I won't feel like a bug. Can't hurt to find out, anyway."

I smiled and gave Natch a wink. The host turned back to me and asked another question, which I answered quickly, then we went to a commercial. The show continued in an easygoing style, alternating between a general discussion of the city to dealing with callers who wanted to know if they or someone they knew would be suitable for the AIO program. Things went well and, all too quickly, the hour game to an end.

"Well, that's it for this hour. After the news we'll be back with the head of the Phoenix Skeptics discussing the continuing controversy about GFOs and other weird things pouring into our state from Nevada." Charles hit a button on the console and pulled off his earphones. "Hey, that was a great show. We'll have to do two hours next time."

"I look forward to it," I told him. The show had given me hope, because I knew the next day we'd have thousands of people applying for the few positions we did have open. At the same time, the desperation I heard in some voices made me wonder if Natch had been right to question our ability to make changes. In our alliance with Fiddleback, we might have enough power to destroy Pygmalion, but that still left us with



iddleback, and he was, by no means, an impotent enemy.

A sense of impending doom started to build in me as I thanked Charles. We left him in the lobby to greet a short, heavy-set man with a beard, and headed out of the building. As the door clicked shut behind us, I turned toward Natch. "You did a great job."

"Thanks."

We set off back toward City Center, and I suddenly realized why I felt uneasy, and I knew it had nothing to do with Fiddleback and the danger he presented. We had been broadcasting on the radio from a place that was a well known location. We left the building within a predictably short time after the end of the broadcast and, for security reasons, we even exited through the same door we had used to enter the building.

We had provided anyone having the means and motive with a grand opportunity.

The Warriors of the Aryan World Alliance took it. Two blond young men in gray wool longcoats stepped out of the Ultra-shuttle waiting shelter. They yanked their coats open and brought their weapons to bear. I turned to warn Natch, but before I could say anything, I heard thunder and watched her fold around a shotgun blast to her stomach.

In that instant, I returned to the training I had gone through for as long as I had been Fiddleback's tool. Drifting toward my left, eclipsing Natch's falling body with my own, I eluded most of the shotgun blast meant for me. I felt pellets hit and heard them thwap through the plastic of my windbreaker, but the Kevlar softened the blow of the four or five that hit me.

One part of my mind assessed the damage that had been done. I felt pain, which meant the vest had not stopped all the pellets. I knew, given the physics

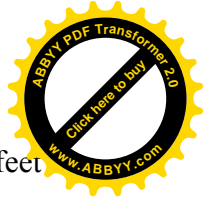
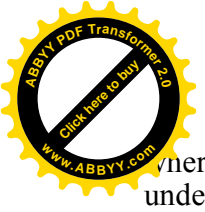
behind the way Kevlar worked and the reality of shotgun ballistics that I was lucky anything had been stopped. By the time I moved a step closer to the shotgunner, I had determined the damage to me was minor at best and that I could close and kill the shotgunner before he could break the weapon open and reload.

His partner brought up a silenced and suppressed Ingram Mac-10, but my swing to the left meant his partner shielded me. If he wanted to burn his friend, I was dead. This close, the Mac-10's .45-caliber slugs would blow clean through my vest and, since the Aryans had provided the vest in the first place, I could not rule out the gun having been loaded with Teflon-coated shells.

Counting on some vague honor among white supremacist trash, I used the cover and made my move. Sprinting forward and off to the side, I reached the railing that guarded the pedestrian walkway on the edge of the up-street. I vaulted up and over it, then dropped away into space as bullets pinged and sparked off the railing.

The Aryans *had* been using Teflon bullets. One hit me in the left shoulder, knocking me back and around through freefall. A wave of pain crashed through me, and in its wake I could feel the grinding click of my shoulder girdle trying to accommodate disintegrating bones.

I had leaped from the up-street knowing the long drop would likely injure me, but injury beat certain death. Now, with the motion imparted by the bullet, I fell out of control. Twisted around, I could not see



where I was going and with my body falling parallel to the ground, there was no way I could get my feet under me to break my fall. Knowing that, I went limp and

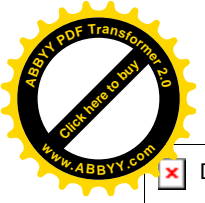
hoped for the best on my landing.

I missed best by a wide margin.

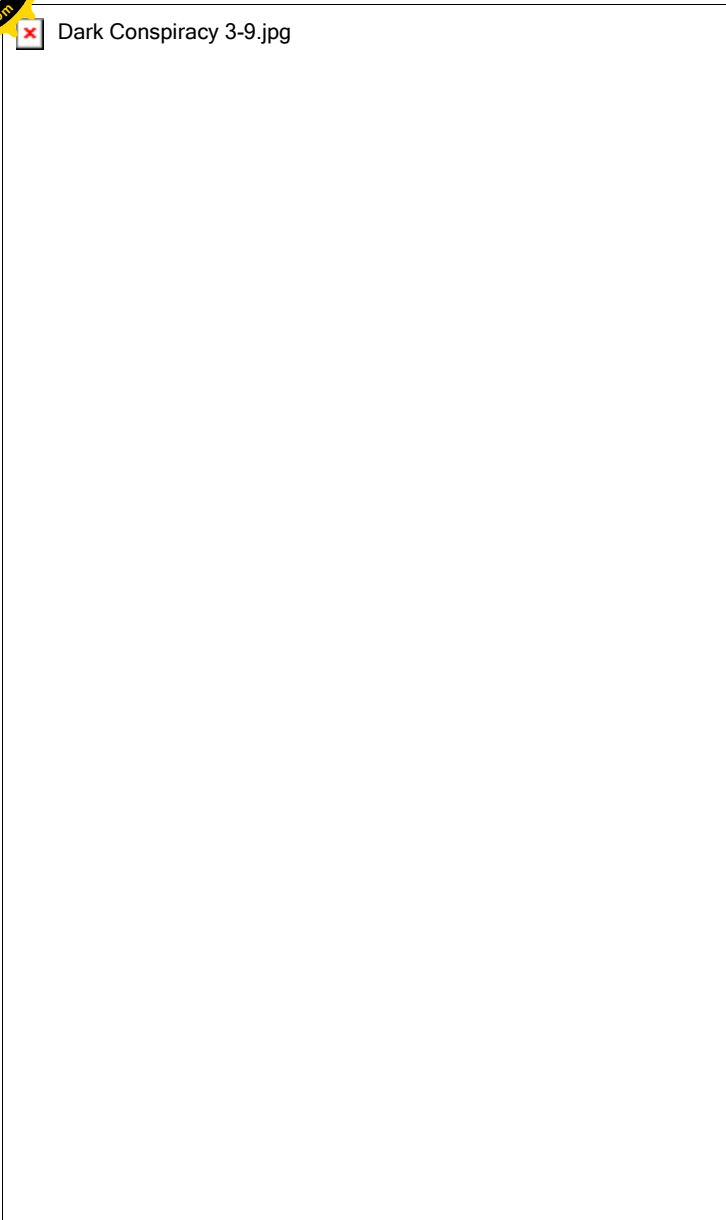
Whatever I hit, it snapped my spine cleanly and numbed the lower half of my body instantly. Even though I could not feel them, my legs hit the ground hard and bounced back up, folding me forward as if I were trying to bring my feet up over my head to touch the ground. As that happened, I somersaulted backward, then landed on my face and tasted dust on my lips.

I fought to banish the pain throbbing out of my left shoulder in sympathetic rhythm with the agony tracing itself up my back. I knew instantly that my legs were as useless as my left arm, but even at that I was better off than Natch. I was still alive and stood a chance at remaining that way. Clawing at the dirt, I knew if I could drag myself into the shadow of the fragmentary brick wall that had broken my back, the Aryan with the Mac-10 might not be able to shoot me.

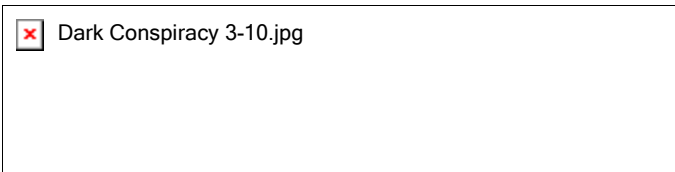
"You are too stupid to live, Loring!" I heard someone shout from above. I heard a faint click, then a thump followed shortly by a second thump. Looking up, not 10 feet from my face, I saw a blue sphere land in the dust in front of me. I stared at it and, in a moment of crystal clarity, I realized the gold symbol embossed on the grenade's blue plastic shell was the Build-more corporate logo.



Dark Conspiracy 3-9.jpg



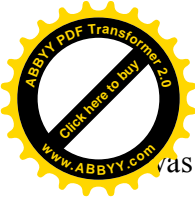
Dark Conspiracy 3-10.jpg



Sinclair MacNeal swallowed hard as he saw Bat step into the briefing room doorway. The larger man had both hands locked into fists. He wore a pistol on his hip and a bandolier of clips across his broad chest, but Sin knew from the set of his shoulders and the snarl on his face, Bat meant to do his grim work with his hands alone. The gun was along because even Bat knew he'd be stupid to attempt what he was setting out to do without one.

"I can't let you go, Bat." Sin looked around the room for support, and got it from Rajani and Hal, but the Yidam, Vetha and Crowley remained aloof. "You can't do this."

The fire in Bat's eyes suggested madness, but the cold, cruel way he smiled told Sin that the pit fighter



was 100% in control of himself. "I do not need your permission."

"Bat, this is stupid. You don't even know the Aryans were the ones who pulled the triggers." Sin fought to keep pleading out of his voice, but he could not. "If you do this you'll be betraying Coyote's trust in you."

"Match is dead. She trusted me." Bat's hands flexed and closed as if he had a throat in his grasp. "Heinrich and his Aryans are bragging. Now they pay."

"Bat, you don't know. Coyote is in the Barrow Neurological Center. He may come out of his coma and tell us

who really did it!"

Bat's left fist slammed down on the briefing room's table, making coffee mugs jump and leaving a dent in the wood. "You do not control me. You do not control this group."

"Before he left for the radio show, Coyote told Nero Loring and I that we should see to it that things keep going." Sin rubbed at his forehead with the fingers of his left hand. "I understand why you've been going after the Reapers—they took Hatch's body and you have witnesses who bear that out. But this, you're just guessing. We don't need you dead, too. *Put* the weapons away and start thinking for a change."

"I've thought plenty, MacNeal, and I know your game." Before Sin could do anything, Bat crossed the gap between them and grabbed a hunk of shirt-front in his left hand. The fighter hauled Sin up and pinned him against the far wall. "The Aryans work for your father. Don't think you can protect him." Bat pulled his right fist back. "I will hurt him, and I think I will start by hurting you."

"No." The contradictory whisper came as gently as the way the pale, long-fingered hand encircled Bat's right wrist. As his fist started to move forward, the hand tightened and drew the fighter's arm down and around. Before his arm could be shoved up behind his back, he twisted around, and Sin felt the grip on his shirt slacken.

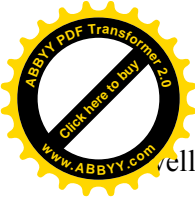
Both he and Bat stood with jaws agape. "Jytte?" they asked in unison.

Sin had always seen her as a beautiful woman who lived inside an invisible cage. He knew she functioned as the computer wizard of the group and had seen ample and excellent examples of her skills. Despite being obviously intelligent, she had seemed mechanical and cold—not unfeeling, but unable to feel and share feelings. He realized in an instant he had thought of her more as an

appliance than any sort of human being.

The blond woman nodded. "I, too, have been... thinking. I owe you all an apology, for much of this is my fault. I should have seen... things. I believe we can regain what we have lost, but I will need your help—all of you."

Sin sat at the table without straightening his shirt. Jytte had changed—the difference was tangible yet elusive. She wore the same clothes she had always worn, and they hid most of her body, yet she seemed to move with them as opposed to within them. He had heard that she had helped Natch with her makeup before she left with Coyote, so he looked for any sign that she had applied her skills to herself. He could see none, but he knew



well that it could mean that her skills were sufficient to disguise themselves.

Bat dropped into the seat beside him as Jytte walked to the head of the table. "Coyote's prognosis is very bad. A Scorpion Security report suggests that with his right arm he managed to push himself away from the grenade. Instead of taking the blast in the head and shoulders, he caught shrapnel along the front of his body, from his feet to his face. A number of internal organs were ruptured or perforated, but his heart escaped injury."

Jytte winced, then shivered. "Coyote has bone and metal fragments lodged in his brain. He is not yet stable enough for surgery. At this point, if he ever comes out of his coma, he will be unable to walk and will likely never recover the use of his left arm. That limb is infected and they may amputate it. His right arm may well be affected if they go in to pull out fragments. The most likely situation is that if he lives at all, it will be in a permanently vegetative state."

"At least he is alive." Bat's jaw muscles bulged, and Sin could hear the squeal of his teeth grinding together.

"And Natch is dead." Jytte hesitated as if trying to

understand why a tear had started rolling down her left cheek. "You have dealt with those who took her body."

"Not all of them. Yet."

"You have broken them. That is enough for now, Bat. We will deal with Natch's killers in due time, but there is a greater problem here that we must handle."

"A greater problem?" Bat shook his head. "Natch is dead."

"At least she no longer feels pain." Jytte's head came up. "Look at me, Bat. Look at what Pygmalion did to me." She brought long fingers up through her hair like pitchfork tines through silk. "These are not my hands. This is not my hair. These are not my eyes. He killed me by taking away everything I was and giving me this body."

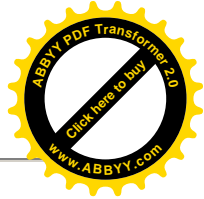
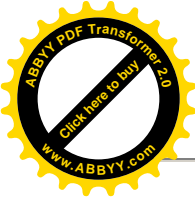
Her blue eyes filled with volcanic intensity. "You have seen what he did with Mickey. You know he does what he wants to whomever he wants when he wants. He has no limitations—self-imposed or otherwise—on what he is willing to do. With Ryuhito working with him, his power is at least doubled, if not squared, and his access to Earth is not blocked in the way access is blocked for Fiddleback."

Bat nodded his head once, but Sin saw no easing of his shoulder set. "Pygmalion first, as practice. Then the Aryans die."

"I think, Mr. Kabat, you will do better to focus on Pygmalion than to even think about the Aryans." Damon Crowley got up from the table and carefully tucked his chair into place. He looked up at Jytte. "I am not going to be of much direct use to you in the short term. I will, however, do two things that will make your organizing the effort against Pygmalion simpler."

Jytte nodded stiffly. "Please explain."

Crowley smiled, then looked around the room, finally settling his gaze on Sinclair. "The first thing I will do is get Coyote to a place where he can recover. As you may be



aware, a number of proto-dimensions have properties that are not at all like this world. One of these is a place that folklore has relegated to the Greek Tartarus and, in fact, a giant creature that answers to the name Tityus does reside there. Chained to a rock, he is devoured by giant vultures during the day, then he regenerates so the torture can continue. This regeneration is not a property of his, but of the place in which he has been imprisoned."

Sinclair nodded. He recalled Coyote having told him of that dimension, and Crowley's apparent physical youth stood as proof of its effectiveness. (Jntil he had seen creatures from other dimensions, like Vetha, the Yidam and the things Fiddleback had created, Sin had not believed the story he had been told. Now he found himself desperately hoping, for Coyote's sake, that the place existed and worked even better than imagined.

"I will get Coyote from the hospital, and take him there. The time differential between there and here is such that he could heal very quickly, but foreign fragments in his body could complicate things." Crowley shrugged. "And I do not know how his being in a coma will affect or be affected by Tityus' dimension."

Sin frowned. "Can the nerve damage be regenerated?"

Crowley nodded. "That dimension regenerated a full brain, so the holes he has there and his severed spinal cord should not be a problem."

Crowley's green-eyed gaze shifted to Bat. "And after I have done that, I will kill the Warriors of the Aryan World Alliance."

"No!"

"Yes." Crowley's voice dropped into an icy whisper that sent a shudder through Sin's gut. "They are *my* problem, and /will deal with them. If you want a piece of me here and now, Mr. Kabat, I'll take you and still have enough left over to do them."

Bat shot to his feet, but Crowley did not even seem to notice. "They killed Natch."

"Indeed they did and, for that reason, at least one of them deserves to die. That is not the reason they *all* deserve to die." Crowley tugged at the cuff of his gray gloves. "They are a bomb just waiting to explode. I will defuse them. Permanently."

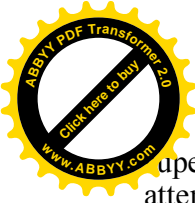
"I demand the right..."

Crowley shook his head. "No, Bat, you have no rights in this case. In fact, there is only one other person here who could do the job the way it has to be done. That's MacNeal."

"MacNeal?!" Bat barked out a harsh, derisive laugh. "MacNeal?"

Sin felt a jolt run through him at the mention of his name. "Why me?"

Crowley met Bat's disbelieving stare openly. "What would the Aryans say if you attacked them, Bat? They'd point out you're a Pole. You're not one of them. You're a subhuman that rose up against the



superior race. They will point to you as a precursor of the great race war in which the unworthy will attempt to destroy God's chosen people. Hal would be denigrated because of his race, Rajani and the Yidam as well. Jytte would lose because her name is the Danish variation of Judith, a Jewish name."

Crowley pointed at Sin and then himself. "MacNeal and I are just like the Aryans. We are part and parcel of the superior race. We can exterminate them, and it's just pest control, not Gotterdamerrung or the overture to Apocalypse."

The pit fighter shook his head. "They will say you were duped. They will say you were a traitor to your race."

"Sure, but that means that those who try to organize another group are always going to have to be looking

inside for the traitor. They're going to have to direct their suspicion on their own members, and that leads to paranoia and anarchy. It makes them feed on themselves."

Crowley smiled wolfishly as his eyes narrowed. "None of us can ever wipe out the sort of fear and ignorance that breeds hate groups. All we can do is confront them to make sure people find the flaws in their logic. We educate people so their membership does not grow, it stagnates. And then we trim them back and force them to remain dormant."

Bat's nostrils flared. "I don't like it..."

"But you will abide by it," Jytte finished for him.

"Crowley can have them. I can wait."

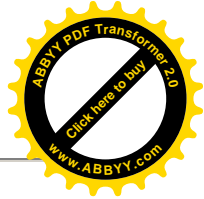
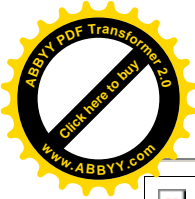
"Good." Jytte smiled tentatively, then let her expression retreat to blankness. "We all know what Coyote asked us to do. We will continue doing our jobs. Hal and Tadd will need help at Sunburst to process applications. Nero Loring has adapted one of his early scanning devices to serve as a window into another dimension. It will be incorporated into a vision-testing device and will let us determine if a candidate will be sighted or blind outside this dimension. We cannot afford to have those who will go on the expedition be blind, but we do have some positions here for people who cannot see in other dimensions."

Jytte blinked twice. "I believe that is enough for now. We need to accomplish our work as quickly as possible. While a delay might give Coyote time to heal, we cannot afford to give Pygmalion time to train Ryuhito."

Sin smiled. "Don't worry, we've got the construction plan under way, Nero is scouting for any sign of Ryuhito, and the Japanese are putting together the equipment we'll need. If hiring goes well and we can pick out a site, we'll be on Pygmalion before he has any clue we're

hunting him."

"My master hopes you are correct, Mr. MacNeal." Vetha bowed her head. "Surprise is an advantage we do not want to surrender, for any Dark Lord, no matter how insignificant, is not a foe you want lying in wait for you."



 Dark Conspiracy 3-11.jpg

Will was three hours waiting in the line at the Sunburst Foundation. The first hour had been the worst because he had been standing outside the Sunburst building. For someone who was born and raised on the Reservation east of Phoenix, having the sky made out of black panels and only a hundred feet overhead was intolerable. He wanted to run away from the artificial and dark world the white man had created, but he kept to his place in line.

Each time the urge to bolt came to him, two sharp memories pinned his feet in place. The first was of two Aryans being poised to kill a man lying in a hospital bed. Will, though he would have thought he could have remained apart from the white man's conflicts, had intervened to save their target. Whether or not he wanted it, he was part of the world in which such problems lived and died.

The second memory, the one that brought a smile to the Native American's lips, was of his grandfather dandling Will's infant son on his knee. "Will, if you want the world to be a place where your son can flourish, you must do this. I would go, but I am an old man. You have the skills, you have the heart. The responsibility is yours."

Up to two months ago, Will had considered those

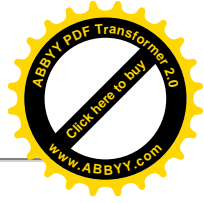
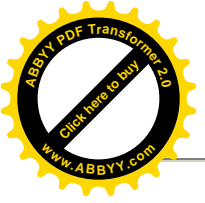
"skills" a bunch of superstitions that were an artifact of a lost time. He had learned what his grandfather had taught out of respect for the old man, yet every time he saw something that hinted at a reality beyond that accepted by consent of the population at large, he pulled back. He had enough schooling to know that the laws of science dictated all that was real and true.

That had all changed when he met the man he now knew was Michael Loring. Loring had hinted to him that there might indeed be things that existed outside reality. Will realized that if a man who ran a multinational corporation could succeed while functioning in a world containing dark corners of unreason, acknowledging the limits of his own experience could not hurt.

As his perspective shifted, a number of things began to flow together for him. In devoting himself more seriously to the things his grandfather taught him, Will found himself less at odds with the world. He still had difficulty accepting his grandfather's assurances that a hitchhiker they picked up outside Flagstaff was a visitor from another planet, but she had been yet another data point he could plot well outside two standard deviations from reality.

Now others of the Aryan group he had fought had crippled Michael Loring and killed his associate, but only after Loring had announced a hiring campaign through the Sunburst Foundation. The man he had saved from the Aryans was the man who ran the Sunburst Foundation, and in that coincidence both Will and his grandfather found a sinister significance. With his grandfather promising to take care of his son, Will set out to offer his services to Hal Garrett and Lorica Industries.

Once inside, he found himself in a large, brightly lit room that had the back third cut off by a low wooden wall. Behind it sat a number of desks with individuals locked in deep conversation with applicants. In front of the half-wall



some long tables had been set up. The Sunburst people there worked one-on-one with applicants, helping them fill out the necessary forms before they were passed back to the desks. A large number of orange plastic chairs had been set up in the center of the room, but by silent and mutual agreement, they had been reserved for the spouses and children of applicants standing around the periphery of the big room.

He waited patiently, number in hand, while the staff processed volunteers. He even saw Hal Garrett directing things from behind the scenes, but Will did nothing to call attention to himself. He realized that if he had any doubts about his being accepted by Sunburst and Lorica, he might have tried to do something special. Because he did not have doubts, because he knew they would hire him, he waited contentedly.

Someone called his number, and he started to move in the direction of the voice, but Hal Garrett's strong voice intervened. "I'll take number 1337 over here." As Will turned toward him, he saw the tall African-American man smile and open a small gateway to the rear area of the room. "Good to see you again, Will."

Will took the hand Hal offered and shook it. "And you, sir." He followed Hal to his desk and sat down in the chair facing it. "You are looking much better than when I last saw you."

Hal nodded as he pulled a form from a desk drawer. "I feel much better, thanks to you." Hal smiled as he started writing. "You saved my life, and I don't even know your last name."

The Native American laughed lightly. "Raven. It's the shortened form of my grandfather's tribal name." Will gave Hal his address and the other information needed to fill in the first portion of the form. "No allergies, no medications, no drugs, no outstanding warrants, no arrest

record."

Hal checked things off and turned the form over. "This work is going to be a long way from here. You don't have any problem with travel?"

Will shivered. "No, none." He hesitated, then met Hal's steady gaze. "My grandfather suggested I tell you that I have special talents that will allow me to go where most cannot."

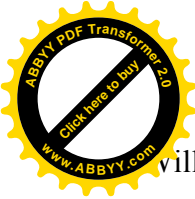
The big black man laid his pen down and clasped his hands together. "Your grandfather struck me as a very interesting man. I think, given what you told me just now, we can dispense with the rest of this stuff." He glanced at the form again, then his head came up, "Your grandfather is your next of kin?"

Will shook his head. "No, I have a son. He's 8 months old. My grandfather is taking care of him. If there are insurance benefits or whatever, they should go to him."

"What about his mother?"

The Native American looked down. "She decided that responsibility wasn't her thing. She took off. I don't know where she is. Doesn't matter because the boy is in good hands. My grandfather raised me, he can raise my son. My aunts will help as well."

Hal sighed slowly. "I can't hire you, Will. The one stipulation we had was that we were not going to put people in a position where their children could be orphaned. I'm sorry, but there's nothing I can do."



Will's eyes narrowed. "Then you are not going as well?"

"What?"

"Your wife was killed in the attack that wounded you. You have children. If you go, they could become orphans. If your rule is absolute, then you cannot be part of this."

Hal sat back. "There are times the rules don't apply."

Will leaned forward. "Then let this be one of those times. My grandfather told me that I had to come here, that I had

to participate if I wanted to make sure that my son would have a world worth growing up in. I don't know you well, but I think you are part of this for the same reason. We have to act to drive evil from the world—no matter the cost to us personally, because if we do not, the evil will consume both us and our children."

Will sensed from Hal a genuine respect for what he was saying, but the underlying reluctance still remained. "Let me also point out that my special skills include things you will never find among those who dwell in the Grand Dark. I have lived outside shelter. I know how to track and hunt. I know how to survive under adverse conditions. I am aware and at home in a whole world these people will be blind to."

The big man nodded. "Follow me." He stood and led Will to a door set in the back wall. Hal knocked twice, then waited for a response. When none came, he punched a combination code into the lock panel and the door buzzed open. He ushered Will into the small, dark cubicle with another door in the far wall and pointed at a chair.

Will sat and found himself in front of a machine that looked very much like a vision-testing device. A bulky circular device with a viewport that jutted toward him, it looked like an over-large model of a referee's whistle. Will saw a number of switches and dials on it, and two cables running out the back, but could make no sense of any of it. It didn't look Russian, even though its blocky form suggested manufacture outside the States.

Leaning forward, he put his forehead on the headrest and looked through the lenses. As he expected, he saw a normal vision chart. Instead of letters it had icons, but that did not surprise him. Will knew a number of the people applying for positions had to be illiterate, so differentiating a dog from a pineapple was easier than telling a D from a P. *

"Which line do you want me to read from? I can manage the 20/10 easy. Moose, car, bean, pen, coin and cat."

"Good. Now tell me what you see."

Will heard a switch click, and the scene changed abruptly. Instead of a static chart, he found himself peering at a purple and pink scene that seemed to be a random distribution of colored circles. At first he thought it was a pattern meant to check him for color-blindness, but he knew he was not color-blind already. Then he saw the dots shift and divide. They attacked each other as if engaging in a race war on a



cellular level. He would have thought he was watching a microscopic slide of a drop of water, but nothing in it looked like it had evolved on Earth.

"I see, I see... I see purple and pink circles killing each other." Will hesitated as a chill ran down his spine. "The pinks are losing, and I can feel their panic."

A sharp snap sounded and the light in the device died. Will pulled back and looked up at Hal Garrett.

"That wasn't a vision test, was it?"

"It was, of sorts. The fact that you saw what you did confirms your ability to be functional at our destination." The African-American rested a hand on Will's shoulder. "The fact that you felt what you felt means I can't turn you away no matter how much I think I should."

"I'm in?"

Hal nodded. "You're in." He crossed behind Will and opened up the other door. "You're in for the long haul. You'll get your shot at that evil you mentioned and I hope, for all our sakes, you make it a good one."

 Dark Conspiracy 3-12.jpg

The entity known to Coyote's allies as Fiddleback stretched out his mind and swept up the weak impressions Vetha had communicated to him. He learned through her the full meaning of Fiddleback and took pleasure in the image of a creature feared because of its power and choice to remain hidden. The name showed they feared him and that, in and of itself, could be an intoxicant for him.

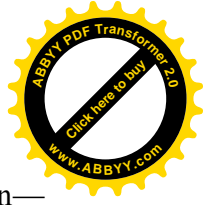
The name did not make him happy because he did not allow himself happiness. Arrogance, yes, and pride in his invincibility, but never happiness. That was a weakness that would both cut at his source of power and, even worse, make him careless. Carelessness, he reflected in a dimensional void, was terminal.

His pet, Coyote/Jaeger/Caine, had learned about carelessness. Even all the years of training Fiddleback had lavished upon him had not prevented his injury and near death. Coyote—Fiddleback could no longer consider him Jaeger-pet in clear conscience—had gone unarmed and had advertised his presence. Those two mistakes had been multiplied, producing a disaster of a proportion that threatened the effort against Pygmalion.

Fiddleback turned Vetha's impression of Crowley

over and over in his mind, like a fly being wrapped in a spider-silk cocoon. Crowley—or El Espectro or The Ghost That Walks or any of a legion of other names—had been an annoyance before. Lacking the power of a Dark Lord, he had succeeded in avoiding detection and slipping into places where he could do a great deal of damage. Crowley had forced changes in plans before, but Fiddleback found himself pleased that Crowley intended to repair Coyote.

The Dark Lord knew that Coyote, like himself, would benefit from the mistake. Creating Pygmalion without establishing a check on his ability to assume power had been a gross blunder. In creating Coyote,



Fiddleback had built the weapon to make up for that first mistake while implementing measures that would guarantee his new pet would not be able to oppose him. While Coyote had been instrumental in—doubtlessly because of Crowley's malign influence—preventing Fiddleback's conquest of Earth, his efforts would ultimately be for naught.

For a mind like Fiddleback's, a mind that contained the memories, dreams and cognitive abilities of an entire dimension's population, out-thinking human agents proved painfully simple. Even one *Myrangeikki* brain possessed more computing power than all the Nobel laureates combined. With thousands of such minds working in parallel and yet others checking the work, mapping out the logical variations of human planning came easily to him.

A lone voice, one he had hoped he banished when he exiled Vetha, pressed him on a point of vulnerability. It was true, he conceded to himself, that Pygmalion was only a human being, and his revolt had not been anticipated, but there had been reasons for that failure. Fiddleback had been preoccupied with locating and

dominating the last of the *Jes'da* on Earth, and that required Pygmalion's aide. Pygmalion's hatred of the *Jes'da* had been so raw that it concealed his own lust for power.

That mistake had inspired the creation of Jaeger/ Caine. Fiddleback had controlled every facet of the youth's life, from his conception to training. He had built the hunter carefully, selectively destroying negative influences and preventing Jaeger from obsessing unhealthfully about anything. It resulted in a unique product that had a personality and even an *aspect*, but without a core identity that desired personal gain.

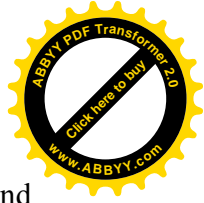
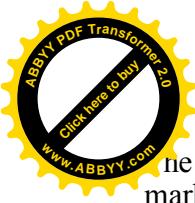
Fiddleback did realize that he had created a perfect model for Coyote to co-opt into his replacement. Jaeger had been trained to see himself as a champion—Fiddle-back's champion—and this self-image transplanted readily into the fertile soil of Coyote's identity. While it amused him to be facing his own creation, the Dark Lord knew he knew more about Jaeger than the man did himself. Therein would be his ultimate victory.

The Dark Lord realized that there was no way he would ever be able to redeem Coyote. His pet was truly lost to him forever. That did not neutralize his pet's utility, but it made him unreliable and potentially treacherous. This, then, would be factored into the calculations.

Fiddleback acknowledged the soundness of his original plan for the conquest of Earth. As he could not move to it through the restrictive sphere of dimensions surrounding it, he had to be teleported into it through a dimensional transportation device. None of those that had existed when he began his plan to take Earth had been of sufficient size to afford him passage, so he manipulated Nero Loring, through a changeling substituted for his daughter Nerys, into creating one suitable for his use.

Coyote had thwarted use of that device, and had seen

to it that it would not be used again. Fiddleback had then turned to his secondary plan and started to seduce Ryuhito, the grandson of the emperor of Earth's technological giant, Japan. To recover the emperor's grandson, Fiddleback had been certain the emperor would order the creation of a dimensional transportation device suitable for delivering a large number troops all at once to free his grandson from Fiddleback's prison. The emperor's acquaintance with Crowley, and Crowley's possession of the needed technology, meant the device would be built.



The Dark Lord idly reached out with a forelimb and ran his fingertips over the circle of boulders that marked the dead gateway in the proto-dimension where he laired. It was the only one he had ever found that was suitably large enough to move him. If things had gone as he had planned, the emperor's device would have created a link between this gateway and the one through which his troops would be sent. Once that opening to Earth had been made, Fiddleback planned to use it to slip into Earth and gather yet more power to himself.

When Pygmalion intervened and stole Ryuhito away, Fiddleback merely shifted his plan slightly. He enlisted Coyote to help him build the new dimensional transportation device to gain entry into Pygmalion's little reserve. Once created, the device could then be used to send Fiddleback to Earth. His trip would be delayed slightly, but the opportunity to destroy his old apprentice was worth it.

With Crowley and Coyote both being wary, the alternate use he planned for the device would be discovered. A poll of the minds within him turned up a 92% probability that neither human would figure out Fiddleback's true motivation before the device's use. The Dark Lord did not take heart in that figure, however, for he knew how often Jaeger had already beaten substantial odds.

He had to assume that Coyote/Jaeger would turn on him, and that meant his pet would have to be destroyed.

The Dark Lord reached out into the void as a million plans flashed through his minds. Cadre after cadre of minds sorted them, casting aside the absurd and inelegant. He keyed the plans to what flaw in Jaeger they preyed upon and eliminated those that covered anything except Coyote's self-confidence.

Fiddleback has engineered Coyote/Jaeger/Caine's upbringing, so he naturally assumed he would be successful and victorious in any undertaking. He knew he was good, *very* good, and he instantly *knew* he would not lose. This assumption of superiority came with a knowledge that he could find the solution to a situation, given a moment to think or plan. The only thing that cut into his ability in this area was a surprise.

The Dark Lord felt something brush the flesh on tri-fingered hands. In his left palm he held the eviscerated corpse of Arrigo El-Leichter. Its belly had been torn open, and its entrails spilled out to dangle like pink-brown drool-ribbons. The abdominal wound went clean through the body, and even El-Leichter's spine had been severed.

In the other hand Fiddleback held the body of the man who had so viciously assaulted El-Leichter. A small man to begin with, Colonel Nagashita looked yet smaller because of the way his ribcage had been collapsed in on itself. Still, even in death, the warrior retained his grip on the katana that had killed El-Leichter.

The Dark Lord pressed his foremost two hands together. Green energy pulsed along his arms and in to cocoon his flesh around the corpses. His fingers drew back, then pushed gently down with the motion of a baker kneading dough. Fiddleback paused for a second, then refocused his efforts while incorporating some of what Vetha had learned of human psychology.

He opened his hands again and left his new creation just floating in the void. Possessed of the mass of both men, the new creature stood no taller than Colonel Nagashita, yet had twice his width and limb girth. The black togs he had been wearing had shredded themselves in the transformation, allowing bulky muscles to peek out through the rents.

The increased muscle mass did not account for the vast majority of the change. In admiration for Colonel

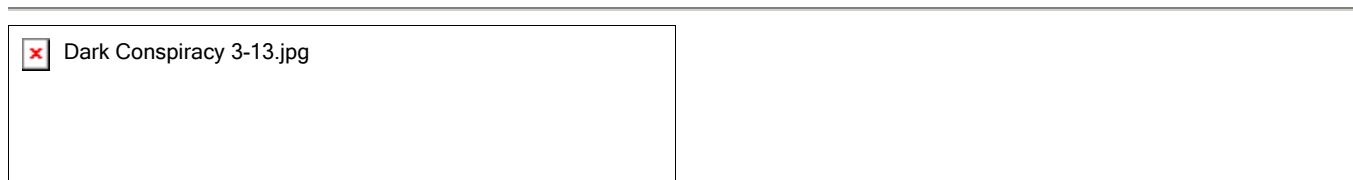


Nagashrta's singlemindedness, Fiddleback allowed him to retain most of his identity. Arrigo El-Leichter, in contrast, had been punished for his failure. His limbs had been melded together into a heavily muscled whiplike structure joined to Nagashita's body where pelvis fused into spine. El-Leichter's mouthless face appeared at the blunt end of the fleshy scorpion's tail, and his horror flashed neon from his blue eyes. El-Leichter's blond hair formed a mane that ringed the tail at its base and tapered back along its curved length.

Where El-Leichter's nose should have been, the katana blade jutted out from the face. The blade's gentle curve completed the arc described by the tail. The creature let the tail relax, then contracted all the muscles, driving the katana forward in a silvery blur. The blue eyes above it focused just beyond the end and controlled enough of the tail's musculature to make final adjustments so an attack would hit on target.

Fiddleback studied what he had wrought, and, by the revulsion of the minds within him, he knew it was good.

The Dark Lprd again let pleasure pass through himself. He had created Jaeger to rid him of Pygmalion. He had created this thing, this sasorihito, to rid him of Jaeger. After it had done its job, he knew, any resistance he faced would be insignificant, and final victory would be his alone.



Supported by the power of his mind, Ryuhito hovered above the circular arena. Clothed only in the radiance of the sun, he acknowledge the deep bow of the creature in the center of the circle with the merest incline of his head. Ryuhito felt the creature's pleasure at having been noticed, but sensed in it the dread that came with the memory of how it was rewarded for its previous victory.

The Japanese emperor's grandson surveyed the arena. The outermost circle had 32 bodies lying there, in pieces or whole, with the black sand sucking down the fluids leaking from their broken bodies. Ten meters closer to the center, 16 more bodies lay twisted and twitching because of their recent deaths. Eight, four and two bodies decorated the innermost rings, until the victor stood above his lone opponent's carcass.

Ryuhito looked at the champion again. It stood roughly two meters tall and came from the augmented humanoid class of creatures he had created. While it had an internal skeleton, he had also given it a segmented exoskeleton or chitinous armor that did not hinder movement. Over the forearm, for example, the bracer consisted of a heavy contoured band around the wrist and at the elbow, then had six solid rods running the length of the forearm to

connect them.

His earlier experiment with solid armor had left his warrior too slow. The hornlike material proved resilient enough to stop the attacks of most other creatures. More importantly, though, it worked wonderfully to provide spikes at elbow, knee, shoulder and knuckles that added to the warrior's destructive capability. While the necessary gaps at the joints did created a weakness, the speed and agility of the creature, as the combat test has shown, made it very deadly.



As he studied his warrior and analyzed the results of its testing, he mentally compared it to the warrior Pygmalion had created and left behind in Japan. Mickey had been more cosmetically perfect and pleasing to look at, while Ryuhito's creature really was the stuff of nightmares. Ryuhito acknowledged a need to frighten enemies, which is why he had equipped his warrior with horns and ivory fangs and glowing red eyes. He realized that Pygmalion labored to create perfection in both utilitarian and artistic aspects of his work. Ryuhito, on the other hand, merely wished to create subjects that would do what he wanted, when he wanted, without question and all for his glory.

Focusing his mind, Ryuhito created a blade that took on the appearance of being forged sunlight. With a last nod to his creation, he drove the blade into its chest, then let the shaft spring open like an umbrella. The laserlike ribs sliced the creature into 64 pieces and scattered them to the starting positions at the outer edges of the circle.

Ryuhito tried to let his anticipation of joyous creation erase the agony of the creature he had destroyed. Though basking in the glow of the power Pygmalion shared with him, the emperor's grandson could not help but feel the pain and sense of betrayal that radiated out from his creation. Every piece of it throbbed with that hurt, and Ryuhito winced as its razor-edge caressed his conscience.

He tried to shunt it away as fast as possible and, this time, found it easier than last. As he encapsulated it and encysted it within himself, he felt the warmth and power radiating out from it. His creation's pain gave him power, the power he needed to make more warriors, to reap more pain, to create more power, and so on in an endless day-night cycle. Creation was the light, and pain was the necessary darkness.

«Worry not about their pain, Highness. * Pygmalion's mental message salved the lingering irritation from the creation's pain. «ybuareo/Ameratsu born. *You are a god. It is your right, your duty, to make and unmake.*»

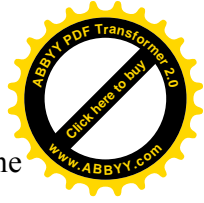
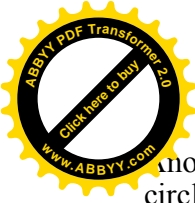
Ryuhito turned slowly in the air to face Pygmalion. He saw the small man walking across the dark sand, casually stepping over portions of dismembered bodies. Pygmalion, he thought, could have been an eggshell-fragile china doll, yet he knew great power dwelt in that seemingly innocent and benign body. The large, dark eyes and delicate hands seemed to suggest a helplessness that prompted sympathy for him. The bald head seemed slightly overlarge for the short, slender body, almost creating an illusion of youth for the Dark Lord.

"I have no difficulty with the making and unmaking, sensei." Ryuhito spoke carefully and infused the proper respect for Pygmalion into the word *sensei*. Ryuhito had steadfastly resolved to never refer to Pygmalion as master, and settled upon teacher as a more appropriate word. As Pygmalion had rebelled against his master, so, someday, Ryuhito would become Pygmalion's rival, and in his choice of appellation for the diminutive Dark Lord, he let the seeds of his rebellion germinate.

Pygmalion nodded. «*You let function influence form.*»

"I am, as yet, at a crude testing stage, *sensei*. I have compared the shapes and forms that appear to function best, and I now will work variations on that theme."

Kyurco wave a nana lowara one segment 01 nis champion, and a solar flare shot up from it like fire from a magician's fingertips. When the dazzling light-jet imploded, the champion stood reconstructed and whole on the spot. "I start with this as my base."



another gesture, and as the light died, a larger, longer-limbed version of the champion stood across the circle from the original. Ryuhito gestured again, this time with both hands, creating a smaller, less-armored version of the champion, then a taller, more willowy one with multi-segmented, whiplike arms. Like a conductor drawing music from an orchestra, Ryuhito summoned creature after creature from his imagination and populated the outer circle with 64 combatants.

Pygmalion smiled slightly and pointed toward one of the creatures that had a hunched-over posture and a flat skull. *«That one, with the diversified nervous system, will prove formidable. All your warriors are formidable, but they are not all that an army should be.»*

Ryuhito frowned. "They will be invincible. No army can stand against them."

«Why stand against them when you can ignore them and slip around them. You focus on power when you should well know that knowledge is the true power. How will they fare against an enemy they never locate?»

"*Sumimasen, sensei.*" Ryuhito caught Pygmalion's point immediately. With the blink of an eye he created a clone of the smaller, faster warrior he had shaped, then began to change it. He enlarged its eyes and gave the creature the chameleon's ability to blend in with its background. He made the ears larger and reshaped the throat and voice box so it could use passive and active sonar for echolocation. He filled its cells with a chloroplast-mitochondria hybrid that would allow the creature to use solar energy directly to power itself. On the flesh of its

eyelids he organized heat-sensing pits so when it closed its eyes it could "see" in the infrared spectrum.

Pygmalion clapped his hands. *«You are quick and decisive. This is a wonderful trait in one whose aspect is that of a builder. Your scout here will do nicely. Shall we test it?»*

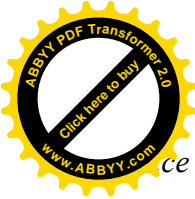
Ryuhito nodded and created four more of the scouts, drinking in the pain of one to birth the next. With a quick mental command he scattered them on complex and overlapping circuits through the nearest dimensions. He sensed a question from Pygmalion and smiled. "Their paths overlap, *sensei*, so I may evaluate how good they are at hiding from one another. Once I am able to see that, I can learn how to hide them better."

«Splendid!»

Ryuhito felt himself brighten beneath Pygmalion's praise, then he immediately tried to fight that sensation. His own heart ached for a second in an echo of the pain his creations felt, and he could feel Pygmalion greedily suck in his anguish. *He did not come to monitor me, he came to feed off me.* He fought to control his anger and discomfort at that discovery, but he saw Pygmalion smile and could feel his mentor grow stronger.

*«I ask little from you in return for what I glue you, Highness. * An annoying note of ridicule oozed from the thought Pygmalion stuffed into Ryuhito's brain. «Understand that I know and grow stronger from your desire to rebel, I am not my master, however, and I will not commit his errors. I left him, and now his new apprentice has defied him. I have learned from Fiddleback's mistakes. I share power with you in return for what you glue me, and your hatred of dependence upon me only strengthens me.»*

The little man waved a hand over the arena. * What you do here pleases me. The accomplishments of the apprentice-



...can enhance the image of the master, don't you think?*

Ryuhito hesitated, and Pygmalion's open left hand snapped down into a fist. The prince convulsed as every muscle in his body contracted at once. «*That's what you think, is it not?*»

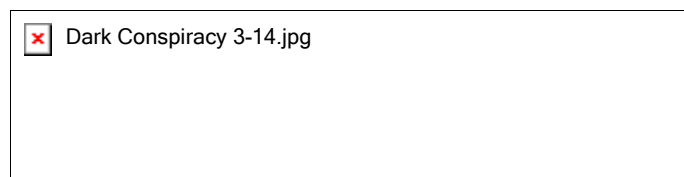
Ryuhito struggled against the pain enough to nod his head. "Hai!"

Pygmalion smiled. «*Just yes?*»

"Yes...master."

Pygmalion's hand opened, and Ryuhito's body no longer betrayed him. «*Master... That pleases me. I think you should always want me to be pleased.*»

Ryuhito hung his head. "Yes, master."



Will Raven's active imagination had supplied him with all sorts of wonderful and strange daydream adventures concerning his involvement with Sunburst and Lorica. Yet, despite the plethora of adventures he conjured up, cinching on a gunbelt and seating an Ingram Mac -11 submachinegun in the holster while high up in the Lorica Corporate Citadel at 1 in the morning had not been one of them. Doing the same in the presence of a man his grandfather called The Ghost Who Lives and a hulking, four-armed creature had not been even remotely suggested by any of them. Actually going off on the mission Damon Crowley was outlining never even would have entered his nightmares.

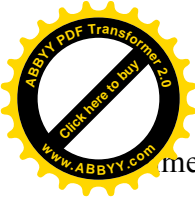
Will shifted his shoulders to seat the Kevlar vest he wore beneath his black jumpsuit correctly. "It would seem to me that moving Mr. Loring from Barrow Neurological Institute is not necessarily the best thing for him."

"Under normal circumstances I might concur, Will." Crowley tugged at the wrist of his left glove. "As it is, leaving him there will not result in his recovery. He is vital to what we are doing, so we need to get him healthy as quickly as possible."

Yellowed light glinting from his tusks, the Yidam nod-

ded in agreement. "The destination that *Mi-ma-yin* intends for Coyote is in the same dimensional sphere as the dimension in which Nero Loring has found indications of Ryuhito. Moving there together will make our transit easier."

Will nodded, not really understanding. He had been told about the other unseen worlds by his grandfather and had even had perceptions of them when using peyote during ceremonies, but he had always dismissed those as hallucinations. The gap between believing his visions the product of drug-induced imagination and believing they actually existed as other worlds upon which he spied was not, in *theory*, that far. In *reality*, which Will pegged as physically being able to visit those other realms, he had a hard



me accepting their existence and his ability to travel to them.

Crowley popped a clip into the Mac-10 he wore on his right hip and snapped the bolt open. "Okay, I'm set to go."

The Yidam, in a black jumpsuit that had been stitched together from two other, much smaller suits, let a pistol-gripped shotgun dangle from a strap over his right shoulder. "As am I." He adjusted the crossed bandoliers of shotgun shells with his lower arms, then nodded to Will. "Are you prepared?"

"I hope so." Will tried to keep doubt out of his voice, but he failed. The other two men smiled indulgently, and Will did not feel he had erred in letting them know how he felt. "What do I need to do?"

Crowley laid a gloved hand on Will's right shoulder. "Relax first. The vision test that Hal gave you on the day you signed on, the one with the pink and purple circles, proved you are empathic enough to be able to actually perceive things in other dimensions."

"Wouldn't the visions I've seen in ceremonies indicate

that ability as well?"

"Not always. There is a difference, which is akin to the difference between being totally blind, legally blind and lacking the need to use glasses. Drugs might make the legally blind sharp-eyed, but we have no use for anyone that can't function straight." Crowley eased the boxy machine-pistol in its holster. "Clear, sharp perceptions are vital where we are going, and the ability to think quickly may make the difference between life and death. That may sound melodramatic, but it is true and well worth bearing in mind."

Will nodded solemnly. "Yes, sir."

"What we are going to do, the Yidam and I, is to rip a hole between this office and the hospital. We will do that by tapping into a sidecar dimension that is remarkable for one thing: Distances there are roughly one one-hundredth of what they are here. A step there will be a hundred steps here."

The Yidam smiled. "Will, I believe your people have a legend about moccasins that allow the wearing to pass great distances in the wink of an eye."

"Hiawatha—not my tribe, but I remember it."

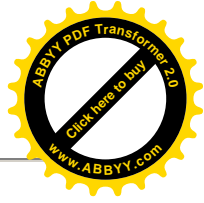
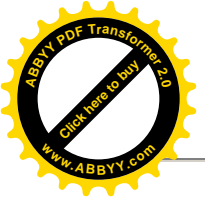
Crowley smiled and jerked his head at the Yidam. "You know these Buddhist demigods—we all look the same to them."

"Well, you all do have only *two* arms."

All three of them laughed at the joke, and Will felt some of his tension bleeding away. "Moving through that dimension will let us reach the hospital quickly, correct?"

"Exactly," Crowley assured him. "Once there, we will do what we need to make sure Coyote is stable, then we will bring him to the dimension in which he will be left to heal. This will not be that easy, but you can make the passage much easier if you do a couple of simple things."

"Anything."



"Close your eyes and start breathing to a four-count. Clear your mind of everything but the counting, then let that slip away."

Will closed his eyes and exerted control over his breathing. He recognized the sense of well-being that flowed over him as the same he had felt during and after the rituals his grandfather had taught him. It struck him that the same techniques he used to purify himself and to be put in touch with the spirit world were the ones he needed to move through dimensions. Once that thought occurred to him, he forced it away and left his mind blank.

He felt Crowley grab his right wrist and the Yidam his left, then got the sensation of drifting forward. He felt a flash of heat as he moved out of the air-conditioned comfort of the office, and that prompted him to open his eyes. He found himself in a dark place that appeared to have no walls or edges, yet left his body feeling squeezed as if he were wedged between two smoke-gray slabs of glass.

To his left he saw the Yidam, but on his right Crowley had changed. Gone was the green-eyed, dark-haired occultist and, in his place, Will saw a man made of shadow. He had depth and a gold ring flash on his right hand, but beyond that bit of color, Crowley appeared to be a three-dimensional silhouette. *He is not human.*

The silhouette turned and looked at him. "I'm human, very human. Outside my own dimension I am just..."

"Eccentric," the Yidam offered.

Crowley laughed. "Eccentric. I like that."

Though none of them took a step, Will sensed forward and downward movement. The dimension in which they stood darkened significantly just before their downward movement stopped. "We are in the Grand Dark?"

"Skimming just below it, in fact." The surrounding area lightened a bit and the air grew chilled. Crowley

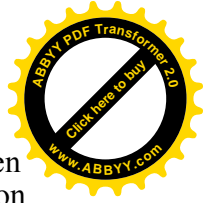
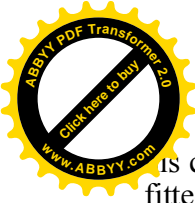
nodded confidently. "We are here."

The surrounding reality cleared like a fogged window being wiped clean. Will felt pressure under his boots as the floor grew solid. He waited for nausea or discomfort because of the journey and used his concern with his physical well-being to hold back his worry and wonder at having passed between worlds.

Crowley, once again in human guise, crossed to the door and opened it just a crack. He shut it again slowly and whispered to them in a hoarse voice. "This is room 954. Coyote is in 958, two doors down. The hallway looks clear."

Again he opened the door and stepped out into the corridor. Will followed him and, when Crowley pointed to it, wheeled along a portable oxygen stand that had been left beside the doorway to 957. With Crowley holding the door open, Will and the Yidam entered Coyote's room. As the door closed behind him, shutting out all the bright light, Will shivered.

Michael Loring lay in a bed surrounded by machines. White gauze had been wound round his head and covered it completely, except where a plastic mask fitted over his nose and mouth. The heavy outline of



his chest and midsection beneath the thick blanket hinted at the body-cast into which the man had been fitted. An IV drip fed into Loring's right arm, the needle taped in place between the the gauze sheath on his hand and the blue-green hospital gown in which he had been dressed.

The machines surrounding him felt cold to Will, and he realized the man laying in the bed seemed more dead than alive. Little red and green lights flashed on the monitors. A green wave spiked its way through a small grid readout, while a little red digital counter tracked Loring's heart rate and respiration. Will watched the light show for a moment, sensing more life in them than in

Coyote himself, then he looked back at the man again.

He studied him more closely and swallowed hard when he realized what had struck him as being the most wrong with Loring. "His left arm...."

Crowley nodded. "They took it two days ago. Too much damage." He pointed to the oxygen cylinder. "Free that from the cart and set it gently between his legs."

From his place by the door, the Yidam hissed, "Someone is coming."

"Dammit, I wanted to do this easily." Crowley yanked the clear lead from the respiration monitor and settled it over the nozzle of the oxygen tank. He opened the valve, and Will heard oxygen hiss out into the mask. "Hold on, Will. Vikram, let's move it all."

The Yidam came around to the right side of the bed and tossed the IV bottle to Will. He caught it and held it high with his right hand while holding on to the end of the bed with his left. Behind him, the door opened and someone began to yell, "What are you doing here?"

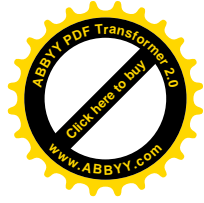
"Go!" Crowley shouted, and Will tightened his grip as the bed began to slide forward into the wall at its head. It met resistance at the first, then gave slowly as if being pushed through mud. The wall itself began to stretch and thin, as if it had been made of balloon rubber. The ugly powder-blue of the wall leached color and became white around the edges of the headboard. The shouting behind him increased, and added to it came the keening wail of a heart monitor linked to a patient with a pulse of zero.

Suddenly, the wall exploded like a burst bubble, and Will felt himself jerked off his feet. Into a blackness the bed sailed, and it instantly dipped down as if it had gone off the edge of a cliff. Over the headboard, Will saw a rust-red world of stone and swirling sands. It reminded him of some of the desolate places in northern Arizona where his

grandfather had taken him to learn the old ways, except that here the world looked very small, and the constellations in the black-bowl sky were alien to him. "Concentrate on pulling up!"

Will looked at Crowley, and in the hunched set of his shoulders he could read the strain of trying to fight against gravity, it appeared to him as if Crowley were standing on solid ground and hauling up against the bed's nosedive, yet Will's body was extended out like a tail on a kite. A quick glance at the Yidam showed Will the godling was fighting as hard as Crowley to prevent their crash-landing.

Tossing the IV bottle on the bed beside the oxygen tank, Will pulled his right hand down to the foot of the bed. Tightening his stomach muscles and bending his legs, he brought his knees up to his chest, then



Bracing themselves, the three men kept the bed point-

ing upward. Will realized how far they had fallen when a patina of red dust curled up as they swooped through the valley he had first seen. Like a wild horse given its head, the bed picked up speed and rocketed toward the stars. Will remained ready to fight against it, but he knew if the bed decided to spin or snap on down, he'd be thrown flying like the last child in line during a game of Crack the Whip.

"We're okay now, I think."

Will looked at Crowley. "What do you mean?"

The stars began to swirl together, leaving their places in the heavens, to form a light-tunnel. The bed centered itself on the tunnel, and the speed increased until red -and-blue highlights worked themselves into the tunnel's pattern of light. As they entered the tunnel, Will felt a jolt of cold, a searing blast of heat, then nothing at all.

"That place, that red world, is where Coyote saw himself kill his predecessor, it marks the place he sees death. When we freed him from the world, he brought us there without a second thought."

The Yidam shook his head. "I cannot see this one wanting to die."

"Nor can I." Crowley pressed his right hand to the man's forehead. "I think, perhaps, he anticipated death and, as this was where he saw the other Coyote die..."

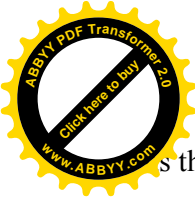
"It seemed a natural destination." Will nodded grimly. "And now?"

"Now we are bound for a dimension in which he can heal."

Will looked at Crowley. "Are you taking us there, or is he?"

Crowley shrugged. "I have implanted the route in his brain. He is functioning on a low level, almost solely on the lizard-brain level. Letting him take us there is easier and less of a strain in our resources."

The Yidam's blood-red eyes narrowed. "But will he take



is there safely, or by a direct route?"

"I don't know."

The light-tunnel ended unexpectedly as the bed burst into the air above a world with molten oceans of sulphur crashing relentlessly into an eroding purple beach. The blankets began to smolder, then stopped as they broke through a wall and into a dark, forbidding land with sluggish nitrogen rivers carving their way five miles deep into the surface of the planet. The bed plunged on toward a mile-high nitrogenfall, but sliced through to a new dimension before any of them felt the liquid nitrogen's deadly touch.

The bed stopped abruptly, and Will found himself catapulted up and over the end by inertia. He flipped once through the air as he sailed beyond the head of the bed, then landed hard in the dirt. He let his body roll, bleeding off the energy of the landing, and regained his feet in an instant.

He looked back at the bed and saw the Yidam picking himself up off the ground. Crowley's shadowform still lay in the dust beside the bed. Will saw where Crowley, when thrown clear, had slammed into *a* man-sized dolmen. The occultist lay on his back and cradled his left arm against his chest.

Will crossed to him and knelt beside him. The shadow-form provided little contrast, but even so Will could see Crowley had broken his left forearm. Like shards of ebon crystal, he saw the sharp ends of a bone jutting up and out of the man's arm. At his elbow, a black liquid dripped off, but when it fell clear of Crowley's form, it became red, and Will recognized it as blood.

"Compound fracture. We will have to get you back to the hospital."

Crowley shook his head. "No need and no time." He turned his head toward the Yidam. "You have to set it."

The monster nodded and came around to Crowley's side as Will shuffled on his knees around toward the man's head. The Yidam crouched down and placed his smaller, more delicate hands on either side of the wound. "I cannot read you; you are closed to me."

Will sensed apprehension from the Yidam and got absolutely nothing from Crowley. "He needs to be X-rayed and to have the bone set and cast."

Crowley shook his head and grunted against the pain. "Don't worry about fine manipulation. Just set it enough to get the bone ends close to each other. I can exert some influence to make certain they grow together."

"Open yourself to me, and I can assure it."

"No." Crowley looked at the Yidam, and Will felt certain he saw a silver-blue light glow in the Yidam's eyes for a heartbeat.

The Yidam stiffened for a second, then nodded slowly. "You are wise. I do as you request." The Yidam grabbed Crowley's wrist and elbow in his stronger arms. His eyes narrowed and he yanked, then twisted slightly.

Crowley screamed sharply, then cautiously drew in breath. He said nothing, but made little animal sounds as he forced himself to breath in and out. From what Will saw and heard, he knew the man was in pain, but he could get nothing from him. The ability to sense pain and discomfort in others, Will realized, was



something he had always had and assumed others did as well. Only here, in the absence of sensing anything from Crowley, did he realize how special his gift was.

Still keeping his left arm hugged to his chest, Crowley sat up. "There's a cave up there, in the hillside. Vikram, if you will carry Coyote up there, I will see to it he is well warded for the time it will take him to heal."

Will pointed to Crowley's arm. "Are you going to stay here and guard him while you heal up?"

The shadow man shook his head. "No. The way this dimension works, my arm will be fine in a day or two—and that will pass in bare minutes back in Phoenix. Were I to wait for Coyote to regain his senses and grow back his arm, I would, well, not quite be the same. The last time I was here, I was in my sixties, but I regenerated the damage of my infirmity: old age. I have no desire to experience puberty in reverse."

Crowley held his right arm up, and Will helped him to his feet. As the Yidam carried Coyote up toward the cave in the grassy hill, Crowley pointed Will toward a small path. "C'mon, I'll show you the reason for this place."

Will followed the walking silhouette up a short ridge that looked down on a deep valley. From that vantage point, he saw that the world appeared to be a bowl no more than 14 miles across. With bluffs and rivers, trees and meadows, it reminded Will of picture books on the Trojan War and the Odyssey. With the bowl of the sky sweeping down to link up at the horizon, Will imagined the dimension having been carved out of Greece by some mad god using a giant melon-bailer on the world.

That impression grew stronger as he focused down on a large, flat stone in the middle of the river running through the valley below. A humanoid of incredible proportions lay chained spread-eagle on the stone. He had the curly black hair and thick beard that Will associated with the men depicted in ancient Grecian um paintings. A bronze shield lay at his feet, and a spear had been jammed into the earth at his head.

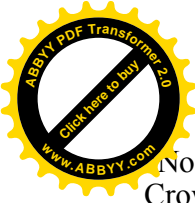
Crowley pointed to where the sun peaked through the mountains at the horizon. "Dawn. They'll be coming for him now."

Before he could ask, the sound of metal scraping against metal filled the air. Will turned and saw a whole flock of bronze vultures flying through the air toward the

valley. While they moved as gracefully as real birds in flight, he could see they were constructs that worked with sprockets and springs and gears. Their feathers had been forged with incredible skill and welded on to their wings. Their cruelly hooked beaks opened and closed with a click, as a mechanical call issued from their throats.

Three of the life-sized metal birds drifted down to circle over the two men. Will went for his machine-pistol, but Crowley reached over and stayed his hand. "Don't bother. You can't shoot them down, and they're not interested in us anyway. Whoever created them has given them a simple program. When the sun is in the sky, they feed on the Titan. That means, for them, lunch is the biggest thing in sight."

Will remained uneasy until the trio of archaeo-me-chanical vultures swooped down and in toward the Titan Tityus. "Their beaks don't look particularly sharp."



"No, bronze is notorious for not holding an edge." As the vultures landed and started tearing at the Titan, Crowley added, "However, I don't think keeping a sharp edge and sparing him any pain was part of the program here."

The Titan's agonized bellows echoed back and forth in the valley. Will watched as the vultures tore his belly open from sternum to navel, then ducked inside and emerged to fight over his intestines. He turned away when two of the blood-soaked birds rolled across the Titan's chest, tussling over a piece of liver. "How can those vultures function. Is it magic?"

Crowley shrugged as he led the way back down toward the bed. "It is the nature of this place, that is all. Dimensions have, by design or chance, their own rules of physics, their own rate of time flow and their own connections."

Will folded his arms across his chest. "And their own

dangers?"

"And their own dangers." Crowley glanced toward the cave and the returning Yidam. "You and the Yidam will find that out as you scout for a beachhead for us to use. I wish you luck."

"Thanks." Will frowned. "While we're off hunting, what will you be doing?"

"Healing for a bit," Crowley laughed, "Then I'll show the Warriors of the Aryan World Alliance that Earth has dangers of its own."

 Dark Conspiracy 3-15.jpg

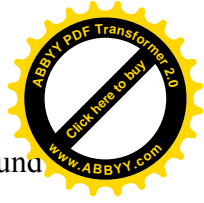
Concentrating on his breathing, Will Raven let the Yidam lead him away from the Titan's dimension. He kept his eyes open, but a black fog stole his sight as the sound of Greek oaths faded away. He blinked once, but everything remained dark for another two steps, then a harsh red world appeared before his eyes. A hot wind brought the sticky, cloying scent of burning candles to his nose.

The landscape wavered like a heat-mirage, but Will realized he was not seeing an illusion. The whole world appeared to be made of semi-molten wax. A thick rivulet slowed on a hillside off to his right, with the surface growing opaque, then a split in its skin appeared and liquid wax splashed down to cover his boots.

The Yidam dropped to one knee and dipped a finger into the liquid. He raised his hand up and sniffed at it, then tasted it. "Wax."

Will frowned. "A world of wax? How is that possible?"

The Yidam shrugged. "There are many possible explanations. Perhaps this is the repository for all the wax ever lost through the 'lost wax' method of casting metal."



the Native American chuckled. "I hadn't thought of that." He looked down as more wax puddled around his

feet and began to harden. "This place does not look stable enough for the sort of operation we are planning."

The four-armed godling shook his head. "Mo, it is not. It is a high-energy dimension, which is good, but *so* chaotic that we will have problems. However, it is good to find, because its energy is likely to bleed into the surround -ing dimensions. We need that."

Will pulled his feet free of the dimension's substance. "Shall we move on?"

The Yidam nodded and gently took Will's wrist in his lower left hand. Two steps forward and the waxworld parted like a curtain. A cold chill settled over Will as they moved into a gray zone, then they came out in a verdant world of rolling hillocks and a green stream moving sluggishly through the heart of a grassy valley. Twin suns hung in the sky and washed them with the warmth of a spring afternoon.

"Not bad." Will squatted down and ran his hand through the long-leafed grasses. "Ouch! Dammit, this is saw-grass." He held his bloodied fingers up for the Yidam to see.

The Yidam grunted, but Will barely heard him as the gurgle of the stream shifted into a rhythmic clicking sound. Standing with the breeze at his back, will looked down at the stream and saw it shift in its bed. While the farthest part of the stream continued flowing on toward the horizon, the rest of it started to flow up the hill and toward them.

Will's jaw dropped open as he realized what the stream really was. Millions upon millions of iridescent green beetles left the valley core and marched inexorably toward the two dimension-walkers. Behind them, where the long column broke in half, Will saw the ground had been stripped of the saw-grass cover and the rocks had been polished to a gemlike quality by the tread of

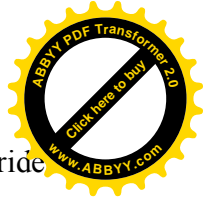
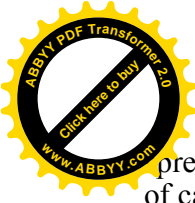
countless insect steps.

"This is not the place for us, I think." The Yidam grabbed Will by the waist and leaped upward effortlessly. Will shivered, thinking the Yidam's maneuver would carry them straight into the center of the beetles, but an opening to a new dimension swallowed them before they came down in the bug-stream.

They landed in a twilight world with broad-leafed, blue vegetation and broad, wooded valleys, ft felt cooler than either of the other two dimensions, and the breeze that blew past them carried the hint of an evening chill. In the hazy blue sky, Will saw what he took to be the world's sun, but it appeared smaller and, therefore, more distant than the sun did in relation to the Earth. That quickly explained for him the lack of warmth.

The Yidam released him, setting him down on a blue-green outcropping of rock. "I think, for the moment, we will be safe. You are well?"

Will nodded. His torso ached a bit from where the Yidam had grabbed him, but he knew the pain would fade quickly enough. His hand had already stopped bleeding. Looking out toward the azure savannah



spreading out below them, he saw what he took to be a herd of grazing animals milling about and a pride of carnivores sleeping in the shadow of tall tree.

"Looks like someone with a liking for blue went and colorized an old Tarzan movie."

The Yidam smiled as if he realized that was the correct reaction to what must have been a joke, but Will sensed no comprehension of it from the creature. The Yidam took Will's hand gently in his lower hands and studied the grass cuts. "Superficial."

Will nodded. "Are you going to heal me?"

"Heal you?"

Will frowned. "I thought you could do that. Rajani—she

is your daughter, isn't she—healed Hal Qarrett from two gunshot wounds. These cuts should be easy for you."

The Yidam squatted down, bringing him just below Will's eye level. "Yes, she could have done that. It is a skill, not a genetic trait, and I never learned it. And, yes, I suppose she is my daughter."

"Suppose? I didn't think there was much mistaking things like that."

The Yidam smiled and even laughed sincerely. "She is indeed the product of the union of my genetic material with that of the female who was my wife. I knew them both well, and we lived as a family until my daughter was in her teens. Then things changed."

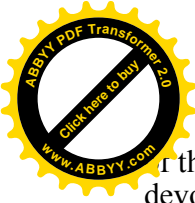
The Native American felt puzzled by the emotions pouring out of the Yidam. He caught an undercurrent of paternal pride and love that he regularly associated with a father/child relationship. A distancing and confused sensation effectively smothered the paternal feelings, and it came tinged with some fear. "What things changed? She is still your daughter."

"True, but I am no longer her father." The Yidam shrugged with all his shoulders. "When I was her father, I was known as Vikram and I was not that much different, save my coloration and gold tattoos, from you or Crowley. Properly attired and at night, I could have passed for human. When the Dark Lords reopened pathways to Earth, I took refuge in *Kanggenpo*, a Tibetan monastery that shielded me from the Dark Lords' influence. Unfortunately, it placed me at the center of some very specific and strongly held belief systems."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"My race is *psychomimetic*. Like a chameleon, we change to resemble the dominant life form in our environment. This ability usually ends early in our life, but my religious sect has isolated a form of mediation that allows

us to change and improve ourselves. This sort of change, because it leaves us vulnerable to outside influences, is normally begun in isolation." The Yidam raised his lower set of hands to tap his tusks. "I hid away in the monastery's *Gonkhang*, the area below the main worship center. It is the traditional home



r the Yidam, the temple's guardian spirit. All of the monks—and these monks are strong-willed and devout in the extreme—concentrated their influence on me and changed me from being Vikram—Rajani's father—to their Yidam."

Will knelt and picked up a loose blue pebble. "But surely you still recognize her as your daughter."

"I do, but my change has been more than morphological. I have assumed the physical form of a guardian spirit, and I have learned how to think like one." The Yidam hesitated, then plunged on ahead. "The time spent in the monastery has been a process of transfiguration for me. While I am more than proud of my daughter and yet love her, I have changed so I can no longer *know* her."

Will let the turquoise stone roll back and forth across his palm. "I...if my son...I do not envy you losing your daughter in that way. I met her once and was impressed by her. You have every right to your pride."

The Yidam smiled and moved down the outcropping to where blue grasses gently swayed in the breeze. "Thank you. She is yet special to me, as I am sure your son is to you. Though I regret the loss, I did then what had to be done."

"And that is what I am doing here, now." Will tossed the pebble into the distance, then smiled. "I think my grandfather would very much enjoy meeting you. He would not find you odd or puzzling at all, but would treat you as another facet of the world being made known to him."

The Yidam snapped a grass stem off and nibbled on it.

"My daughter told me of her adventures since waking from stasis. Your grandfather figured prominently in the accountings, as did Hal and this Sinclair MacNeal. Do you know him?"

Will smiled as the paternal undertow dragged on him. "A bit. He does not remember it, but I was his caddy at a golf tournament once. He is smart and witty. He's also rich."

The Yidam fixed him with a bloody eye. "If you had a daughter, would you want her in love with him?"

The distant thunder of hooves distracted Will for a moment. Down in the plain, the carnivores had attacked the herd, starting a stampede. As he watched, the carnivores—looking a lot like wolves with zebra striping in dark and light blue—coursed and brought down a yellow wildebeest analog. Snarls and howls of victory echoed through the dusk as dust settled on the plain, and the herd regrouped beyond the carnivores' range.

"I think, had I a daughter like Rajani, I would trust her judgment." Will shrugged. "She is intelligent and able to think for herself."

"Agreed." The Yidam turned his face into the wind and sniffed the air. "The question still stands, however: How would you *feel* about her being in love with him?"

Will suddenly realized what the Yidam was asking. "I would feel exactly how you are feeling now, I think. Happiness mixed with apprehension has to be the universal state of any father when his daughter chooses a man as her lover. What I sense from you is normal. You have not changed so much that your feelings are inappropriate."

Dropping to his haunches, the Yidam raked the claws of his upper right hand through the earth and brought one of the grass plants up, roots and all. Aside from the blue hue, the plant looked normal to Will. "Tell me,

what do you think of this place?"

The Native American hooked black hair back behind his right ear. "ft looks normal. I heard a theory once that suggested that all plant life on Earth would be blue, except that an algae was that color and absorbed the blue wavelengths from sunlight. For other plants to compete, they had to draw energy from the green wavelengths. It seems temperate, and the steady breeze is probably enough to power some windmills for electricity."

"I concur."

Will looked at the Yidam. "Is this close enough to Pygmalion's dimension to suit our needs?"

"I believe it is." The Yidam tossed the plant aside and stood. "What we shall do is return to Phoenix and give our compatriots a preliminary report. We can return with measurement devices that will clock the wind and determine other things to see if this is good for us. As you have pointed out, the flora and fauna are close enough to Earth to minimize shock for our other workers."

"Most of them come from Eclipse and have never been outside of Phoenix. You could tell them this is Kenya, and they would believe you." Will smiled. "I think this place would do nicely. Peaceful and beautiful."

"Let's hope ft stays that way." The Yidam reached out for him. "As much as I have changed and as much as this place appeals to me, I cannot think it is the place where I want to die."

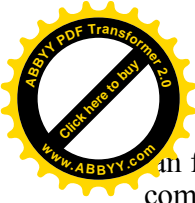
 Dark Conspiracy 3-16.jpg

Sinclair MacNeal sat back in his chair and rubbed his eyes. The swivel chair tipped back until the seat hit a 45° angle, and Sin's feet dangled in the footwell of his desk. Aside from the backglow of the computer screen and the harsh glare of his desk lamp, the office he had been given in the Lorica Tower remained dark.

He closed his eyes for only a second as numbers scrolled up the screen, but he still saw the glowing figures racing through his brain. No matter how many times he ran the numbers, the answers came up the same. While that precision was to be applauded, the numbers it produced meant the expedition to the dimension code-named Turquoise would be a lot tougher than they had originally imagined.

"A penny for your thoughts, Sinclair."

Sin sat bolt upright and spun his chair around, narrowly avoiding a collision between his kneecaps and the edge of the desk. Standing in the half-light, a vision of dreamlike seduction, Rajani smiled at him. Her golden hair spilled over the shoulders of her light bluejacket. The padded shoulders helped emphasize her slender waist, while the white blouse contrasted sharply with her jet-black flesh. Her gold-lozenge pupils struck him as reptil-



an for a second, but her almond eyes and smile bore him no malice. Blue jeans and white sneakers completed her casual outfit, yet on her it seemed elegant.

Sin smiled openly. "You're the telepath, you tell me what I'm thinking."

Rajani shook her head. "I only want to know if you want me to know."

"Okay. Right now I'm thinking you're a vision of beauty."

That broadened the smile on her face. She looked beyond him toward the computer. "I sensed some worry when I came in. Is something wrong?"

Sin stretched and stood up. "Not really. The place your father and Will Raven found is probably the best we're going to do for a staging area for the invasion, it is stable, not overtly harmful and enough like Earth that we can probably avoid giving our workers nightmares when they get there. For our people, it is close to ideal."

He threw an arm over her shoulders and relished the warmth of her closeness. Sin steered her toward the office's conversation alcove, then dropped onto the brown leather couch beside her. He put his feet up on the coffee table, displacing a stack of printouts and leaned his head on the back of the couch. "It's perfect for our people."

Rajani tucked one leg under another and leaned back against the couch's padded arm at the other end. "Then there must be other problems or you would not be so disturbed."

Sin nodded. "Nero Loring gave me the numbers on how much power we'd need to actually activate the dimensional gateway. It's the rough equivalent of having Hoover Dam running at full, which would be great if Turquoise had a river we could dam and tap for power."

"It doesn't?"

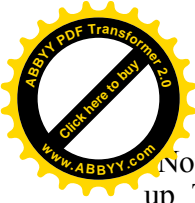
"Not even close."

"But I thought my father said it had wind." Rajani's eyes glowed catlike in the shadows. "We can use wind-generators, can't we?"

"We can, //we want 5000 of them running in a gale." Sin closed his eyes and rubbed wearily at his temples. "It's not quite that bad, but the breeze in Turquoise averaged five miles per hour, and we need at least four times that to give us the minimum amount of power Nero thinks he needs."

He heard her shift around on the couch, then felt her gently tug on his shoulders. "Come here, Sin." She pulled him around and toward her, letting him stretch out on the couch. Her bent knees pressed gently against either side of his chest as he lay back, and she slowly massaged his neck and shoulders. "There may be a number of solutions to this problem. Vetha has gone off to Plutonia to take a census of the creatures there and, for all we know, they have some ability that will help us."

Sin slowly rolled his head around as her strong fingers unknotted his muscles. "A bit lower and to the left...yes, right there. Sure, from what Bat said about the Plutonians they'll make fine beasts of burden, which cuts down on our need for heavy equipment. I don't think they have the technical skill to create more efficient generators, though."



"Not what I was thinking. There might be a seasonal change coming in Turquoise that will pick the wind up. There might be a way to tap the energy of the Toussaud dimension. My father and Will are out looking for more places to get the power we'll need."

Sin felt a shiver run through Rajani and brought his head up. "You okay, kid? Your father will do fine."

"I know, but that's not really what I'm worried about." She traced the knuckles of her right hand down his spine. "You know why I went into stasis, right?"

He nodded. "You spent the time in isolation so you

could attune yourself to Fiddleback and eavesdrop on his thoughts. The fact that he got close to coming through in Phoenix last July brought you out early, because he was very close and you picked him up. You're our secret weapon."

"I may not be that much of a weapon, Sin." Rajani's fingers dug into his neck and worked over a stiff muscle. "What I don't like is that I've been picking nothing up from Fiddleback lately. I have to assume that when he's out of my range, he's plotting against us. We all know he cannot be trusted, then I get thinking about how much he could hurt us, and who he could hurt."

Sin heard the unspoken adjunct to her statement. "And your father is out there with Will in a very vulnerable position. I wouldn't worry about him, though, because Fiddleback can't get to him there. Your father will be fine."

"I know, I just..." Her voice trailed off, then stopped in what Sin heard as a suppressed sob. "I can't read Fiddleback, and I can't read him either."

He eased himself over and sat up, hugging her knees to either side of his chest. "Who him?" He reached out and took her chin in his right hand, tipping her face up so he could look her in her teary eyes. "You're going to have to tell me because I can't ferret it out."

Rajani sniffed once, then frowned. "It's just that, well, I'm confused. My father and I, we are different than we were. We used to be much like Tadd and Mickey and Dorothy, but now we are distant." Gold highlights glittered in her eyes. "How do you deal with your relationship with your father?"

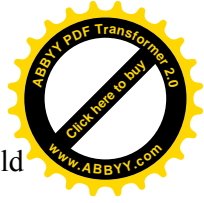
Sin chuckled lightly and flopped back on the couch with a thump. "Well, mostly I ignore my father."

"Why?"

"Keeps me from remembering how much I hate him."

Sin swallowed against a lump rising in his throat. "My father did some things that hurt me a great deal. Like most folks, I wondered what I had done to deserve such treatment at his hands. I mean, he was my father, he had always cared for me, and now he was punishing me. I had to wonder why, and it ate me up inside."

He propped himself up on his elbows, "It wasn't until I'd been in Japan for a while that I realized he did what he did because it was his way of controlling me. I defied him, he made concessions, and I returned home. He kept me under his thumb, allowing my little rebellions because they kept me close to him and within his



control. Finally, when Coyote brought things to a head with my father, we parted, and I realized there could never be any reconciliation."

Rajani shook her head. "But that is not the problem I have with my father. We have grown apart and cannot find common ground."

Sin sat up again and rested his elbows on Rajani's knees. "That's not true, you've just not *yet* found common ground. Your father is trying, though. You just have to look at what he's doing, not what he says, and you can see that."

"Really?" Rajani frowned. "He has been paying more attention to you than he has to me lately."

"You have to avoid reading that wrong." Sin gave her a half-smile. "Since returning from that first expedition to Turquoise, he's been talking to me a lot for two reasons. The first is that you and I are close, and he can learn about you through me. More importantly, though, because we are close, he wants to get to know me to see if I'm good enough for you."

"Do you think so?"

"I know so." Butterflies beginning to navigate clumsily through his stomach, Sin reached down and took

Rajani's hands into his. "I can't read someone else's emotions. I have a hard enough time understanding my own, but you're very special to me." He half-laughed. "Here I am, sitting in the dark, holding hands with a woman from another planet..."

"I was born here, in Utah."

"Okay, as *good as* being born on another planet, and I feel more at ease and more, well, complete, than with any other woman I have known." He shook his head. "Her father is the guardian spirit of a Tibetan monastery, and she has incredible powers. Because of her, I survived a death trap, and because of her and others associated with her, I'm looking to help stop a tarantula with pituitary problems from taking over reality."

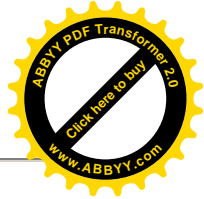
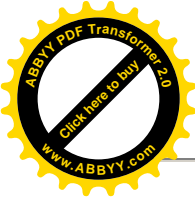
Rajani gave his hands a squeeze. "I don't like what you're saying, Mr. MacNeal, but I like your actions." She sat forward and kissed him lightly on the lips.

Sin smiled. "I like your actions as well, Ms. Rajani." He kissed her more fully, and she did not pull away. "I'm falling for you, and falling hard, you know."

"I know. I felt attracted to you when Match and I broke into your suite in Japan. Just from the impressions you had left in the room, I knew you to be strong and kind and wise." She looked down for a second, then glanced up mischievously. "That's why I took your cufflinks. They became a connection to you."

"As you used them to get to me and save me when the Galactic Brotherhood wanted me dead, I'm very glad you took them."

She caressed the left side of his face. "I share your feelings, Sin, and I share your doubts. We both must question if what we feel is genuine or part of the pressure cooker we're living in. With the threat to our lives that exists in Pygmalion and Fiddleback, it is natural to want to cling together, to want to fight off death together."



"You're right, it is natural. It's also natural that you and I are closer to each other than we are to our parents." Sin leaned forward and kissed the side of her throat. "For me, it's because my father is a jerk who's uniquely suited to use Preparation-H as a body lotion. For you, well, your father has become something more than mortal. He cannot know the same fears we do, nor can he view them the way we do."

"I wish I knew of a way to let him know I still love him." Rajani looked up at Sin. "Do you think he knows that?"

"I think it's something he carries proudly in his heart." Sin kissed her on the tip of her nose, then looked down as his stomach rumbled mightily. "As for me, I'm running on empty."

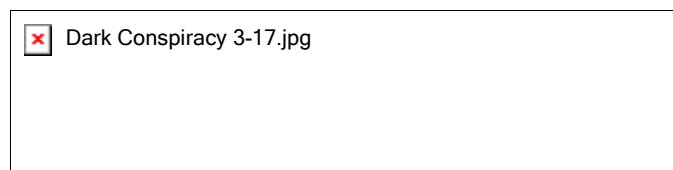
"Are you done here? Can you go for food?"

Sin leaned back, freeing Rajani's legs, then looked over at the computer. "Yeah, that monster will be crunching numbers for a couple more hours. We can go for Mexican and you can fill me in on what PsyOps has put together on Pygmalion."

"Done, but only if you put going to bed on your schedule."

Sin raised an eyebrow at her.

Rajani smiled. "Telepathy is not needed to read that thought, Sinclair." She stood and pulled him up off the couch. Wrapping her arms around his waist, she laid her head on his chest. "I actually meant you needed some rest, but given what we're facing, security, love and happiness are not things I would deny either one of us tonight."

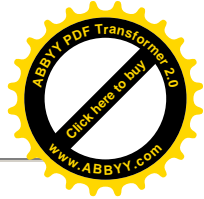
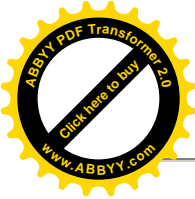


Damon Crowley did not let the two days he needed to heal up in the Titan's dimension go to waste. In between his periodic checks of Coyote's progress and the occasional scouting missions to the surrounding proto-dimensions, he worked hard. Using a small knife, he cut a cross into the nose of each any .45 caliber bullet in his Mac-10 clips.

When he finished the last one, he surveyed his work. He saw it was good and he smiled.

He made one last check of Coyote's cave. After the first day, Coyote had ceased needing the oxygen, which turned out to be fortunate because it ran out soon thereafter. The intravenous drip proved equally unnecessary within the first day. Coyote's regenerating body sucked it dry, then attacked and expelled the needle as a foreign body.

Squatting down so he could look closely at Coyote's legs, Crowley stripped the blanket away from them. In the half-light, he saw a number of reddish lumps dotting the man's legs as if he had the measles. Passing his hand above them, Crowley could feel the heat as the body worked the bits and pieces of grenade shrapnel out. At the rate with which Coyote seemed to be progressing, Crowley



assumed his body would be free of debris inside a week.

Crowley rose up and looked at the stump protruding from the left arm of the hospital gown. Already the stitches that had closed it had been consumed by Coyote's body, and the livid red scars had all but disappeared. The stump had already grown past the mark on the cave wall that Crowley had made to measure it, and he thought he could see a bud at the end that looked akin to a fetal hand. Before long, the occultist had no doubt, the arm would again be whole and healthy.

"The coma. That will be the tricky part." Crowley concentrated and tried to pick up Coyote's thoughts, but he got nothing. Coyote's brain still functioned, and had even exerted itself when the bed almost crashed, but since his arrival in the Titan's proto-dimension, Coyote had shut down.

Crowley smiled. "I understand that, my friend. Recover quickly. We need you." He tugged the gray blanket up to Coyote's neck and headed back out of the cave. At the entrance, he rolled a couple of small rocks over the opening. The irony of blocking a cave in a Mediterranean setting with stones and hoping for the resurrection of the one inside did not escape him, though Crowley was more than willing to grant Coyote in excess of three days and was willing to have him return as nothing more than a man.

Flexing his left arm and finding it completely healed, Crowley reached out and ripped a gaping hole between the Titan's dimension and the Earth. He stepped through into the Terran dimension in a wooded courtyard in the heart of Eclipse. Looking up through the leaves of the trees, he saw the black steel and plastic panels that sucked energy from the sunlight and fed the vast desert city of Phoenix. Existing in a little box-canyon created by City Center, Crowley's home recalled a time when sun-

light freely fell on the city.

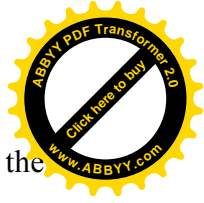
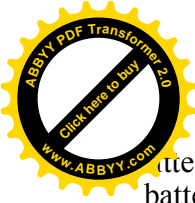
Two huge canine beasts came out of the two-story house and stood at the top of the stairs on the back porch. Colored like Doberman pinschers, but with the size and wiry pelt of Irish Wolfhounds, the red-eyed dogs bared their fangs and growled a menacing caution at him. Each dog tensed, ready to spring and tear him apart.

Crowley remained rooted in the midst of the white-stone ocean that dominated the courtyard. "Kara, Amhas, it is only me." He did not move, but let his voice reassure them.

The two dogs sniffed the air, then leaped from the porch and landed in a spray of stones. As they bounded forward, Crowley dropped to one knee and greeted each dog with a hug. Thumping them heavily on their flanks, he stood and let them escort him to the back door. He opened it, not being surprised that it was unlocked and that his belongings had remained unmolested in his absence. The last trespasser to enter his property had done so on a dare from another gang member. He escaped with his life, but earned the nickname "Kid Alpo."

Crowley quickly descended the stairs to the basement. He opened a utility closet then hit a hidden switch at the rear of it. The back wall withdrew into the ceiling to reveal a collection of weapons both comprehensive and deadly. From the spot above the Mac-10's outline, he took down the heavy, cylindrical sound and flash suppressor and screwed it into place. He also fitted the gun with a laser-targeting beam and slung the weapon over his shoulder by the sling he clipped into place on it.

He pulled the Mac-10's holster from the web-belt he wore and replaced it with a more slender holster



itted with a silvery cylinder. He pulled the foot and a half long baton out and switched it on to check the battery monitor light. Satisfied that the modified cattle-prod was fully charged,

he turned it off again and reholstered it.

He studied the rest of the weapons, but decided he was satisfied with what he had so far chosen. Almost as an afterthought, he pulled on a pair of black leather gloves that both had bladders filled with lead shot sewn into the backs and knuckles. He snapped his right hand out and slammed his fist into the plasterboard wall. He left a dent, then rubbed the plaster dust off his knuckles.

Closing the closet, he retreated to the center of his basement. He drew in a deep breath and centered himself. He worked his mind down beyond the Damon Crowley identity and approached his true core. A blue-gray pearl tinged with green, it expanded outward to greet him. Once again feeling true to himself, he allowed himself a brief smile, then set about his grim task with cold efficiency.

The first thing he did was to visualize the Warriors of the Aryan World Alliance headquarters. Because of his interest in the city, and his association with the current Coyote's predecessor, he knew the location well and had even helped the other Coyote with a soft penetration and reconnaissance of the site. They had gotten in and out undetected, but Crowley had not forgotten what he had seen and felt and smelled.

Reaching out with his mind, he sought to make his current surroundings match his mental image of the Warriors' lair. He added detail after detail in a carefully calculated equation that brought him through a nearby dimension and back into Earth at the site he had chosen. He materialized within the Warrior stronghold with an agonizing sloth, but remained undiscovered.

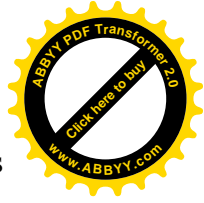
As he had planned, he appeared in a darkened corner of the garage area. For all of the time it took him to check his Mac-10, he regretted not being cloaked in the shadowform he affected when away from his home dimension. A second after the birth of that idea, he killed

it because he knew that what he had come to do was a job that had to be done by a man, not a shadow.

Two tall, blond Aryan men bearing MP-7 submachine-guns paced the catwalks surrounding the garage's upper level. Crowley stepped from the shadow and snapped two quick shots off at the man on the far side of the area. One slug took him in the chest, and the second blew through his stomach. The Aryan slammed back against the wall and slid down on a red slick before falling to his side on the catwalk.

The second guard saw his friend fall. He started to turn toward Crowley, bringing his gun up. The 240-grain bullet the Mac-10 coughed out completed the spin for him as it entered his thigh and powdered a four-inch-long segment of his femur. The slug exited up and to the right from the entry wound, drawing blood, tissue and bone after it. The Aryan grabbed at the catwalk railing to slow his fall, but before he could scream, two more bullets pierced his body. One popped a lung like a balloon, and the other pounded his right cheekbone back out through his brainstem, spraying blood and gray pulp against the wall. He flopped unceremoniously on his back and shuddered once before lying still.

Crowley waited in silence, listening for any sound beyond the hissing of air escaping from rapidly deflating lungs. The scent of blood and feces reached him through the cordite. He'd smelled it before and often allowed it to trigger regret in him, but this time he forced it away. He did not want to acknowledge those he had killed as human beings, because they were not. They wore the flesh and hid within the shell.



they could do the walk and do the talk, but they could never truly pass for human beings. Their ideas took them beyond humanity, turning them into monsters.

There was nothing to regret about killing monsters.

As if the biblical avenger out to destroy the first-born of Egypt, Crowley moved through the Warrior headquarters razor-sharp and whisper-quiet. The two Aryans with their eyes glued to the external camera monitors died without warning. Six more Hitler Youth died as they slept dreaming about the White Empire their leader had promised them. Another three, including the two who had attacked Natch and Coyote, met death while singing off-key in the communal shower facility. Crowley found four more in the canteen and killed three with a single shot each. The fourth died when she learned through two quick examples that a coffee-urn, though opaque, is not bulletproof.

Reloading as he moved up the stairs to the second level, Crowley found no one in the two classrooms at the southern end of the building. Wary of a trap, he cautiously approached the open doorway at the northern end of the corridor that ran the length of the second floor. From outside he could see what appeared to be a relatively unobstructed room covered with thick pads on the floor and walls. Kneeling in the shadows at the far end of the room, he saw a slender man.

Ready for an ambush, Crowley entered the room on cat's feet. He stepped quickly out of line with the doorway, but discovered the kneeling figure was the room's only other occupant. Inside the room, he saw an honor gallery of portraits with a huge painting of Adolf Hitler surrounded by smaller images of Evan Mecham, Tom Metzger, David Duke and Pat Buchanan.

He kept the man covered with the Mac-10, but the man's utter lack of concern about the gun surprised him.

"I sensed you coming."

"Did you?" Crowley's green eyes narrowed. "Then you will have sensed why I came."

The small man nodded solemnly. "I have been expecting someone, especially after Loring disappeared from

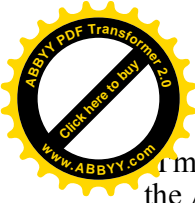
the hospital. I had people watching—the snatch was good." He canted his head to the right. "I had not expected you—rather, I had expected they would send the Polack."

"I did not give him that choice, Heinrich."

"Of course you didn't. You are of a superior race Mr.... Crowley, is it?" Heinrich straightened his head and sat a bit taller, "It is a pity that an operative of your skill will die having been tricked by the Zionists to betray your own race. Did you leave anyone alive down there?"

"They were too stupid to live. They followed you, did your dirty work, so they died." Crowley held up his left hand with the index finger pointing up. "And just so you know, I'm doing this solo—I'm no one's tool."

Heinrich laughed heartily, but a bit too long. "Mo? I think you are. I would guess, for example, that you believe in the fiction of the Holocaust?"



"I'm not a moron to be tricked into denying history." Crowley shook his head but never took his eyes off the Aryan leader. "The Nazis killed Jews, Gypsies, Poles, Slavs, gays and any communists they could get their hands on. Stalin did that and more. Mao's Cultural Revolution, Democratic Kampuchea, Kurds in Iraq and the slaughter of innocents in Latin America—all of these are historical facts. You can debate numbers and quibble about methods, but no one denies the results of the sort of hatred you preach. The ignorance and bigotry you promulgate kills people."

Heinrich smiled. "This from a man who has just murdered over a dozen people."

"Mo, Heinrich, you don't get me that way. You're the moral equivalent of a bacillus. You are intellectual Black Death, but there is no immunity to you. You have to be eradicated, and I'm here to do the job."

Heinrich gained his feet in one smooth motion. "Do you know anything of aikido, Mr. Crowley?"

"This has some bearing on our discussion?"

"It does." He bowed slightly. "A master of aikido, such as I am, cannot be shot with a gun. Even as you think about pulling the trigger, I will see you visualize a bullet in your brain, and I will dodge."

Crowley raised an eyebrow. "Betting your life on this, I take it?"

"No, your life, actually." The Aryan smiled coldly. "I just want you to understand how I am going to be able to cross the room and kill you."

Crowley snapped a quick shot off at Heinrich. The Aryan slipped to the side as the bullet whizzed past and ripped into the wall padding amid a cloud of feathers.

"Ten steps, Crowley, now nine." Heinrich feinted right, then cut diagonally forward to the left. "Eight."

Crowley popped another shot at him, but Heinrich sprang out of the way and into a cartwheel that carried him wide to the left.

"Give it up, Crowley. You're as good as dead."

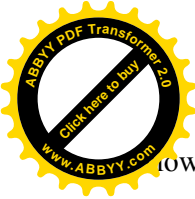
"Am I?" The occultist's eyes narrowed. "You know what they say, Heinrich. For evil to triumph, all that is required is for good men to do nothing. Do you know that statement's corollary?"

The Aryan sideslipped forward another step. "You'll tell me, of course."

"The triumph of good requires good men make sure that evil men do nothing." Crowley let the gun track Heinrich, then he punched the trigger. "That's what I'm here for."

The bullet blasted Heinrich's left kneecap to bone splinters before it continued on, shredding ligaments, mutilating cartilage and all but severing his leg. Screaming frantically, the Aryan leader fell back on the mats. He clutched at his knee with bloody fingers, desperately trying to deny what had happened.

He stared up in wide-eyed terror as Crowley walked



slowly toward him. "That's impossible. You couldn't have shot me. I saw nothing."

"That's right, little man, you saw nothing. You saw bullets before because I let you see them." Crowley smiled cruelly. "You intruded at my sufferance, and now you suffer."

Heinrich pushed off with his right foot and clawed at the padding to pull himself away from Crowley. "It won't matter. There are others. They will come back here. They hunt you down. You can't win."

"I've already won, Heinrich. If there are others, I will destroy them, and no one will mourn your passing or theirs." The occultist stepped around the bloody streak on the padding and stabbed the gun's muzzle to Heinrich's forehead. "No one cares if you live, Heinrich, so now you have to die."

He stroked the trigger once.

Heinrich lay staring dead-eyed at the ceiling, his head surrounded by a black halo of blood. A tiny rivulet wormed its way out of the hole in his forehead. It flowed down to the bridge of his nose, then split in two and slowly filled both eyes with blood. When those shallow basins brimmed over, the dark fluid ran like tears down both sides of Heinrich's face

As Crowley looked down at the small man's twisted body, he decided Heinrich had been right about at least one thing in his life. There *were* other Warriors—stupid, homicidal bigots—who would return. They would find their dead comrades. They would swear vengeance. And, if they ever learned who had hunted down their friends, they would come after him.

Crowley smiled. He knew that crew would need a big clue to figure out the identity of the culprit. He decided he'd give it to them.

He slipped a new clip into the Ingram.

He sat down to wait.

 Dark Conspiracy 3-18.jpg

Will filled a Styrofoam cup with what passed for coffee in Turquoise. He skirted a knot of men sitting in a circle in the center of the mess tent and found a folding chair that looked strong enough to support his weight. The second he sat down, the sharp legs of the chair dug into the earth and started to tip, but he righted himself without spilling a drop. Shifting the chair around to more solid ground, he sat back and put his tired feet up on a table.

He blew on the coffee for a second, then carefully sipped it. It tasted better than it had the day before, or at least seemed to taste better. He put it down to a real improvement instead of just wishful thinking, as a couple of the workmen had actually volunteered to take responsibility for things like coffee and meals. The daily influx of supplies usually brought with it some surprises that made living in the blue wilderness an enjoyable, if stressful, adventure.

Will had been amazed by the intricate and elaborate charade Jytte had set up in conjunction with the Japanese. She had argued, quite rightly he thought, that the workers were not going to function well if



they believed they were being sent out and away from Earth to another dimension that could prove dangerous. The dimensional

travel aspect just made things *too* weird, and that could have caused mass defections and unrest in the work camps.

To avoid that, the workers were introduced into Turquoise through a three-step process that worked exceedingly well. From Phoenix the workers were flown in a jet to Japan. With the exception of a few workers who had been in the armed forces, it was the first plane ride for the workers, and it took very little persuasion to get them to avail themselves of anti-motion-sickness drugs. The systemic sedatives they were given kept their stomachs under control and dulled their senses until they functioned on a level just higher than that of a lobotomized zombie.

Once they reached Japan, they were shipped in buses from the airport to the Galbro Center. Under the pretense of a physical examination and inoculations, they were drugged again and shipped to Turquoise through the dimensional gateway located at the center. Barely conscious when they arrived, Will, Tadd Farber and others in the know got them to the temporary buildings erected by the IDC ninjas.

The third step involved the workers' acclimatization to Turquoise. For most it was not difficult, because the change of scenery made the place fascinating. The generally cooler temperature and abundance of plant life—albeit blue—seemed to have a calming effect on the workers. Very few of them knew enough in the way of astronomy, botany or biology to tell they were not on Earth, and those expressing concerns were soon argued into complacency by self-proclaimed experts in whatever subject happened to be being discussed.

Everyone had gotten used to their new, temporary home. Most assumed they were somewhere in southeast Asia, and Borneo had recently been offered as a site. Will knew the night-music of birds and insects in the jungle

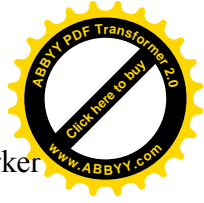
was unlike any heard on Earth, but the Eclipsers had no frame of reference from which to draw that sort of conclusion. In absence of fact, they made up their own reality and felt more secure in it than they would have if they knew the truth.

Will found himself slowly beginning to offer evidence that backed their explanations for things, because it kept a peace in the camp. The hardest thing for him to accept was that the blue foliage, when it started to die, turned green, then degenerated into a slime. One of the men suggested the bluish tint meant the plants were better suited to the cold, since everyone knew people's lips became blue in the cold. The green things turned to slime because they got too hot and just melted. While that explanation twisted logic into a Klein pretzel, Will saw that it made a basic sense and agreed to it to bolster the self-esteem of the man who had suggested it.

Tadd Farber entered the tent and slapped a couple of men on the shoulder. He laughed at a joke, then got himself some coffee and came over to join Will. "Long day, eh, Will?"

The Native American nodded. "Long, yes, but you seem to be holding up well."

Tadd smiled proudly and straightened his shoulders. Will had seen Tadd grow stronger with the responsibility thrust upon him. The workers seemed to regard Tadd as an informal supervisor and often shared little problems with him. Because of Bat's apparent respect for Tadd, the other toughs patrolling



the camp deferred to Tadd, and that made it easier for Tadd to keep some sort of order within the worker camp.

"I'm just burning off energy I've been hoarding for years." Tadd slapped his paunch. "More cases of beer went into this than I care to remember, but 10 days here is sweating it out of me. We're ahead of schedule on

setting up windmills and might maintain this pace if the phantom masons can stay ahead of us."

Will nodded as Tadd lowered his voice. In conjunction with Vetha, a number of creatures that Jytte had called Plutonians had been brought to Turquoise to do heavy lifting work. About the size of a Caterpillar tractor, and looking like an ant built by the same firm that manufactured armadillos, the Plutonians had incredible strength and actually seemed possessed of a basic intelligence. With Vetha giving them simple directions, they were capable of excavating and positioning over a dozen huge rock plinths on hillside terraces, then raising dolmen on them to provide the height needed for the windmill mechanism. Will had seen them the evening they cleared the space for the encampment, and he'd not slept well for the next two nights.

One of the men from the circle looked over at Tadd. "Hey, boss, you figure the phantom masons are out there tonight?"

Tadd shook his head. "How many times I gotta tell ya, Bill, them's fairies on steroids. You leave a bowl of milk out for them, and they do your work."

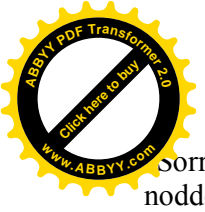
Will laughed lightly to bolster Tadd's joke. From the first, the biggest discipline problem they had encountered was the desire of the workers to go out and watch the dolmen going up in place. The lack of tractor marks around the work site, the lack of engine noise and the occasional breeze carrying some heavy and almost noxious scents from the work area became a mystery the men wanted to solve. Tadd had told all of them that the Japanese were in charge of that portion of the project, hence the lack of interaction, but a few brave souls had made attempts to see what really went on at night.

The Native American looked over the lip of his cup and studied the men in the circle. *Two are missing. The fat*

one—*Kent—and the kid from bwa.* He grabbed Tadd's shoulder. "Kent and Billy Kaufman aren't here."

Tadd set his cup of coffee down and swore. "Aw, shit, Mooney, you're not here gaslighting me while the Kent and Bill show tries to get a glimpse of the Japs, are you?" He stood and shook his head. "Not only will the security guys we got beat the hell out of them if they find them, but the Japanese have their cybeminja dudes out there. You guys stay here. Will, come with me and we'll see if we can find the Hardy Boys before they get into trouble."

Will dumped his coffee in a plastic trash bin as he followed Tadd out of the tent. "You find Bat and get his people to secure the perimeter. I'll tell Hal about these two, and he can warn the ninjas." Tadd nodded and cut off toward Bat's tent while Will shot off in the opposite direction. Dead center in clearing he found the mobile home that served as the command center for the beachhead. He vaulted the wooden steps in one leap and pulled the door open.



"Sorry to burst in, Hal, but we have two guys..." Will hesitated when he saw Hal Garrett was not alone and nodded to both the Yidam and Crowley's shadowform. "Two guys went into the jungle to try to see the 'phantom masons' at work. You need to alert..."

"...the Japanese." Hal reached for a walkie-talkie. "They'll find them, don't worry."

A hoarse male scream cut through the cool night air. Will turned and leaped off the stairs, then started to run north in the direction of the jungle and the windmills beyond. The Yidam caught up with him in two steps and Crowley came up right behind, though he seemed to be favoring his right leg. "I don't know what it could be—there's been nothing large and predatory we've found the jungle yet."

"Could be as little as someone having fallen and broken

a leg."

Will heard Crowley's words, but he knew neither of them believed it. They broke through the broad-leaved undergrowth and stepped into an alien world. The night-music had stopped with the scream, reducing the jungle to a static scene of long shadows and deceptive vistas. Unconsciously, Will began to downplay his reliance on sight and started to concentrate on sound, smell and intangible, extra-sensory impressions.

Crowley and the Yidam moved off toward his left. Will realized they were on the correct track toward the injured man. Making as little noise as possible as he moved through the jungle, Will could hear moans and a sibilant sound that he took to be the whispered reassurances of the second man to his fallen partner. The Native American knew he should head for them and offer assistance, but something else pulled at him and directed him deeper into the jungle.

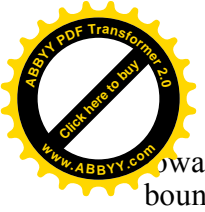
At one time Will would have denied what he was feeling. As he stalked through the jungle, he felt less himself than he did a vessel that an animal spirit could inhabit. As opposed to being a trespasser in the pristine, primal world of Turquoise, Will felt a part of the natural order in this place. The second he realized that, it also occurred to him that what he was tracking was something that was utterly alien to Turquoise.

As he expanded his senses, the proto-dimension of Turquoise became alive for him. He could feel his fellow humans and sensed the fear oozing out of them. From the north, he caught the hunting-searching intensity of the Japanese as they closed on the scream. From the Yidam, he got a sense of foreignness, and more so the Plutonians and Vetha out at the windmill site. That he got no indication of Crowley did bother him for a moment, but by then the Yidam had reached the pain locus he took to be

Billy or Kent, so he assumed Crowley's impressions were masked in the agony maelstrom.

He drifted more to the right, closing on his quarry. He did not know what it was, but he could tell it was different and wrong. He felt it was the rough equivalent of a mechanical dog among a litter of puppies. It was the right size and shape, but just had an artificial, constructed feel to it. Will latched on to its manufactured aspect and headed directly for it.

He found himself almost on top of it before he realized how close he had gotten. The creature's small size had deceived him into thinking it was actually a bit more distant than it was. The creature's head oriented



oward him, and Will felt a thrill run through him as the creature's mouth opened in a silent scream, it bounced back, leaping out of his way, and smashed into a thick-boled tree.

Part of Will realized he was unarmed except for a knife, but another part of him drew the blackened-steel Corvo knife without hesitation. He came forward, feinting once with the blade, then pulling back as the creature struck at him. Will hissed as he felt talons rake his forearm, but instinctively he knew it was nothing more than a flesh-wound.

The Native American lunged forward and slashed the knife's curved blade over the creature's torso. A thin line opened on its chest and began to ooze black, but Will caught no terror from the creature. Instead of fleeing as it had before, the beast cut to the right, then slammed a bony fist into Will's ribs.

The punch carried with it enough strength to lift the young man from his feet and deposit him in the brush about a dozen feet away. Will landed on his back and let his momentum carry him on a somersault through the undergrowth. He came back up, then ducked to the right,

as if by instinct, to avoid the creature's hurtling body. It missed with its flying tackle, and Will turned to face it in a small clearing.

Will felt a curious detachment. He saw himself circling this short, slender and armored beast like a coyote searching for a porcupine's soft spot. He realized the creature had struck at him defensively, hoping to scare him or hurt him enough to prevent pursuit. It wanted to escape him, not kill him.

Fearsome though it was, he knew it was not really meant for combat. The big eyes, large ears and inclination to run first told Will the creature was not a predator. This realization fed back on the mechanical nature of it, and the Native American suddenly understood its purpose in being in Turquoise.

He also knew that discovery of its purpose meant he had to kill it. To do that he had to become a predator, so, without a thought, he abandoned himself to the spirits his grandfather had taught him about all his life.

The fragment of human consciousness that remained in his skull accepted that the spirit that chose him was Raven. He flipped the hook-bladed knife over in his right hand until it mirrored a raven's curved beak, then came in at the creature. He feinted a slash with the blade, then kicked the creature square in the chest as it pulled away from the blade. A hop-step forward and another kick later, Will sent the creature sprawling.

Will landed on the creature's back and ran the knife around under its chin. Hauling back hard he felt the blade bite into and through the thick muscles of the beast's neck. He pulled back with all his strength and ended up all but severing the head. Black blood gushed out over his hands and the knife, but felt curiously cold and smelled bittersweet, like rotting flesh. The creature twitched twice, then lay still. As Will stood, he noted that its limb lay

twisted in an utterly unnatural pattern.

He felt a hand on his right shoulder, and full human consciousness returned to him as he focused on Crowley's shadowform. "Interesting prize you have here, Will."



the Native American grunted and dropped into a crouch. "It was a scout, Crowley. It was created specifically to do recon through the dimensions."

The shadow man nodded. "I wonder why it didn't leave Turquoise when you discovered it?"

Will shrugged. "Perhaps the threat level I represented did not trigger its desire for self-preservation."

"Or its sense of self is subordinate to its sense of duty." Crowley crouched down beside Will and touched the creature's chitinous mask. "Looks rather like a samurai's battle-mask, wouldn't you say?"

Will nodded. "Could be. Does that mean what I think it does?"

"That Ryuhito had a hand in creating this thing? Perhaps." The shadow man rested his elbows on his knees and interlaced his fingers. "The fact that it did not leave when discovered suggests that not much thought was given to the sorts of situations it might face."

"You think it's a prototype scout just on a random mission?"

Crowley nodded. "That's the best we can hope for, I'm afraid."

Will grunted. "And worse case is that he's got big brothers and they'll be all over us like smog on LA."

"And soon," Crowley added, "much too soon."

 Dark Conspiracy 3-19.jpg

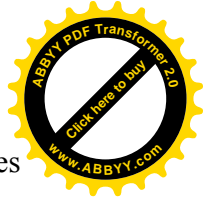
Betrayal!

Ryuhito smiled as he put a word to the emotion filling his chest with fire. *Betrayal!* He relished it, embracing every bit of pain and righteous anger it brought to him. As his great grandfather might have done with a new species of oceanic invertebrate, Ryuhito cataloged every detail of what he observed. He related it to what he already knew and realized he had known it before, but in a more docile and benign state.

it occurred to him, as he floated above the quartet of scouts that had returned, that he had known betrayal from the day of his birth. The techno-giant corporations that ruled Japan through an industrial shogunate had only ever really paid lip-service to the Imperial families. If his grandfather objected to the actions of this minister or that, the man would resign in disgrace. The corporations would choose another man, an ideological clone of the first, to replace him so business could continue as usual. Worse yet, of course, was the fact that the minister who had left power would not only *not* atone for his error through *sepukku*, but he would often be given a corporate position of greater power than he had known in the government.

Ryuhito looked around him and reveled in the sense of

correctness he gathered from the tower in which he floated. Once he had determined which of his warriors would operate well, he created armies of them and set them against each other in epic battles.



the losers were destroyed, but the victors were immortalized. They were permitted to form themselves into the walls and floors of his tower, surrounding him with the sort of loyal retainers his family had known since before time itself was born.

The corporations mocked the Imperial family and the traditions upon which their own power was based. Ryuhito had seen his grandfather pressured mightily by his conflict with the corporations and had bristled at the injustice of it. The corporations operated as if a coerced renunciation of divinity actually could have *stripped* the Imperial family of their birthright. That it could not was intuitively obvious to even the most casual of observers, but the corporations were not even as observant as that.

They will learn to regret their arrogance. Ryuhito nodded to himself with satisfaction. His current situation had helped him put his past into perspective, and with it came an important revelation: He knew he could use the sensation of betrayal to power himself. He felt it more strongly than he did pain and knew that a sense of betrayal was more acute within those raised in the Japanese culture. Being betrayed was a breach of honor that demanded restoration of same, and the drive to restore that equilibrium knew no equal in the Japanese psyche.

Ryuhito focused on his current betrayal. He decided, when one of his scouts did not return from an extended reconnaissance sweep of the dimensions, that Pygmalion had deliberately gone out and destroyed it. He had done so for reasons that actually made Ryuhito's face burn with shame, but any error he may have made in his designs did not warrant such a humiliating lesson.

He had learned, from the previous missions, that his

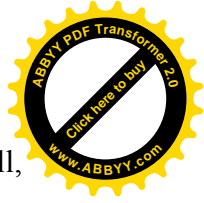
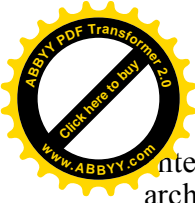
scouts were very good at returning and reporting on things they had seen. For the large part, the reports made reading soy futures in binary seem the excitement equivalent of live sex shows in the Chicago Stockyards, but Ryuhito had been pleased with how his scouts had functioned. Their armor and coloration defenses had kept them from harm and the most potent threats had come from adverse conditions instead of any indigenous life forms stalking the scouts.

The loss of a scout taught him a bitter lesson. Because he had not anticipated a scout failing to return, all data had been stored in the creature's brain until return. Providing a telepathic ability to communicate information in a realtime setting would not have been difficult. In fact, he conceded to himself, creating a creature that could handle reports that had shifting time differentials between the proto-dimensions would have been a challenge.

He also realized his scouts were flawed because they did not have a way to alert others in case of an emergency. He decided he should have cloned each of the scouts, or perhaps breed them in teams, so that at any sign of distress, another scout could be dispatched to find out what was happening to its teammate. With the real-time input, a lot of that information would already be available, but having another scout there to gather additional data would not hurt at all.

He put modifications on his list of things to do, elevating the genesis of his SCOUTINT sorting drone to the top. Having decided what he had to do to make his scouts better and having prioritized that information, he set that aside and again embraced his betrayal. *You may be my master, but there is no excuse for that sort of action.*

*nWhat action would that be, Highness?** Pygmalion's mental voice carried an amused tone with it as it forced itself into his brain. Walking on the air itself, the small man



entered the tower Ryuhito had created from the dried husks of his immortalized warriors through a tall, arching window.

Ryuhito opened his right hand and pointed toward his patiently waiting scouts. "One of my scouts did not return. Your object lesson has pointed out the flaws in the design, but coming to me and sharing them with me would have accomplished that end without acrimony."

Pygmalion nodded slowly and licked his lips as if he had just consumed a pastry. *"Indeed, acrimony tinged with betrayal and frustration. This I felt from you. I wondered at its genesis, and now I find I am it How fascinating.*"*

"You deny having destroyed my scout?"

Pygmalion pointed his index finger at one scout like a child making a gun from his hand. His thumb fell once, and the first scout crumbled to dust. A second twitch, and a scout evaporated; a third, and a scout burst into flames. Pygmalion gestured one last time, liquefying the fourth scout, then raised his finger up and blew on it before tucking it away in an imaginary holster.

«The fate of your toys, Highness, is of no consequence to me. They are a means to an end, a process through which I can help you realize your true power and potential. While your experiments with exoskeletons have been amusing, the fact that they lack any true artistry bores me.» Pygmalion shrugged, then frowned. *«Where has this scout gone missing?»*

Ryuhito hesitated, no longer certain his master had been tormenting him. "In Blue Africa, it is an unremarkable proto-dimension."

nUnremarkable because it possesses nothing to threaten you. I know it and, were it as accelerated in time as this place is, I might have chosen it for my domain. Nothing there should have been able to kill one of your scouts.»

"My hypothesis exactly."

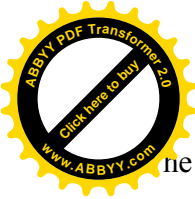
Pygmalion gestured sharply, and agony spiked from temple to temple in Ryuhito's head. *«Think, fool! If nothing there should have been able to kill one of your scouts, yet one of your scouts died there, what does it mean?»*

Ryuhito cried out with the pain, then forced it back under control. "Something else must be there. What?"

«Not what, but who?» Pygmalion's breath hissed out between clenched teeth. *«It cannot be Fiddleback and would not be the Empress of Diamonds. Baron Someday, perhaps? Midas Longclaws? Camillelion. Whoever it is, they seek to distract me and deflect me.»*

Ryuhito shivered as Pygmalion's tiny hands knotted and unknotted. *Ms enemies come for him. He is not invincible.*

*«No, my child, I am not invincible, but I am more than capable of handling you. And, yes, I have enemies. I bested Riddleback a second time now, and that means I have power. I have become noticed among my fellow Dark Lords, and if I am seen to be weak, they will try to tear me apart.** Pygmalion's dark eyes went blank for a moment, then returned with a malevolent fire playing through them. *»You, Highness, will be my tool for destroying my enemies.»*



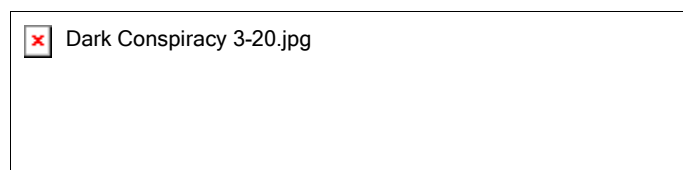
the man-godling nodded. "I will create more scouts and we will determine who this interloper is..."

"Forget your scouts," Pygmalion whispered in an irritated hush. *«I have dispatched tunnelers to build you a route through the dimensions to a place with a link to Blue Africa. You will take your battalions through the gateway there and destroy whatever is in Blue Africa. You can return through the tunnel.»*

"Will this not expose me to your enemies?"

•It is a risk I will accept I sense nothing out there of sufficient strength to harm you. You are a god, and having you working with me will give any of my enemies reason

to pause.» The little man smiled openly and glanced back out the window through which he had entered. *«You and your assault will buy me time, and I need very little of it, as you know. Go, Ryuhito, slay what you find. Let your action tell my enemies that opposition to me is an alliance with oblivion.»*



Will felt both better and worse as Bat unzipped the black body bag and exposed the thing he'd killed to the light in the trailer. Almost instantly, a sickly scent, akin to stagnant swamp water, filled the small enclosure. Even the Yidam didn't seem to like the stench, though he joined Crowley in stepping forward to get a better look at the thing.

In the light, Will had a better perspective on what he had slain. The long, tufted ears reminded him of a bat's ears, and he suspected he'd missed the creature's voice box when he slit its throat, so there was no way to confirm its ability to use echolocation like a bat. The oversized eyes had huge pupils surrounded by only the thinnest white circle. As Crowley had noted before, the hardened exo-skeleton covering the face did look like a samurai battle-mask, and subtle coloration variances on the breastplates and deltoid caps reminded Will of the rising sun flag of Imperial Japan.

Stretched out to its full length, the creature only stood 1.3 meters tall, but its short torso and long legs gave the impression it had been designed for speed instead of strength. The ache of his ribs still reminded him that the creature was very strong, and Will had already seen that

the bruise on his chest bore an impression of the weave of the cloth of his shirt.

Bat looked most closely at the wound in the throat. "Nice. Got the airway and the artery."

Will winced. "Thanks, I think." In many ways he still felt detached from the kill, as if he had not actually committed the act. Looking down at his hands, he still saw the black bloodstains on his shirt and beneath his fingernails, but he couldn't bring himself to believe he'd actually struck the blow that killed the creature. Something else had been in him, acting through him. He knew from his grandfather that such a thing was a blessing and, though it *did* thrill him to be so blessed, it also scared him deeply.



Crowley poked the creature in one of the pale green chestplates. With a thick, slushy sound, the plate pulled free of the flesh mooring it and slid toward the breastbone. A new wave of the swamp odor rose up from the body. "Interesting."

Hal frowned and offered Crowley a letter-opener from his desk. "We're not well equipped for an autopsy, but if you want to do one..."

The shadow-sheathed man shook his head. "I have no interest in that at all, actually. What I found fascinating is that the creature has already begun to decay. It looks as if there are microorganisms that feed off green chlorophyll. This explains why, as a plant dies, it shifts color from blue to green, then turns to slime."

Will smiled. "Of course, the green-chlorophyll eaters cause decay faster, returning resources to the soil, which promotes new generations of plants. This thing has chlorophyll, presumably so it can draw nourishment passively, without hunting." He looked up at Crowley. "That's why blue plants predominate here."

"That would seem to be the situation." Crowley folded his arms across his chest. "I wonder if this microorganism

attack is something that unconsciously inspired Herbert George Wells in *The War of The Worlds*?"

Tadd Farber drew in a deep breath of fresh air from the window, then looked back at the room's other five occupants. "H. Q. Wells? I don't follow you."

Hal smiled. "The ability to see anything in another dimension is a talent that not everyone has. Without people like Crowley around, our ability to transit dimensions would be severely limited except in dream or trance states. It is possible to have your consciousness drift, and Wells might have drifted here."

The Yidam nodded. "Given the temporal flux between dimensions and the ability of impressions to travel via circuitous routes, it is even possible that he is witnessing our speculation about his inspiration, thereby allowing us to inspire that which we speculate about."

Will shivered. "I don't think I want to think about that." He pointed to the scout. "Mr. Crowley, you said this might mean someone will be coming after us. What can we do? Should we evacuate?"

The shadow man looked over at Hal Garrett. "This is your show, Hal. You make the calls."

The African-American straightened up as much as the trailer would allow him. "I am open to suggestions, especially if we are likely to be under attack." He paused for a moment. "You know I don't like violence, and I don't approve of how you handled the Warriors, but I'm not one for making or being made a martyr. Do you have suggestions?"

Crowley nodded. "Tadd, get the workers together and tell them we've had a security breach. Tell them we suspect the thing that pushed Kent down into that ravine was a scout for a Red Army Faction terrorist cell out here to disrupt this operation. No one goes anywhere outside the compound without an armed escort."

He again touched the corpse. "The exoskeleton is good protection against getting bruised and chewed, but it won't stop a bullet. We have to issue guns to all of Bat's people. I think Will and Tadd should draw them as well. The loss of a scout is likely to draw a recon in force, and we have to be ready for it." Crowley turned



toward Hal. "You might want a gun yourself."

"I'll pass." Hal waved Bat out of the trailer. "You go get your people aimed, and draw as much ammo as you need."

The African-American turned his attention back to the corpse. "You said Ryuhito had something to do with this. Do we start assuming he has attained status as a Dark Lord and, if so, how do we deal with him?"

"This thing is strictly Lego blocks compared to what a Dark Lord can do. The biggest threat to us here is that Pygmalion decides to clean up and uses his troops against us." The shadow man looked at Tadd. "If we were faced with a half-dozen of fighters like your son, this would be over fast."

Tadd shook his head. "I'm glad Mickey isn't here."

"Amen to that." Hal picked up a walkie-talkie. "I think advising the Japanese of our situation would be good."

"Agreed. We definitely have to consider ourselves being centered in enemy territory." The Yidam tapped the crudely drawn map on the wall. "We are not in the most defensible position here, but the clearing has good fields of fire. There is a battle in your history that our position parallels."

"Little Big Horn?" Will asked hopefully.

Tadd shot Will a harsh side glance. "Most of us didn't have kin on the winning side of that one, Will."

The Yidam shook his head. "Roarke's Drift."

Hal scowled. "Perhaps I ~~io~~ take a gun, after all."

"Good. I can only use two at a time." Bat entered the

trailer and tossed a Mac-11 to Hal along with a web belt and two clip pouches. He handed similar rigs to Tadd and Will. "My people are heavy, but if Ryuhito's warriors get through, you can use these to stop them."

Will settled the belt around his waist. "You hope."

"No, you hope." As Bat let his AR-15 slide from his shoulder, Will saw the sheathed dagger he had on his left hip.

"I take it you expect to get close to anything we have to fight?"

Bat snapped the bayonet on to the AR-15. "Knife worked for you."

True, but I don't want to be that close again. Will said nothing and pulled the slide on the Mac-11 back into the firing position.

"I think we have trouble." Bat stood in the doorway and looked out. "Big trouble."

"What's the matter?" Tadd turned toward the south-facing window and shrugged his shoulders. "The sun's



coming up, big deal."

"I think, Mr. Farber, you will recall," Crowley commented as he drew his machine-pistol, "in this dimension, the sun does not rise in the south."

Ryuhito sent an honor guard of his warriors through first, then he entered Blue Africa through the circular dimensional gate. In Blue Africa, it looked no more remarkable than a circle of termite mounds, while in the dimension Girasol it appeared like a pond with a shimmering rainbow of lights. Stepping free of it, and refusing to let himself acknowledge the nausea he felt from using it, he floated up into the air on a disk made of golden light.

To his immense pleasure, he saw Blue Africa in all its dawning glory. Beneath the hilltop above which he hovered, he saw a compound filled with tents and a few mobile

homes. Beyond it, to the north, he saw a thick jungle that gave way to the hills on the far side of the valley. In the distance, he could make out some terracing and stones, but other details escaped him in the darkness. They did not matter, for his mission was to slay what he had found in Blue Africa and, clearly, the compound was his target.

He floated back down to the ground as his army climbed free of the dimensional gateway. The first battalion formed up, and Ryuhito smiled. As rank upon rank lined up, radiating green in the backglow of his glory, he saw his army would be more than enough to destroy those who had invaded Blue Africa.

The first battalion on station was a mixed assault battalion. Creatures he designated as Hammers made up the first company. The heavily built and thickly armored drones formed a solid wall behind which the rest of the battalion could advance. Drawn up in two ranks of 20, the Hammers could run at a top speed of 15 miles per hour, which had proven sufficient to blast through the defensive positions of the opposition in his wars. All bony spikes and blocky fists, both fortifications and enemy soldiers crumbled beneath their assaults.

Behind them came 80 of the half-sized warriors with the diffused nervous system that Pygmalion had praised. Try as he might, Ryuhito had not been able to find a design that worked as well at surviving a combat. Because their central nervous system had ganglia-knots at the joints, one part of the creature could be torn off and the rest of it would continue to function. Damage to the chest cavity could incapacitate one, but having two hearts—one high and one low—meant that even massive torso trauma would not guarantee a kill.

The Gnats, as he called them, used fangs and claws to kill. Aided by incredible reflexes and superior agility, they were difficult targets to hit. Because they kept coming and

coming, they forced the enemy to devote more resources to destroying them than they might have seemed worth. Because ignoring them was not an option, once the Hammers had opened a hole in the enemy line, the Gnats could terrorize the enemy from within.

Behind the Gnats came the warriors he called Paragons. Tall and slender, they had an incredible reach. Their hands and arms, while incredibly thin, were whiplike in their ability to strike and flay an enemy alive. At the same time, a Paragon possessed the strength necessary to crush a man's chest in its bony grasp. Built on legs that looked remarkably like those of a locust, Paragons could leap great distances,



and the claws on their feet could shred sheet steel. The tail, which they used for stability, had enough strength in its long, flat length to shatter bones and stone with a single swipe.

Confident of victory, Ryuhito bowed to his troops. In unison they executed a deep and respectful bow in return. Moderating his glow, Ryuhito gestured down the jungle hillside and toward the human compound. "Go, my children, feast on those who would do us harm." Feeling safe behind the wall of Hammers that slipped into the brush, Ryuhito advanced in the midst of the Gnats like a teacher leading anxious children on a field trip.

On reflection, Ryuhito realized he had erred in either not making his creatures utterly silent in their movements, or in not giving them hideous and terrifying voices. Though they moved through the undergrowth and through the forest like shadows, they were not careful about avoiding dead branches or topping rock piles that gave away their positions in the darkness. He knew his error stemmed, on one hand, from having waged his wars in the arid, desert-like climate of Pygmalion's headquarters. On the other, of course, he could not have borne the constant combat cacophony that would have accompanied his war games.

While he thought his troops unnecessarily loud in their advance, the thundercrack of the first gunshot startled him. It split the night in half and almost buried the thwip of a bullet exploding the head of a Gnat standing next to him. In an instant, he realized the shot—to get over the line of Hammers—had to have come from a sniper high in a tree. With no way to return fire—another error in his designs he acknowledged—he gave the only order he could.

"Level the jungle!"

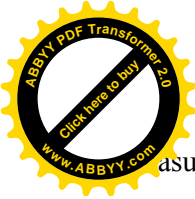
The Hammers broke into a run and slammed into the trees before them. Loud, wet snaps echoed between gunshots as the Hammer line closed and began to clear a path 60 feet wide. While he did see two snipers leap from their perches and scamper off before the assault, he saw the line was too wide and moving too slowly. The Hammers could not build up enough speed and, lacking sufficient intelligence to know when something should be bypassed, left holes in the line when a stone outcropping failed to give way.

Before he could stop them, the Gnats began to pour through those holes. Yipping and chittering like homicidal gerbils, the Gnats crashed on into the underbrush. He saw them scampering up the boles of trees, snapping off limbs and showering the ground with bark fragments. It occurred to him that the Gnats had always taken their cue in identifying the enemy by what the Hammers had assaulted, so the Gnats gleefully started to wage war on the jungle itself.

Elements within the jungle fought back. Scattered, single gunshots swelled together to become a ballistic hailstorm. Gnats mewed and wailed as bursts from automatic rifles blasted them from tree trunks. More concentrated gunfire staggered Hammers. The design conventions that made their armor light allowed bullets to

penetrate the Hammer bodies. Leaking black blood from dozens of wounds, they stumbled backward. The Hammer line crumbled, and the Gnats poured forward into the guns of the enemy.

For the barest of seconds Ryuhito thought the Gnats might carry the day. The men in the jungle used their weapons to great effect, literally shredding the Gnats as they advanced. The fact that the Gnats kept coming meant more fire was directed at them than would have to have been used against a human cadre of the same size. Had the Gnats been human, they would have better coordinated their attacks and avoided some



casualties, but with their rudimentary brains, any order beyond attack or kill meant nothing.

The Gnat line did not so much break as it was blown in little twitching chunks over the floor of the rain forest. Ryuhito watched his creations march into death without a shred of remorse. He used the humans' preoccupation with the Gnats to withdraw. Using the Paragons as a rear guard to screen his retreat, he headed back up the hill to where his second battalion waited.

He looked at them, then glanced back down at the waiting forest. "You will do, my pets, with a few changes. You will do indeed."

Using curt hand-signals, Will directed workers in placing the hastily filled sandbags. No one in the camp had taken the warning about the Red Army Faction lightly, and when Bat's men moved into the rain forest, tension rose in the compound. When the gunfire started, those who had not immediately crawled under cover started looking for something to do. Armed with shovels, picks, sledges and scythes, the workers formed themselves into a rag-tag peasant army.

"No freaking slimeball Jappo terrorists are going to

scrag this American," one man vowed with the voice of many.

It surprised Will no end to see Crowley walking openly through the camp. The men who looked at him, Will concluded on a moment's reflection, only saw a shadowed figure which, in the relative dark, should not have seemed odd to anyone. Crowley looked over the preparations and nodded as Will approached him. "What will they do now?"

"My guess is that we'll get hit with the heavy forces now." He pointed off into the distance toward where the last assault had bogged down. "This first assault was run like an operation using toy soldiers. The shock troops came first, then the light, fast troopers came later. The bullets we used on them had more brains than most of things they tore up. My guess is that this next wave will come with similar troops, but each one of them will be more heavily armored."

The Native American frowned. "Isn't another frontal assault rather foolish?"

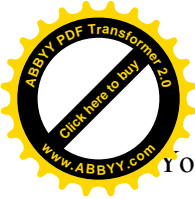
"Yes, but I don't believe Ryuhito will see it that way. The integrity of his creations is on the line. He has to try with brute strength one more time or admit he's foolish."

"If he comes at us again with a frontal assault, he'll *prove* he's foolish."

Crowley slapped Will on the back. "Exactly, which is why we can't let him get a third try at us, because there will be no predicting what he will do." The shadow man glanced off to the north. "I know we can beat him this time, but after that..."

Somewhere out toward the south, a single gunshot broke the stillness of the night. Will ran forward and hunkered down behind a sandbag barricade. As he drew his Mac-11, he saw Crowley go running forward toward the edge of the jungle. In a second, more because it felt

right than it seemed smart, Will leaped up and followed him. He dropped to the ground beside the shadow man, then crawled forward to the bole of a tree.



"You don't have your normal sidekick, so I'll fill in, okay?"

"Glad to have you, Will."

Will strained his ears to hear anything. "Are they out there? I can't hear them."

"Not a question of hearing, Will, but of feeling." Will saw gold glint from Crowley's ring finger as he waved his right hand in a circular motion before the jungle. "You can feel them out there, I know you can."

The Native American took a deep breath and forced it out slowly. Narrowing his eyes, he willed his consciousness to expand. He forced it into the forest, controlling it so it would not spread out behind him and confuse him with the emotions of the other workers. He smiled, realizing that he did have that sort of control over his perceptions within Turquoise, and once again he felt ancient spirits coming to his aid.

His perceptive barrier pushed on out and down into the ravine that ran to the south of the compound. Against the dark backdrop of the steep slope, he picked up the intensity of Bat and his people. They kept their fear in check by letting unbridled hatred roar through them. They knew the foe they faced was unlike anything they had ever fought before, and that excited them. They lived to slay the monsters in the dark, and Will realized they would likely die doing just that.

Beyond them, he pushed his perception and watched as the landscape unfolded before his mind's eye. Past the stream that had formed the ravine and on up the gentle slope to the other side he traveled. He found the place where the initial assault had withered and died. Life leaked from countless bodies, and it was not until he started to

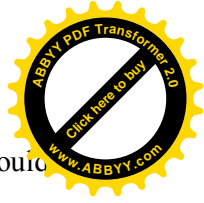
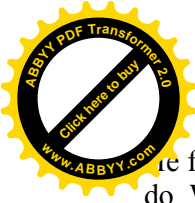
count the individual lifesparks that he realized there were so many of the enemy dead, it seemed to him that there should have been more pain, more agony present, hanging like a miasma over the battlefield, but there was not.

The ebbing lifestuff drifted up and away from him like smoke, it took him a moment to figure out that it was not rising to any sort of heaven, but was being drawn up the hill toward the crest of it. Will looked up, rotating his perspective so he faced the direction of the hill. There at the top he saw the crestline silhouetted against the pale glow that might have been a dawning sun. He saw the fragile life-wisps inching their way up toward the summit, and he followed them.

Dread grew in his belly as he did so. He pressed on, then hit a wall that he could not penetrate, it frustrated and angered him, but secretly delighted him. He knew, as much as he wanted to know what lay on the other side of the hill, he had no desire to face whatever it was that created the wall.

He wanted to turn back, but he knew piercing the wall was important. He searched within himself and found hidden strength right where his grandfather had told him he would. His consciousness seemed to meld once again with that of his surname-namesake, and he suddenly saw and felt himself a raven flying purposely up over the wall and on up the hill. He felt etheric wings beat strongly to propel him forward. With the strength of each motion, his self-confidence grew. He drove himself harder and, triumphantly cawing, he swooped up and over the top of the hill.

Will convulsed as his consciousness abruptly snapped back into his body. He dropped his gun, then clutched his arms around himself. "God in heaven, no!"



He felt Crowley's hands on his shoulders. "Easy, easy. Trying to breach that wall is not something you should do. We can just waft on this side and give an early warning to

the men when the assault comes."

"You don't understand, Mr. Crowley, I got through."

"You got through?"

"I did, I got through." Will shook himself and forced his terror away. "Ryuhito is up there, and he has plenty of troops. More are arriving each minute. "This won't be Roarke's Drift or even Little Big Horn." Will picked his Mac-11 up again. "This is Desert Storm, and we're defending Iraq."

 Dark Conspiracy 3-21.jpg

Ryuhito studied the proud ranks of his warriors and knew victory would be theirs. He had mutated his Hammers into Ultra -Hammers by filling in the holes in their armor and doubling their size. He made their brains larger and managed to instill in them enough of a basic cognitive framework that they would recognize insurmountable obstacles and deal with them appropriately. *Of course*, he allowed to himself, *with their strength they are now invincible*.

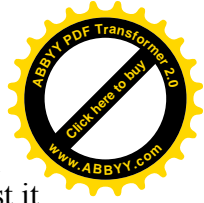
Two companies of Ultra-Hammers stood backed by two companies of Wasps. Gnats had been enlarged and more strongly armored. The need for more intelligence did demand a centralization of their nervous system, but the addition of horns and a thick skull-plate protected the added brains he stuffed into their heads. More importantly, though, he modified their bracers to provide them with missile weapons capable of visiting accurate and deadly retributions on snipers.

He reveled in the elegance of the design. In a system reminiscent of how a shark always has teeth growing up out of its jaw, a four-pointed star-shaped piece of chitin grew flat atop the bracers. When one of his Wasps cranked its hand up and back, the internal pressure

forced the top star up and around so one of the points positioned itself between the Wasp's middle two fingers. Bringing the arm forward and accompanying it with a snap of the wrist would free the organic shuriken and sent it off on its way.

Because of how he had designed his creations, they could continuously create new throwing darts, because their chlorophyll allowed them to draw energy from sunlight alone. He knew they would need more nutrients to be able to produce an ongoing supply, so, while he worked on the Paragons, he set his Wasps to foraging and devouring all the plant and animal life they could find behind the Gltra-Hammer line.

The Paragons he changed the least. He filled in the holes in their armor and provided them with enough muscle to move. He modified chitinous plates on their backs so they could flick out and help the



Paragons get lift during, or glide after, their leaps. Their weaponry became more formidable just with their increased bulk. He half-considered giving them some sort of missile weapon, but decided against it. The samurai had shunned the gun because it lacked honor. So, too, would his Paragons remain unsullied.

With a clap of his hands, he called the Wasps back from their foraging. He intensified his solar glow so they could charge themselves up, then he pointed toward the forest and the encampment beyond it. "There, my children, are your enemies. Yours is the honor to succeed where your brethren failed."

Will saw the sky brighten and swallowed hard. "They'll be coming now."

Crowley nodded and stood. "We'll pull back to the barricades. Better fields of fire."

The Native American frowned. "But don't we need to be

here to cover Bat's men as they retreat?"

"Do you honestly think they'll retreat?"

Will shook his head and ran back to one of the sandbag fortifications. To reach it he had to pick his way through a tangle of sharpened stakes that had been cut from the jungle and stabbed into the ground a good 20 meters in front of the sandbags. Like a porcupine's quills, the ends of the stakes had been barbed so that any creature impaling himself on one would do more damage pulling it free than it made going in.

It struck Will as curious that the stakes had been placed thickly on either edge of the compound, but more thinly distributed toward the center. Likewise, the sandbag shelter in the middle of the line had no one standing behind it, while all four of the others did. Clearly, Crowley and Hal wanted to channel the warriors into the middle, but if the line could not hold, the enemy would split their camp in half and destroy them.

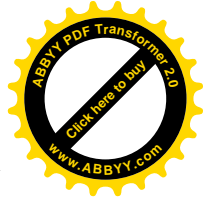
He looked to the right and to the left. On his right, two sandbag shelters down, Tadd stood amid a knot of hard and determined men. Tadd gripped his Mac-11 tightly and pointed it downrange toward the darkened forest and the glowing hill beyond it. Behind him, the men carried their shovels and other tools as if they were waiting for scab labor to try to cross a picket line. Will admired their bravery, but having seen what he saw, he knew they were whistling their way through a graveyard.

To his left, Crowley crouched within a sandbag semicircle. He spoke to the men with him in a low but confident voice. Their faces slackened a bit, then closed up as a grim determination entered their eyes. Crowley had told them the score, and they accepted it. Will smiled, knowing how Crowley's ready acceptance of him made him feel. *He is a true leader of men.*

Will looked at the men standing with him. Wearing

yellow, plastic hardhats, threadbare flannel shirts and dirty jeans, they looked as about as unsavory a lot as he could ever imagine having seen in his life. As they looked back expectantly at him, he realized that they were looking to him for leadership, it struck him that back in Eclipse they could have just as easily been part of a gang who would have gone after him for being an Indian.

"This isn't going to be easy, guys." Will gave them a half-smile and got nervous grins in response. "I'll soften them up, then you've got to take them down. You can use the sledges to break heads or crack backs. Belly



utton to skull, front and back, those are your killing zones. These guys have some sort of armor on—real fanatics."

One of the guys waved Will's last remark off. "You don't need to lie to us, bro. Tadd gave us the word—we're a long way from home, and something out there opened a gate to Hell."

"Okay, you're up to speed." Will ducked his head as gunfire started crackling down in the ravine. "They're coming, and they're not human. Kill all you want, they'll make more."

The gun-thunder rose to a crescendo that filled the broad valley with deafening noise. Will strained to hear any screams, but he could hear nothing in the confused explosions. He tried to concentrate enough to push his mind out so he could see how the battle raged, but the fear from his men and the staccato popping distracted him. By the time the noise began to die, a great crashing sound began to build. Echoing from north to south and back again, the crashing grew louder as it came closer and told Will who had won and who had lost down below.

Even having seen the troops Ryuhito had raised did not prepare Will for the spectacle of their arrival in the compound. Trees shivered and shook, then fell toward the

compound as if being knocked down by a gigantic steamroller. When the last tree toppled, the enemy front line paused for a moment at the edge of the clearing.

Tall and thick-limbed, the heavy creatures in the front line stared back at the human defenders with piggy eyes full of hatred. Their blocky fists ran with blood and plant juices, and a number of the creatures bled from open wounds. One by one they raised their muzzles to the sky and let out with a blood-curdling howl, then hunched their shoulders and charged.

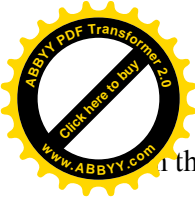
Their wide line narrowed toward the middle of the spike field, and Will opened up with his machine-pistol, it started to rise with the recoil on him, but he brought it under control and it came around in a tight little circle. It shattered the armor plate on one of the massive monster's shoulders. Armor fragments and more bullets minced the flesh beneath and blew apart the shoulder-girdle. As the monster twisted around with the impact, its arm dangling by a thin strip of bleeding muscle, another charging creature hit it from behind and drove it into the stakes.

Four sharpened wooden shafts pierced the lead monster's body, but three others snapped off when they hit armor. The body, propelled forward by the momentum of its charge and the impact from behind, started to roll and flatted yet more stakes. Dead even before the heavy hooves of its companions stomped it to pulp, the creature Will had shot all but cleared a path through the stakes.

Will hit the tab at the rear of the grip and slammed another clip home as the spent one dropped away. He felt the ground tremble as he brought the gun up again. A second monster, this one shot in the knee by Tadd, went down and opened a hole through the stakes. Leaping above him, the first of the behemoths started sprinting forward and his fellows followed in a tight arrow formation.

Will tried to pick a target as the shaking ground toppled

some of his sandbags. *We are done!* Ready to consign himself to death, his eyes narrowed, and he burned a clip at one of the approaching monsters. It fell, and he reloaded again, fully believing until he saw movement



in the corner of his right eye, that he had two more seconds to live.

From back behind the lines, having built up speed on a dead gallop through the center of the compound, the Plutonian Phantom Masons blasted into the monsters' line like Cathaginian elephants crushing a Roman square. Will saw one of the behemoths lifted up and tossed like scrap paper through the air. The snapping sound of armor plates being crushed beneath titanic legs filled the air, and an acrid, cloying stink washed over the battlefield.

Vetha, a bone-pale death-goddess, rode perched atop the lead Plutonian. Bursting through the behemoth line, she faced an immediate attack by the secondary troops. Will saw scale-stars flash through the sky and ricochet from her ivory form. One of the creatures leaped high in the air to attack her, but she speared a forelimb through its chest, then discarded the body before he had even reached the apex of his jump.

As the Plutonian charge carried on through the behemoths, scattering them like mobile homes in a tornado, the smaller creatures poured through the openings. Will heard things whizzing through the night air and heard a gurgle as one of his men went down with a chitin-star in his throat. "Down, down!" he shouted. Raising his gun enough to clear the sandbags, he tracked a prolonged blast against the front.

Twisting around with his back to the sandbags to reload, he saw two more of his six men down with the throwing stars embedding in their bodies. More importantly though, coming on the heels of the Plutonian attack, the Japanese cybeminjas poured into the battle. "Yee-ha!"

The Cavalry has arrived!" he shouted, then laughed insanely when he realized what he'd actually said.

Their automatic rifles lipped flame in controlled bursts that sent the smaller creatures reeling. Moving up in fire teams, they covered each other and directed withering amount of fire into the boiling mass of bodies. Their concentrated effort ground the enemy advance down and started the tide to ebb.

Witt rose to one knee and poked the snout of his machine-pistol over the sandbags as one of the behemoths rose up two feet from him like a titan. The monster raised both of its fists for a crushing overhand blow, and Will started to fall back away from what would have been ground zero for the blow. He knew, as he fell and weakly kicked out to propel himself backward, he could not escape.

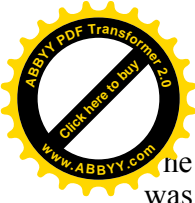
Suddenly someone grabbed Will by the collar and yanked him back. Tossing him clear with the lower pair of arms, the Yidam stepped up and stuffed the muzzle of an improbably huge rifle up under the behemoth's chin and pulled the trigger. The muzzle flash shined out of the creature's mouth and nostrils. A little fountain of blood spurted up out of the top of the monster's skull, then the beast fell backward, crushing two of the smaller attackers beneath its bulk.

Crowley pulled Will to his feet and shouted in his ear. "These are what you saw, right?"

"Yeah, but more and different things might be coming through." Will snapped off two bursts at the first creature to reach his former shelter. It went down, and one of his men pulped its head with a sledgehammer before breaking and running back behind the Japanese line.

"Coming through?"

"I told you, they were coming through in a circle of termite nests."



The Yidam joined the two of them and shouldered his incredible rifle. Longer by a good bit than Will was tall, the rifle spat out a two-foot flame and the recoil half-slewed the Yidam around. Will saw another of the behemoths jerk upright, then fall lifeless.

"What the hell is that, an antitank rifle?"

"It is, and aren't you glad he's carrying it." Crowley pointed off back toward the hill. "Will says there is a dimensional gate up there. We have to shut it down or he'll have reinforcements in a second."

The Yidam nodded. "Ryuhito will not like that."

"Agreed." Crowley grabbed Will by the back of the neck. "Let's go."

"But wait..." Will looked back and through the smoke he saw Tadd go down. "They need us..."

The battlefield vanished in a gray haze as Crowley tugged him backward. "No time, Will. We have to stop the troops from coming through or everyone dies." The shadow man half-carried him forward and up, then parted the gray mist with a knife-like chop of his hand. "Look sharp."

Will brought his gun up and swept it toward the circle of termite mounds to the south. He was about to pronounce the way clear when one of the smaller creatures popped up and scrambled toward them. He fired a burst that started the beastie spinning, and Crowley hit it with another that stitched a line of holes across its chest. It went down and did not move.

The Yidam raised an eyebrow. "They appeared much more vital than that to me before."

Crowley grunted as he knelt beside what looked like a firepit and dirt clearing surrounding it. "Chlorophyll, remember? They're feeding off Ryuhito, and in the dark their batteries run down. He has their metabolism cranked, so in the dark they're dormant. Chances are he doesn't really

realize this."

Crowley fell silent as he studied a set of eight shallow holes scooped out of earth. Set in two rows of four, each hole had a small pile of pebble? in it. He poked at a couple of the stones, then glanced back at the termite mounds. He shrugged and thumbed two stones from one hole and pitched them into the depression opposite their original home.

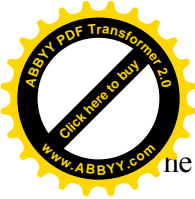
Will squatted down beside him. "Owari?"

"Close. It's the control mechanism for the dimensional gate." Crowley picked a red stone out of a hole and tossed it away. As Will watched, the stone reappeared in the hole. "Primitive, but effective. Now I've set it to block more things from coming in."

"Good." Will let the distant sounds of gunfire punctuate his sentence. "Now we can go back and help the others." He stood and checked his last clip. "I have a dozen bullets left to nail those things."

Crowley shook his head. "We can't go."

"Why not?"



he Yidam shouldered his rifle by its sling. "We have to wait."

The peaceful finality of both men's voices acted like a heavy blanket to smother the vengeful fire in Will's soul. "We have to wait here to make sure no one reopens the gate, right?" As both of them nodded, will continued, "Which means we're waiting for him."

Ryuhito, riding a helios-disk, streaked up and over the lip of the hill. "Who are you that dares thwart a god?" The Japanese prince landed and strode forward, the solar glare lighting the hilltop like a halogen lamp. "Your friends are dying below, and I will kill you here."

As Ryuhito strode casually into range, Will threw a punch at him. The prince parried the blow with little effort, tossing Will aside like a toy. Where Ryuhito's forearm

touched him, Will felt a searing pain. Hitting the ground, he clutched his burned arm to himself and rolled up onto one knee.

Ryuhito laughed at him. "I am a god, little man. It is not allowed for you to touch me."

The Yidam lunged forward and grabbed Ryuhito's wrists in his powerful upper hands. He lifted the prince from his feet and held his arms wide apart, but Ryuhito seemed neither concerned nor frightened. His glow intensified, and smoke began to rise from the Yidam's clothing. The sling on his rifle burned away, but the Yidam maintained his grip and started to pummel Ryuhito with his lower set of arms.

"It is not possible! I am a god!" Ryuhito roared.

"As I have become, as well!" The Yidam gnashed his teeth as he rammed his head into Ryuhito's chest. "To catch a god, you set a god."

The prince gasped aloud and his glare faded just a whit, then it started to build in intensity and focus itself down through Ryuhito's eyes. The solar light tightened down into twin nova-beams that started the Yidam's flesh sizzling at their touch. The Yidam screamed in pain, then pulled his clawed thumbs back and drove them both through Ryuhito's wrists.

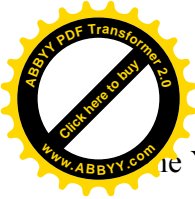
The Prince's blood ran like liquid fire over the Yidam's flesh.

Will dashed forward, smelling the bittersweet scent of singeing hair, and grabbed the Yidam's rifle up off the ground by the barrel. Without looking, without thinking, but trusting in the spirits to guide him as they had before, he swung the massive rifle around like a baseball bat and smashed Ryuhito in the back of the head. Light exploded, and the gun ignited, then Will felt himself spinning like a top through an ocean of molten gold.

In a heartbeat, everything went dark. Will didn't know

if he had fallen or had been knocked unconscious or what. He felt dazed and dazzled. His hands began to hurt, pulsing with the angry sensations of a bad bum. He tried to take a step forward, but found he had to stand up first, then he blinked his eyes and saw shadows moving in a dark gray world.

One more blink and tears ran down his cheeks. He saw Crowley pulling Ryuhito's motionless body off



the Yidam. Will crawled over in their direction and looked up at the shadow man. "Is he dead?"

"You cracked his skull, I think, but enough of the rifle stock had combusted that you didn't kill him." Crowley rolled Ryuhito onto his face and folded the youth's arms across his chest. "He'll be out for a good long time, and I know of a dimension where time runs slowly enough that he'll be out until we decide how to treat him."

Will nodded unconsciously and looked down at the Yidam. Ryuhito's eyebeams had burned criss-cross scars over the chest, blistering and charring flesh. The Yidam's upper arms and hands were badly burned, and Will knew the creature had to be in incredible pain. "What can I do for you?"

The Yidam forced his face into a smile, "It is too late to ask for sunblock, I think."

Crowley shook his head. "We'll dip you in aloe and get you healthy again."

"No. I was not god enough to stop Ryuhito on my own, and I am too much a mortal to recover from the attempt." The Yidam glanced over at Will then again at Crowley. "Tell my daughter I remembered her as such." His back bowed as pain radiated off him, then his body slackened and his eyes went glassy.

Crowley reached over and closed the Yidam's eyes. "One more thing for which Pygmalion will pay."

Will shook his head. "Ryuhito killed him, not Pygmalion."

Your people believe in an eye for an eye, don't they?"

"Yeah, but we also hold the person responsible for the actions of their agents." Crowley hoisted Ryuhito up and draped him over his shoulder. "And, yes, I'd shed no tears if Ryuhito here ended up dead. Of course, I'd rather see him on our side. I know some people in a place where he could learn some things. The Yidam came from there."

Will stood slowly, holding his hands carefully in front of himself as the pain built. "I'd like to learn, too."

Crowley nodded. "I can arrange that. Want a lesson now?"

Will smiled and followed him over to the eight holes, then squatted down. "What do I do?"

"Move one of those blue stones from hole two to hole four. Good. Once I go through the dimensional gate, you have to move the stones around so Pygmalion will have a hard time tracking me." Crowley shifted Ryuhito around as sporadic gunfire sounded from the encampment. "Get back down there, gather the survivors. I'll return for you then."

As Crowley turned toward the termite mounds, Will saw something move behind him. The Native American kicked out, knocking Crowley down as the beastie they had shot before snapped both arms forward. The chitin-stars hissed through where Crowley had stood, missing him by inches.

The shadow man shed the Prince in a roll and came up on one knee, with his Mac-10 blazing. The bullets tore up sod on a direct line between the creature's legs, then tracked upward. The .45-caliber slugs opened the monster up from groin to throat and knocked it back against a blood-splashed termite mound.

Crowley jammed a new clip into the smoking Mac-10. "Ryuhito's light display must have been enough to



revive it for that last shot."

"It made it count." Will tried to roll up on his side, but the

pain in his chest from where the chftin -stars had hit stopped him. He coughed once and felt a sliver of agony pin him to the ground. Again he coughed, and it hurt less, but he tasted blood in his mouth and felt a rivulet trail down his cheek.

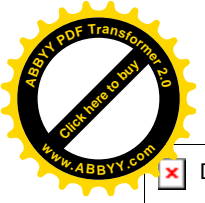
Crowley knelt beside him. "Hang on, Will. I'll dump Ryuhito and be back."

Will weakly pushed him away. "Go, go before I can't move the stones."

Crowley nodded grimly and stood up. "Your son wants for nothing in his life. You know that. You have my word."

The Native American nodded. "My grandfather trusts you, so do I. The Man Who Dies Far From Home believes the Ghost Who Lives."

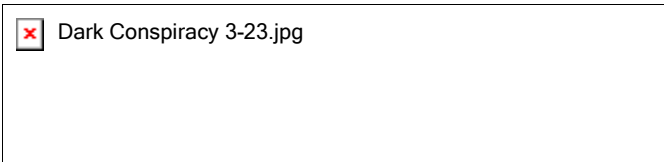
Like a phantom, Crowley retreated with Ryuhito to the circle of termite mounds. Will saw a bluish flash, then reached out with his left hand and began to brush stones from one hole to another. He measured the rest of his life by the number of stones he could move between coughs. He didn't die as fast as he feared he might, nor did he live as long as he hoped he would, but he died happy knowing any search for Ryuhito would die right where he did.



Dark Conspiracy 3-22.jpg



Dark Conspiracy 3-23.jpg



Awakening from a nightmare of pain and fire is not a pleasant experience. It is made less so by opening your eyes to find yourself lying on a bier in a sepulchre. I could feel death around me, clinging like stale perfume, and my return to consciousness came with a knowledge of death's reluctance to surrender its grip on me. With an etheric *until we are one again*, death left me alive but not at ease.

My eyes, having been closed, were pre-adjusted to the darkness, but it took my brain some time to become used to *seeing again*. I had no idea where I was nor how long I had been there. I raised a hand to my chin and felt no stubble, which would have suggested only a short stay, but back at the edge of my



aw near my right ear I found a spot the person who had shaved me had missed.

That hint of beard provided no clue as to the length of time I had spent in the small cave, but it did tell me other things that were valuable. The first was that I had not been left entirely alone to recover from my wounds. Second, and more significant, I found the attention to my appearance disquieting. It suggested at least one of those watching over me had given some thought to more than my recovery, but no one in my circle of acquaintances shared with me the sort of relationship that would bring

with it such concerns.

My right hand moved up from my jaw to touch the garland of laurel leaves encircling my head. It surprised me at first, then prompted a smile. I could have seen Crowley crowning me with such a wreath, but only after I had recovered. I realized then that the wreath, short kilt and sandals I wore were all of a set, and that answered some questions while creating more.

Crowley had told me of a proto-dimension in which regeneration was part and parcel of the natural laws. I remembered enough of my last moment of consciousness to know I had to have been in dire need of that place's powers. Just the fact that I knew I wore sandals because of how the straps bound my calves and the leather felt against the soles of my feet meant that my broken spine and severed spinal cord had been repaired.

I idly scratched my chin with my left hand and smiled when I felt no pain in the joint that had been destroyed fighting the Aryans. The return to functionality of my limbs, my return to life and my attire all suggested strongly that I had been deposited in the proto-dimension that had been placed as part of the Greek Tartarus in legends. Crowley would have seen to that because he knew better than anyone else that I would be needed to destroy P*ygmalion.

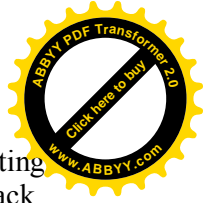
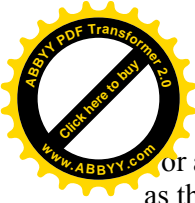
Crowley, on the other hand, would not have worried about my attire being in character with the place he left me. The cave would have been his choice because of the relative safety it granted me, but had I not been disturbed since he brought me to it, I would have still been wearing whatever clothes I had worn at the accident site or in the hospital.

Closing my eyes, I brought my breathing under control. As I had been taught to do by Fiddleback's minions, and had reinforced by Lama Mong at a Tibetan monastery, I

reached out with my mind to tear open the fabric of reality. I focused my mind on the suite I had once lived in at the Galactic Brotherhood headquarters, since its stark simplicity reminded me of the cave and bier. Pouring all my energy into it, I tried to force my way back to Earth.

My attempt failed utterly and completely. I felt as if the proto-dimension in which I existed had become fossilized. The shell that protected it and segregated it from other proto-dimensions had become as hard as diamond. I could not penetrate it and I knew, consciously and intuitively, that my egress had been blocked very deliberately.

I also knew that Fiddleback could not be doing the blocking and that Pygmalion, had he been able to discover me, would have destroyed me. That meant another Dark Lord, or someone of similar powers and abilities, had become enmeshed in my fate.



or a moment, returning to my nightmare seemed like a pleasant alternative to living. I knew that, as inviting as that surcease might have seemed, allowing myself to accept it would have doomed millions as Fiddleback and Pygmalion fought for control of Earth. I had decided long ago that I would not be a party, either active or passive, to such a thing, so I resolved to live on.

With my stomach muscles aching in protest because of their long inactivity, I sat up. The cave, with its glassy-smooth walls, appeared to have been formed when an oval bubble of gas became frozen in the middle of a lava-flow. At the end toward which my head had been pointing, a narrow tunnel led out toward sunlight, yet contained enough twists and turns that only a diffuse amount of light illuminated the interior of the cave.

And the woman standing across from me.

Swinging around to face her, I let my legs hang over the edge of the bier and dangle an inch or so above the

ground. I smiled. "I would have hoped for more suitable attire when I met the Empress of Diamonds."

The petite woman covered her surprise well. I felt none of it, and only caught a hint of it in the slight tremor running through the dark veil hanging down from the brim of her hat. Wearing a sleeveless, black leather dress that fell to her calf, elbow length gloves and ankle-high boots, she seemed appropriately dressed for a graveside appearance. A diamond choker, bracelet and anklet provided a striking contrast to her clothes, and the choker looked especially attractive against the darkish flesh of her throat.

She spoke carefully, in a voice I recognized, with a diction and vocabulary I could not reconcile with the person I had known in the body she wore. "Your deductive abilities have been woefully underestimated. Shall I call you Coyote, or does another of your pseudonyms please you more?"

"Coyote will suffice." I chose not to stand, which left us at an equal eye level. "I admit I am amiss in not having established contact with you sooner, but until now I had not pieced together the implications of the things in which I have been involved."

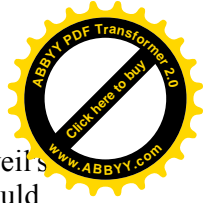
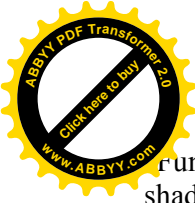
"You have been preoccupied. Opposing one like Fiddleback is not a task that permits distraction."

I nodded appreciatively. "True, but it is a task that demands certain skills and abilities which prompted my predecessor to choose me to continue his crusade to keep Earth free. Those abilities include things like being able to actually perceive things in dimensions outside that of your birth and dimension walking. Coyote could not do those things—he was blind to the reality outside that of Earth."

I gestured toward her. "This is the reason he concluded an alliance with you and invited you to place Natch Feral as your agent within his core group. He needed someone through which he could gain information about Dark Lord

activities. Jytte had knowledge of Pygmalion, but even she denied it and denies it still. Entering into an alliance with a Dark Lord is a difficult thing to justify. Did he see you as the least of the evils?"

Even her laughter sounded different. More throaty, it carried with it less of an edge and spoke to eons of life and experience. "I believe he saw me as the *last of the evils*." She stepped closer to me, crossing the small chamber in two steps and readjusted the laurel wreath on my head. "How do you like your clothes?"



functional, though a bit less utilitarian than I might prefer." I narrowed my eyes and tried to pierce the veil's shadow, but even knowing what lay behind it, I could see nothing. "How are you the /astof the evils he could face?"

She laughed again, throwing her head back and giving me a fleeting glimpse of her jaw. "Unlike your Pygmalion and Fiddleback, I do not have an aggressive aspect. They are builders and synthesizers. I am a salvager. I salvaged your clothing from the Titan who is imprisoned here." She held up her right hand and jiggled the bracelet. "If you think of it, even these diamonds are salvaged from carbon. I salvage things and make them my own."

I reached up with my left hand and carefully pulled off her hat. "You salvaged Hatch's body."

"I salvaged Natch herself. I sensed her distress and actually had some of my people whisk her body away before she was dead." She looked at me through Hatch's blue eyes, but in a way Natch had never looked at me. "I thought it would be suitable to wear a familiar face to greet you on your waking."

I frowned. "Natch is not dead?"

"By no means—she was too faithful and loyal, unconsciously so, that I would not let her die." The Empress of Diamonds gave me a smile that almost seemed right. "I salvaged her once before, though she never knew it,

because I used Coyote as my agent to save her. As I am a carbon-based life form too, slipping in and using her body is not at all difficult. I often used her to communicate with Coyote directly."

"And you used her to salvage Bat?"

"My aspect is salvage, not disaster relief." She left her left index finger trace the line of my jaw. "Coyote was willing to work with me to oppose Fiddleback because he knew I would and could only exert power after another Dark Lord had brought something to ruination. Having enough power to conquer and despoil the Earth would be more than enough needed to destroy me, preventing me from bringing my plans to fruition, so we had an alliance bom in a common enemy."

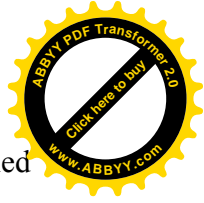
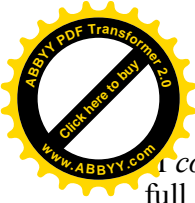
I smiled slowly. "So, why are you here? Am I salvage?"

The Empress of Diamonds turned Natch's body away from me in a coy move that would have embarrassed Natch to death. "No, but I am interested in salvaging my alliance with Coyote."

"I see." I leaned back, posting my arms against the top of the bier. "You know Coyote did not trust you. The first thing I did in playing the elaborate charade he arranged for me was to destroy one of your Reaper outfits."

She shot me an amused glance over her right shoulder. "He always did begrudge me that little inroad into Earth, but I take my power where I can get it. Your effort was damaging, but not very significant and pales in comparison with the rampage Bat has been on to find those who took Natch's body. Your attack did, however, draw my attention to your competence. Coyote chose you well."

I stared at the valley between her shoulderblades. "He wanted a weapon to use against Fiddleback. Is that what you want?"



I *could* settle for that, but I think I want something more of you than did your predecessor." She turned full around,

and intensity flooded her blue eyes. "I would make you my consort: a full and equal companion for me." She brought her hands together, then opened them again, conjuring a neck torque formed of diamond.

The torque drifted toward me and I felt an almost overwhelming desire to bare my throat to its touch. I could feel the power radiating off it. Accepting it would make me a Dark Lord just like her. We both knew I had been groomed by Fiddleback to become a Dark Lord, so handling the power was not a problem. All I had to do was to accept what she offered.

In concert with her, I knew no Dark Lord could stand against us. Trained to be an assassin, with the synthesizing aspect of my creator, I could meld together creatures to form an invincible army. My Empress would be able to salvage the best of the enemies we defeated, and I would cast them in new molds. With each conquest we would grow stronger and stronger until nothing could withstand our assaults. I could annihilate everything, destroying the universe, and she could remake it in whatever image suited us.

If we tired of it, if it ever bored us, we could begin the process all over again. It would be the ultimate quickening of the cycle of life and death, through our power, to our glorification. And all it would take was my willing acceptance of the power she offered.

A savage agony thrust like an obsidian dagger into my stomach and started to rip up through my chest. I felt it saw through every connection of rib to sternum, the invisible blade grating against my bones like a wood-saw bumping its way across a steel rod. I raised my hands to my chest, but the second flesh touched flesh, hands and chest both felt as if they had been pierced by a million molten needles.

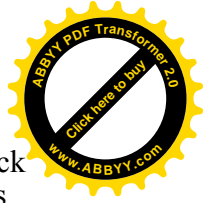
"No! No!" I gasped against the pain. The torque stopped its forward motion, then dissolved. As it went, so did the

pain in my chest.

Not so the pain I felt deeper in my soul. The core of my willingness to battle Fiddleback and Pygmalion came from my knowledge that to sustain their power required the misery of helpless victims. I had felt the seduction of power when Fiddleback had offered it to me before. I had been tempted by the grand visions of what our blending, the Empress and I, would bring. When viewing it from the pinnacle of power, the misery of other creatures seemed inconsequential.

My perspective did not come from the pinnacle, but from the nadir of powerlessness. I had seen the desperation of people like Tadd Farber. I knew the fearful hatred the self-perception of victimization spawned in people like the Aryan Warriors. I saw the pain in Sinclair MacNeal at the callous and hateful neglect he suffered at the hands of his father. I knew these people, I counted them as friends and enemies, but I did not want to number them among my victims.

Dark Lords clearly have a sociopathic lack of any sort of conscience. To them, people are resources to be used. They are bees to a beekeeper, but with a subtle difference: The beekeeper does what he can to make life for his bees wonderful because he draws a product from them. Because the Dark Lords find misery and fear honey-sweet, the creatures in their hives have to lead hellish lives.



looked up at the Empress of Diamonds. "Even if I desired your offer, I could not accept it. Fiddleback has endowed me with a mechanism that will kill me were I to take on a Dark Lord's power against his will. He learned from Pygmalion, and will not make the same mistake."

"Fiddleback would never allow you to become my consort while he still lives." The Empress licked her lips deliciously. "An obvious remedy to that situation suggests itself."

"I agree." I slid off the bier and stood. "Once Fiddleback has eliminated Pygmalion, he will be my biggest problem. To kill a Dark Lord, one has to use a Dark Lord."

"You think like one of us already. Fiddleback says he made you, but I think you may have been a natural all along." She closed again and pressed her hands against my chest. "You will honor my alliance with Coyote? Once you and Fiddleback have destroyed Pygmalion, I will help you destroy Fiddleback."

"Agreed."

She raised an eyebrow in a very un-Match way. "You have a plan?"

"I'll put something together." I smiled. "Right now, though, I need to return to Earth. I tried that before, but I could not get out of here. It was as if this proto-dimension had been hardened."

The Empress of Diamonds nodded. "It was. This proto-dimension's nature and my aspect have a natural affinity. With a sufficient expenditure of power, I can make the dimensional wall all but impenetrable. Any Dark Lord can do that, if his aspect is compatible with the dimension. Pygmalion has done that with his dimension because of the disaster with his little pet."

I frowned. "Disaster? Something has happened with Ryuhito?"

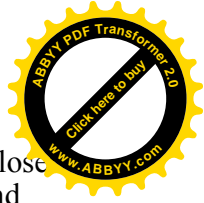
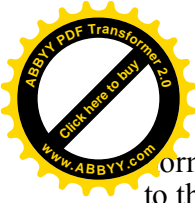
"It did, which means Pygmalion is lairing up. Even so, I know you will find a way to destroy him. You can leave this place now. And here, I make you a present." Match's body slumped against mine, but I caught her before she could fall to the floor.

With crystalline clarity, a voice spoke within my mind. *«Care for her well, Coyote. You both have value to me. When you need me, tell her and I will know. Together we will not be defeated.»*

 Dark Conspiracy 3-24.jpg

It would have seemed to me that my return and my bringing Natch Feral back with me would have sparked quite a reaction when I arrived in Earth. As I had planned before, I decided to reenter the dimension of my birth in Japan, at the Galactic Brotherhood headquarters. I made that choice because, as I recalled, we had decided to use the Japanese base as a staging area for sending people and equipment into whatever dimension we were using to get close to Pygmalion.

I materialized in the jungle courtyard with the dimensional gateway at the Galbro facility, but no one took any notice of me at all. Standing there, with Match's unconscious body in my arms, I looked almost



ormal. All around me, arrayed in neat lines, I saw bloodied and unmoving bodies. Off to my right, close to the facility's main building than I stood, stretcher bearers stepped from the dimensional gateway and headed off with an injured person.

"Crowley!" I started to work my way toward the man as I saw him exit the gateway. He turned toward me, his face an angry mask. He had another man's left arm looped over his shoulders and, with a firm grip on the man's belt,

Crowley half-lifted the injured man over the lip of the gateway.

Crowley's expression lightened only slightly when he realized who I was, then he shook his head. "Just a minute." As he started shuffling toward the building, I recognized the man he was helping. As if the bodies had not been enough evidence of a dire catastrophe, Bat's blood-soaked shirt and the weakness of his staggering steps told me how bad things had really gotten.

Two medical technicians took Bat from Crowley and helped him toward the building. Another relieved me of Hatch's body, undoubtedly assuming she had been injured in the same disaster that had claimed all these others. I caught not even a flicker of curiosity about me or my clothing, just fatigue and a concentration on the tasks at hand.

I turned to Crowley. "What happened?"

Emotionally, from what I could sense, the haggard man in front of me did not exist. "We won."

I looked back at the rows of bodies and shook my head. "We knew there could be danger, but..."

"These guys caught it in spades." Crowley stepped over two bodies and knelt down by a third. He peeled the gray blanket back from the face. "Mickey's father. Broken neck, it was fast."

Ice cascaded through my guts. "Does Mickey know yet?"

"How are we going to explain death to a 5-year-old?"

"Rajani has a rapport with him, perhaps..."

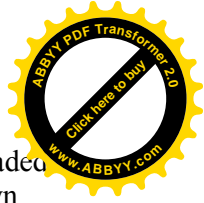
Crowley looked at me with hollow eyes. "But I haven't even had the time to tell her that her father is dead yet."

My jaw dropped open. "I thought you said we won."

"We did. C'mon."

I followed Crowley into the dimensional gateway. Built into the base of a fountain, it replaced the water with an

opalescent shimmer when in operation. Stepping over the fountain's edge and stepping down did not feel all that much different from wading into water. The gateway gave me a cold shock as I first started to sink, then it wrapped me in a scratchy blanket and twisted me around, utterly disorienting me.



Finally, I emerged amid a circle of tall, termite mounds. I saw a puff of dust from where Crowley had headed out, and I chose that route because it took me out of the way of medtechs with stretchers. Scrambling down the other side. "Crowley, wait up."

I got no response from the shadow man, so I jogged forward and grabbed his wrist. He tried to pull away, but I held on and spun him around. "What the hell's going on here?"

He opened his mouth to shout something at me, then stopped abruptly as his temper lost its battle for control. "Sorry, I..." He exhaled explosively, then pointed out the panoramic view we had from the top of the hill. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

I nodded. The proto-dimension looked to me like an African savannah that bordered on a rain forest. Had the vegetation been green instead of blue, I would have had a hard time believing we had left Earth at all. "It's gorgeous."

"Most of the men who died here thought this was Borneo, for crying out loud!" Crowley shook his head and his fist knotted up. "You and I, people like Bat and Hal and the Yidam, we know what's going on. We accept the risks. The men who were here, they were just out for a job. We made them part of a battle with Dark Lords."

"They were already part of that battle, Crowley." My eyes narrowed. "They could die here, or they could die in their homes. Dammit, most of these men should have been like Tadd Farber. For all intents and purposes, they

were dead already."

Crowley's head came up. "But they were *not* dead."

"Agreed, but their deaths here mean that others may not have to die." A breeze blew from the valley below, and I caught the swampy scent of decaying plants. "How bad was it? Can we salvage anything?"

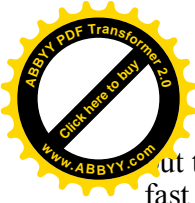
"Not a question to ask me, I'm afraid. Take a look for yourself."

We set off down the slope toward what appeared to have once been an encampment. The jungle between the hilltop and the clearing below had a wide swath of destruction cut through it. Underbrush had been trampled, and trees had been taken down more efficiently than in a clear-cutting operation. On the trunks I could see evidence of bullet hits and a disturbing number of long claw scars that sent a shiver down my spine.

Throughout the area I saw sodden masses of greenish slime that looked like a slimy fungus or an open gangrenous wound, it took no intelligence to determine these lumps were the source of the decaying plant scent. I paused near one and saw a flattened bullet pop out like a piece of gravel melting out of ice. "I take it these things were worth shooting?"

Crowley nodded impatiently as two men carrying a stretcher worked their way up the narrow path we had been coming down. "Prince Ryuhito created these things. He had given them, among other things, chlorophyll in their skin so they could produce energy when basking in his glory. In fact, we noticed that out of his presence they were sluggish and not terribly hearty. They were a nasty army."

I stood and wiped my hands off on my gold-trimmed kift. "You're still pulling wounded men out of here,



ut they're in an advanced state of decay. Does this proto-dimension have alternating time zones that run fast and

slow?"

"No." Crowley started down the hill again as he explained. "This dimension has a bacteria that breaks down chlorophyll. Ryuhito did not realize that when he brought his creatures in here. The bacteria was not enough to kill the creatures outright, but it did weaken them. That's probably why we survived as long as we did—they were not in top form."

We crossed from stone to stone across a stream and worked our way back up toward the compound. On the way up I saw an area where all the undergrowth had been uprooted. A twisting trench with shallow rootlets running off in all directions cut across the swath of destruction. At the lower lip, the green slime covered the ground like a foot-and-a-half coat of green-yellow wax.

"Bat and his people made a stand here." Crowley shook his head. "When I found Bat, he was wandering through the jungle looking for more of the enemy. After he ran out of bullets and his bayonet broke, he went after them with his bare hands. He showed me the sites of three kills and said he forgot where the others are."

Three fallen trees had been used to bridge the plant-rotfoam. I crossed it and started up the steepest part of the hill. In the dark loam, I could see impressions of enormous hooves. Superimposed over them, I saw smallish clawed footprints and then a few larger and more slender footprints. Judging by size and relative depth, whatever the creatures that lay rotting had been, formidable would have been an understatement when applied to them.

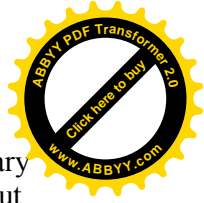
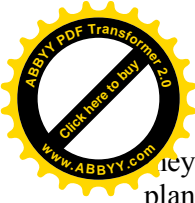
Coming up over the lip of the hill, I saw a scene that explained to me Crowley's anger. Warfare is death and destruction, but too often gets remembered in terms of a person's heroism in the face of brutal chaos. Memorials are raised to the innocent dead, and heroes are remembered with ceremonies, but the sheer cost in life that

results from a war is difficult to quantify and so incomprehensible that memorializing it defies even the most talented artisan.

Rotting plant-stuff the color of peppers long gone had covered the compound like a lake of pea-soup vomit. Big and little chunks of things floated in it like islands fighting off its destructive tide. Men waded through it, dragging yet other men from the clinging gelatin with great sucking sounds. A quick check determined whether the rescued man was alive or dead, and his status determined if he was placed on a stretcher for immediate evacuation or left lying in a line with the other dead men.

The swampy miasma choked me and made my eyes water. Just looking at the battlefield, I could tell how things had gone. Ryuhito's troops had advanced, been stopped and slowly driven back, but not before inflicting incredible casualties among the defenders. Sharpened stakes stuck up out of the slime and toppled piles of sandbags marked where defenses had once stood. And, between the stakes and the fortifications, at the thickest part of the slime sea, four huge islands lay dead.

I recognized the Plutonians from the one visit I had made to their home dimension. At that time, they had seemed incredibly big and powerful, but lying on their sides, their blood mixed with streaks of green foam,



They were pitiable. I had no doubt that their strength had won the day. I knew, from some of the preliminary plans we had knocked about, that a half-dozen Plutonians were the minimum number we had thought about using, which meant, at worst, we had suffered 66% fatalities.

Looking at the pile of human bodies, I knew that estimate might be light for creatures as fragile as me. "Do you have numbers?"

Crowley nodded curtly. "Plutonians: 100% casualties, 66% dead. *Myrangeikki*: 100% casualties, but it is only a

minor wound. Vetha is off in Plutonia tending the two injured Plutonians and expects them to recover. Humans: 99.5% casualties, 70% fatalities. The remaining 30% require medical attention. The Internal Defense Cadre troops came through the best; the fatalities are mostly our workers." The shadow man opened his arms wide. "I'm the only person who did not get hurt."

"You know better than buying into survivor's guilt."

"Yes, dammit, I *do* know better than that." The shadow man folded his arms into the silhouette of his chest. "I know I survived because I have training and experience. I also know that I survived because the Yidam and Will Raven both dealt with things that could have killed me. I owe them my life, and they're dead. And now, with all this, there is no way to make their sacrifices count for anything."

I frowned. "We can get more people, can't we? We have no need to abandon the plan, do we?"

"If you want to bring more people in here, you can count me out." Hal Garrett, his right arm in a sling, limped over toward us. Rotfoam splatter streaked his pants and left sleeve. Some had even been smeared across his forehead. He looked at Crowley. "Have you told him yet?"

"Told me what?"

The man of shadows shook his head. "Seeing as how you were not around at the moment, I headed out to try to kill Pygmalion. I know assassination is your bailiwick, but I've been known to shoot straight. I tried to enter Pygmalion's dimension, but I could not. I've not surveyed the whole thing, but as nearly as I can tell he's managed to armor his dimension so I can't get in."

I nodded. "I am given to understand that Dark Lords can manage that trick in dimensions with sympathetic resonances to their aspect."

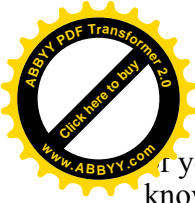
Crowley looked me over from toes to head and back

again. "That's an interesting piece of information."

He waited for me to volunteer the source of my comment, but I shook my head. "There's something wrong here."

Hal burst out with a disgusted laugh. "Clearly nothing wrong with your reasoning capabilities."

"That's enough, gentlemen!" I looked from Crowley to Hal and back again. "What I'm catching from both



It is you that somehow what happened here is *my* fault. You're both exhausted—I can see it and you know it. That's the only reason I'm trying to ignore your comments."

I paused for a second and let the pain and death in the proto-dimension fill me. Despair, frustration and just plain anger wove through the atmosphere. I could sense the lost friends and the sharp sense of terror that had been the last thing most of the dying thought about. From Hal, I got the strong impression that everything had been a waste and that some other option should have been made to work.

"I wasn't here, that's true. Do you think, had I been able, I wouldn't have been here? Do you think I don't mourn for these people? No, I didn't know them, I didn't interview them and didn't have them place their confidence in me. By the same token, given a choice between that and kissing a hand grenade, what do you think I'd choose?"

Hal nodded. "I'm sorry, Coyote, I just.. one of the guys who died shouldn't have been here at all. I let him talk me into it."

Crowley nodded. "Will Raven. Damned good thing he was here. If he hadn't been, we never would have gotten Ryuhito."

"He's still dead, Crowley." The tall African-American looked down at the ground. "Will had a son. His grandfather is caring for the boy."

"Hal, you made the best decision you could. You shouldn't have been here, either." I glanced at the shadow

man. "What did you mean by 'gotten' in reference to Ryuhito?"

"Will cracked Ryuhito's skull while the Yidam kept him busy and I... I should have killed Ryuhito, but I wanted a nonlethal solution. Will found it, then got killed. Before he died, though, he made it impossible for Pygmalion to track me when I took Ryuhito away."

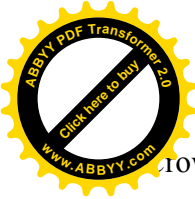
"The emperor's grandson is still alive? Where?"

Crowley hesitated for a moment. "He's in a very safe place, a little dimension I know about. I think he has a fractured skull, but he's not dead."

"Good. That should deny him to Pygmalion." I let Crowley's evasion of my question pass. Being told the name he had for the dimension where he stashed Ryuhito would do me absolutely no good. I had no skill at telepathy, so getting the information out his brain would have been impossible for me. Given that I never got any emotion from Crowley either, I knew that even a gifted telepath would be blocked from his mind.

More importantly, I realized, Crowley had very effectively relieved me of some responsibility and prevented the possibility of my betraying our cause. I was a creature of a Dark Lord. Trusting me had to be difficult for him, and I accepted that fact. Not telling him that I had spoken with the Empress of Diamonds likewise meant he could not be forced to give that information over. I trusted Crowley to look out for himself and, as a consequence, the whole of Earth.

"Was evading Pygmalion difficult?"



Crowley shook his head. "As nearly as I could tell, there was no pursuit."

"Hal, did you see any of Pygmalion's constructs here? Anyone who looked like Mickey?"

The big man shook his head. "I didn't see anything like that. Having seen Mickey go at Bat, I can't imagine my still

being alive if Pygmalion had sent troops to avenge Ryuhito's defeat."

Crowley started to pace. "I think I see what you're driving at, Coyote. I assumed Pygmalion didn't come after Ryuhito because the trail was too difficult to follow. I also assumed that Pygmalion armored his proto-dimension because, without Ryuhito, he could not oppose Fiddleback."

"Exactly. Because we saw Pygmalion and Fiddleback in conflict over Ryuhito, we have overlooked some obvious things. We assumed that Fiddleback was correct in stating Pygmalion wants to destroy him. That's certainly the truth from Fiddleback's point of view, but his is not the only point of view, is it?"

As we talked, the three of us began to drift deeper into the compound. The campsite returned, more or less, to normal the farther north we went. Like the Mary Celeste, the compound looked utterly proper except for the lack of people in it. If the stink of decaying plants hadn't been so prevalent, I could have forgotten that anything was amiss.

The African-American scratched at the stubble on his chin. "We need to rethink everything. Pygmalion had been Fiddleback's disciple, but he rebelled. In rebelling, he gained the status of a Dark Lord."

I nodded. "Right, he became Fiddleback's equal, more or less, right then and there. The major difference between them is that, because of Pygmalion's much smaller power base, he can move into some dimensions where Fiddleback cannot. Pygmalion's headquarters is one of those. I assume Earth is, as well."

Crowley confirmed my speculation. "Earth is tricky, but there are a number of Dark Lords who have limited access and who meddle in the affairs of humanity. Fiddleback, for example, can project a considerable amount of psychic energy into Earth, but he cannot

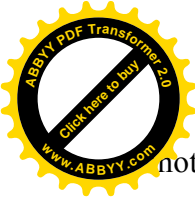
journey there physically because he cannot break through the entropy barrier around Earth. The only way to do that is with a dimensional gateway."

I looked over at Crowley. "What about that tunnel thing that Pygmalion used?"

He shrugged. "That operated already inside the entropy barrier around the Earth." He stopped dead. "That means Pygmalion staged his raid on Galbro from a proto-dimension very close to Earth, within the entropy barrier..."

"Or from one point on the Earth to another." Hal nodded. "Pygmalion can come to the Earth whenever he wants, which makes sense, since he was born there."

At the other end of the camp, we plunged into the rain forest. With the sun nearly at its zenith, the dappled blues and violets almost made me imagine that I was walking through some undersea wonderland. "If Earth is such a big plum and Pygmalion has access to it at will, why would he use



another proto-dimension as his workshop?"

Crowley laughed harshly. "You saw what he did with Mickey. That boy aged physically at a very quick rate. The other warriors Pygmalion has that are based on the Mickey prototype were fully developed when I met some in diverting the tunnel device. By keeping another dimension under his control, he can incubate an army that will make conquering yet other dimensions easy."

I stepped over a sky-blue birch trunk. "How many soldiers would it take to conquer the Earth?"

The shadow man shrugged. "A billion?"

Hal half-closed his brown eyes. "But bringing a billion warriors in would be blocked by the entropy barriers, right?"

"If he tried it all in one lump, yes." I slowly smiled. "If he has a dimensional gate, he can bring them in regardless."

"But warriors like Mickey are not likely to go without

notice, which means he would have to bring them in to a place where their isolation is guaranteed until he has a sufficient force to prevent disruption." Crowley nodded his head. "That means he'd have to have a secure site that is in very good supply."

"Right." I winked at Crowley, knowing we were on the same wavelength.

Hal shook his head. "You two obviously know the game plan, but I'm missing something."

"Hal, it's easy." We broke through the brush and looked up at the terraced hillside dotted with dolmen. Over half of them had windmill propellers affixed at the top. In the proto-dimension's light breeze, the props spun away lazily. "There's your key."

The African-American squinted for a second, then nodded sheepishly. "Energy."

"Exactly. This casts a new light on the battle over Ryuhito, doesn't it?"

"Ryuhito's sun-god displays were enough to power his army here. With training..." Hal slapped his forehead with his left hand. "And Fiddleback wanted Ryuhito because he could provide more power than the whole of the Frozen Shade, which means he could have powered the dimensional gate that's built into the Phoenix maglev train circuit."

I slapped him on the shoulder. "That's right. Pygmalion needed to prevent Fiddleback from coming through to Earth. He did it by removing the battery that Fiddleback wanted to use. Presumably he didn't just blow the maglev line because he knew it would be valuable some day for moving troops. He arrived, took Ryuhito away and made some vague threat about returning with Ryuhito to enslave the world.

"That meant that all of us took his threat as being dependent upon Ryuhito in some way. We focused on

Ryuhito and devoted a certain amount of our planning to ways to eliminate or neutralize the prince." I



grinned wryly. "And if Pygmalion is even half as intelligent as we've given him credit for, he's already worked the same sort of failsafe into Ryuhito's brain that Fiddleback has with me, preventing either one of us from assuming the powers of a Dark Lord in opposition to our mentor's wishes."

"Well, we've got Ryuhito now, so he's out of the equation." Crowley toyed with the tip of his goatee. "This puts us back to square one, but with a caveat: We know Pygmalion intends to conquer the Earth with an army of soldiers built on the Mickey prototype. What we don't know is where his staging area is. If what he needs is a place deserted enough to let him bring his armies in, he could be almost anywhere."

"I don't think so, Damon. I think he made a mistake there." I smiled openly. "Pygmalion took Mickey from Flagstaff. Jytte Ravel was found somewhere in Arizona."

"Kingman, I think," Hal offered. "She never said anything about it, but I recall Coyote or Marit mentioning one time or another."

The shadow man canted his head slightly. "So, you think he's operating out of the northern area of Arizona?"

"That, or the California badlands, or the Nevada desert, or southern (Utah). There's a lot of open space out there."

Hal dropped to one knee and plucked an azure strand of grass. "It'll be like finding a needle in a haystack."

"Mo it won't," I assured them both. "We have Jytte, and she once lived in the eye of that needle. To find Pygmalion's base, all we need is to convince her that she wants to lead us back to the place from which she escaped."

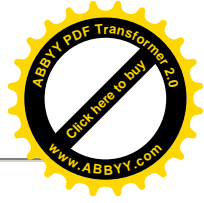
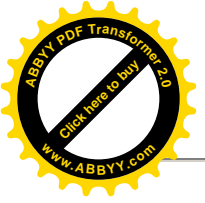
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Crowley and I took an indirect route on our return to Earth. We walked through the dimensions within the same entropy sphere as Turquoise. Crowley carried on a vague travelogue that let me know why the Yidam and Will Raven had selected the proto-dimension they had used for their staging area. As always, I found the reasoning decidedly logical and nodded in agreement that the correct choice had been made.

Crowley held out a silhouette hand to slow me as we approached Pygmalion's factory dimension. A grayish-purple fog filled the area surrounding it and appeared to be without surfaces or movement. By the same token, I could feel something solid beneath my feet, and I found the sensation of a gentle breeze in my face a constant.

We pushed on forward and I found the breeze stiffening. By the time my kilt started flapping in the wind, the fog came to an abrupt end. Standing on the edge of a brilliantly lit void, I felt as if I had worked my way through the surface of some giant tennis ball and now stood looking at a miniature sun burning at its core.

Crowley spit at the burning ball of a dimension suspended like a star in front of us. His spittle made it barely two feet from his mouth before crackling loudly and



exploding into a wisp of steam. "No welcome mat here."

I shielded my eyes against the light streaming out from the proto-dimensional sphere. "For someone who needs energy, isn't this a wasteful display?"

The shadow man shrugged. "The heat layer is very narrow, but quite sufficient to hurt most things trying to crawl through it—present company included."

"The sphere doesn't look very big."

"It's bigger on the inside than the outside. I think he means it as a statement about himself, really." Crowley rested his hands on his hips. "Arrogance seems to be an attribute that all Dark Lords share."

"As long as they continue to underestimate us, I don't mind." I pointed toward the dimensional ball. "Making it in there would require either a lot of energy to overwhelm the defense or a dimensional gate, right?"

"As I understand it, yes." Crowley nodded slowly. "Pygmalion has to be devoting a certain amount of his concentration on keeping this dimension inviolate. While we can't strike at him, it does pin him into place."

"So we know where we will meet him, but he's choosing the battlefield."

"Right, which means he has a hell of a home field advantage. By the same token, it probably means he has not begun to ferry troops into Earth. He will be vulnerable when he does that, because the amount of energy required to establish a link will be more with his dimension armored like this. Sustaining that over the time required to move a billion troops, or even the number needed to secure a staging area, is going to be draining."

I nodded. "So he will drop his defenses here at that time, you assume, which leaves him open to a strike."

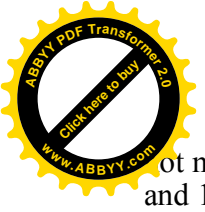
"Yes, but you know as well as I do that hitting this place at that time would be suicidal."

"Because he'll have all his troops ready to go and just

waiting to eat up opposition." I turned away from the burning sphere and headed back into the fog. "We have to pre-empt his strike at Earth, and we have to do it in his dimension, because we'll need Fiddleback with us, and giving him access to Earth isn't part of the game plan." Crowley slapped me on the back. "That's how I read it. Let's get back to Phoenix and see if we can find a spot where we won't mind letting two Dark Lords have a war."

We arrived in Phoenix late in the evening. Appearing in the suite of rooms I maintained at the top of the Lorica Industries corporate citadel, I left Crowley to call Jytte while I took a shower and dressed in jeans, an aquamarine shirt and a pair of docksider loafers. I took my time dressing because I needed time to think a bit.

Oddly enough, feeling the starchy stiffness of the shirt's collar and cuffs helped focus me. The shirt felt uncomfortable, but I wore it because it helped define who and what I was. The kilt, while functional, was



ot me. I was not a Greek hero coming back from a time in the underworld; I was a Dark Lord's minion, and I sincerely doubted that made me a hero in anyone's book.

I realized that, in creating me, Fiddleback had forged a formidable weapon indeed. My predecessor had seen that and had chosen me to replace him. I had no doubt that his choice had been motivated by his belief in my ability to oppose my former master. I also had to imagine he did not discount my ability to face off with another Dark Lord. If his causing me to destroy a Reaper base was an indication, he expected me to destroy the Empress of Diamonds when push came to shove.

Things had changed from what he had envisioned. Pygmalion supplanted Fiddleback as the primary threat to humanity. Eliminating that threat called for an alliance with my former master. I could imagine Coyote approving

the alliance and even my striking a bargain with the Empress of Diamonds to ambush Fiddleback, if necessary.

What I couldn't tell is how he would take what I needed to force Jytte to do to eliminate Pygmalion. For as long as I had known Jytte, which was not, granted, that long a time, she had been a gorgeous doll, a living automaton. She did everything she could to downplay her beauty. She dressed down, she acted in only the most subdued ways and seemed to do everything she could to distance herself from all other human beings.

It occurred to me that the only emotion I had seen her display came after I had spoken with the ghost of my predecessor. In the back of my mind, I had wondered if Coyote and Jytte had been lovers or otherwise emotionally entangled. Certainly if Coyote had helped to rescue her from Pygmalion, she would have been greatly in his debt. I knew that he was the only member of his group she trusted with the secret of his plan concerning me, which means he had also confided in her the reason he needed to be replaced.

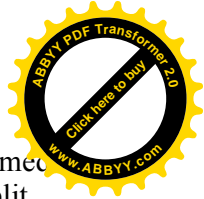
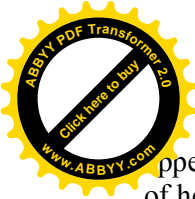
Given the likelihood of some ties there, I had to wonder what he would have thought of my need to have Jytte lead us back to the place where Pygmalion kept her before her escape. She would resist—she had to resist if she wished to maintain the minimal control she had over her life. She used her amnesia as a foundation, but I had to get her to dig deeper. I had to sacrifice the welfare of one for the good of the many, or so I meant to be doing, but I really did not know if my plan would work.

It also occurred to me that in doing what I would be doing to Jytte, I would be no better than a Dark Lord using someone. My only hope, my only difference with those we opposed, was that I would try to get Jytte to listen to reason first. I would try to get her to work with me. I had to at least

try that, or there was no reason in trying anything at all.

I left my dressing chamber and threaded my way through the corridor to the central sitting room. The white upholstery of the couch and chairs matched the white marble covering the floor. A teak coffee table with a glass top pinned a small piece of carpet in place in front of the couch. The room's northern wall looked out toward Squaw Peak and Camelback Mountain, with both of them rising above the black, Frozen Shade ocean like distant islands. The white drapes had been pulled back to allow full view of the peaceful vista.

The far end of the room had been arranged as a media center, but the stereo and monitors remained dark. Sinclair MacNeal stood at the little bar mixing two drinks, but he barely acknowledged me at all. His attention



appeared focused on Rajani, the Yidam's daughter. The expression on her face told me she had been informed of her father's death and that she grieved for him. The feelings I read from her included more grief, but split between mourning her father and regretting their inability to rediscover each other as father and daughter.

MacNeal brought her an amber drink in a small tumbler, then sat beside her on the couch. She took refuge beneath his arm. Beyond them, Crowley stood at the window and looked out. Jytte stood near him, then turned toward me as I entered the room. "I am glad to see you here, Coyote."

I stopped dead in my tracks as Jytte flashed a brief smile. I caught a feeling of relief from her, then a quick stiffening like a child realizing she'd been caught with her hand in the cookie jar. That faded after a second or two, then Jytte crossed to an overstuffed chair and sat down. Her movements flowed naturally, not stiffly, making me wonder if somehow the Empress of Diamonds was controlling her as she had controlled Natch. Her outfit, an

olive jumpsuit, did not look as sexless as other things I had seen her wear, but it had not been augmented with diamond jewelry, so I was left assuming other forces were at work here.

I bowed my head to Jytte. "I am pleased to be here, Jytte. Rajani, I am very sorry about your father."

The black-skinned woman nodded once. "He used to be fascinated with the heroism that some people exhibited during wars. I know he died happily if what Mr. Crowley has described to me is the truth."

"It is, Rajani, it is," Sinclair assured her with a hug.

"It is," I echoed him. "Jytte, did Damon tell you why I need to speak with you?"

The blond woman nodded and crossed her long legs. "He said I have some information that is important. He suggested getting it might be unpleasant."

"It probably will be, and interrogation might get downright rough. I want you to know, though, that I respect you and would not ask this of you if there were any otherway."

Sinclair frowned. "Maybe there tsanotherway, Coyote. Jytte is really the core of this operation right now. After you left, she took charge and has been very good at finding solutions to problems through very innovative techniques. Maybe she can think of something that will save her from the third degree. Lay the problem out and we can see."

I nodded. "Fair enough. Jytte, we need to know the location at which Pygmalion held you before your escape. You'll have to lead us back there."

Her head came up, but her face slackened into the emotionless mask I had always seen before. In my absence, she had risen out of her shell to direct the effort against Pygmalion. In her capacity as our communications coordinator, she often organized actions and had done so for the group when I arrived back in the beginning

of the summer. Now, faced with the prospect of having to return to the prison that stripped her of her old body and stuffed her into the new one, her shell began to close around her once again.



Jytte folded her arms slowly and seemed to sink deeper into the white chair's plush upholstery. "I remember nothing of the time before Coyote found me."

Even as she spoke, I knew she was lying. "Then start there, Jytte. Start at the moment Coyote saved you and go back one second at a time."

Stroking his goatee with a gray-gloved hand, Crowley turned from the window. "I can help you, if you wish."

Jytte shook her head adamantly, and her bangs slid down to cover the left half of her face. "No. I do not want anyone intruding into my mind." Hostility rolled off her in waves that carried naked terror in the troughs. I saw Rajani shiver, and when she whimpered, Jytte's emotional output dropped. "Forgive me, Rajani."

I walked over to Jytte and dropped to my haunches in front of her. "No one wants to intrude in your mind, Jytte. We know, or we think, Pygmalion has a base on Earth in this area. The fact that you were found nearby, that he dumps his failed experiments in Phoenix and the fact that he took Mickey from Flagstaff all point to it."

"Why don't you get the information you want from Mickey?"

I sensed in her question a desperation to deflect attention from herself, but I also took it as a sign that her defenses were beginning to crack. "We cannot because we do not know that he was ever at that base."

Crowley nodded grimly. "In addition, Mickey is only a child. His grasp of geography, distances and other details would be impossible to decipher into useful material."

"What if I was taken when I was Mickey's age?"

"It wouldn't matter. You escaped as an adult." Crowley

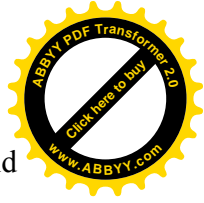
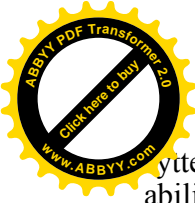
seated himself on the arm of the couch near Sinclair. "There are things that you know which are valuable. You have nothing to fear."

"Yes she does." Rajani set her tumbler down on the coffee table. "She has a lot to fear."

I looked at Rajani and frowned. "What can be more frightening than a Dark Lord being poised to take over the planet?"

"Learning who and what you really are." The Yidam's daughter shook her head. "From what I have been told, Coyote, you should understand this better than anyone else. Imagine awakening one day with no knowledge of who or what you are. You don't know anything about yourself, but when you come to, you escape out of a nightmare existence. What you come to realize is that you do not recognize the face in the mirror, the body you wash in the shower or the voice you hear when you speak. You are trapped in a prison created by someone else, and the worst of it is that any number of other people let you know they would willingly trade places with you."

"I do understand that, Rajani. I *did* wake up in a nightmare with no knowledge of who or what I was. I discovered things about myself, and I learned to live with who and what I am. I didn't run away from my past."



Jytte's soft whisper silenced me instantly. "That is because you knew from the start that your skills and abilities gave you value. I had no such reassurances. You built on a foundation of strength. I have no such foundation."

"How can you say that if you have not tried to find it?"

"I tried, but there was nothing to find." Her hands gripped the arms of the chair in which she sat. "From the beginning, I learned things about me that frightened me. When Coyote found me, he had to clothe and feed me because I was unable to do that for myself. I was helpless."

Coyote said it was because I was not used to my new body, but I knew he was lying to keep my spirits up. I could do nothing because I was nothing."

Sinclair raised an eyebrow. "I've seen you work a computer unlike anyone else, and I've seen the best. You're better. Computer skills like that are more than just a gift—you had training and were very, very good. You weren't nothing."

"Mo?" Jytte looked over at him, her voice filling out with the challenge in it. "At first I clung to my computer skills in the vain hope that it would help me puzzle out my true identity. I assumed someone of my skills would have been useful and, therefore, would have been noticed when she disappeared. Using my skills, I combed all the records—*a//the records*—looking for anyone who even came close to matching my description. I came up empty—no computer geniuses had suddenly gone missing without an explanation published later."

The occultist's green eyes narrowed. "Poorly defined search parameters for your hunt."

"Exactly. I started from another end and tried to decide how long someone would have to have worked with computers to gain my level of expertise. Even allowing for some inborn talent, I worked it out that I had been in computers for at least 20 years. The changes Pygmalion put me through made determining my age difficult, but I worked with an age of 30, plus or minus five years. That meant..."

I nodded. It meant a lot of things, but primarily it meant she had been exposed to computers at a relatively young age. While it was true that most children did get to work with some computer equipment during their schooling, the only ones who got strong training were the children of privilege. There again, though, a close association with computers would have to be tempered by all the other

things a child from a rich family would have available to him.

Crowley filled the silence. "It meant you were a chip-child. Maybe."

Jytte nodded in resignation. "It meant I was born with congenital defects caused by bad genes or because one or both of my parents used chemicals without regard to the possible side-effects. It meant my parents or grandparents were of sufficient moral standing that an abortion was not seen as an option and of sufficient means that they could afford to make me a sacker."

The term *sacker* struck a resonant chord in me. The term originally came from the acronym for Specially Augmented Child, which meant the child had been provided with a whole host of computer-operated vehicles and appliances designed to promote independence. Through use of a computer driven by eye-



think commands or a simple touch on a simpler keyboard, a challenged child could make the machines do the things he could not do for himself. The derisive term sacker came from the way some children who were born with severe handicaps would be suspended inside one of their computer-controlled vehicles in a nylon hammocklike sack.

"You don't know that." I shook my head. "You are supposing an existence that may not have been true."

"But the evidence is there, Coyote." Jytte stared up at me like a hunted and trapped animal. "Mickey was a severely deformed child who Pygmalion made beautiful. There are scattered reports of similarly deformed children being whisked away—enough to suggest a consistent *modus operandi* for Pygmalion. He healed himself and now, it appears, heals others in his own peculiar way."

Crowley cleared his throat. "Even with this speculation about your possible origin, you found no report of anyone like the person you feared you might have been disap-

pearing, did you?"

"Mo."

Rajani shivered. "Which makes you think that you were seen as nothing more as a burden *upon* your family—a burden they willingly and happily had lifted from them when you were taken away."

Jytte nodded wordlessly.

"You're making one big mistake, Jytte," I said softly. "A lack of evidence proves nothing. Yes, it could be that you were a chip-child born to a rich family here in Phoenix or up in Flagstaff. And, it could be that when you vanished they raised no alarm about it. But the lack of evidence more strongly supports the possibility that you are wrong, that you were not a chip-child, because a nonexistent chip-child would leave just as much evidence as the child hidden away by a callous conspiracy."

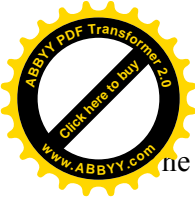
"But if I go back, if I *try* to remember, I might find the evidence I need to confirm my worst fears."

"What difference does that make?" I stood and started pacing. "Five months ago, I was an assassin in the employ of Fiddleback. My job, my avocation, was going places and killing people on command. Yet when Coyote stripped my memory from me, I became what you see now. That is the key."

Turning, I pointed a finger straight at her. "What you *were* does not matter. What you have become is what is important. It does not matter if you were missed or not when Pygmalion took you. We need you now. We value you now, both for the information you have *and* because of who you made yourself into. You are a responsible and talented individual, and nothing that you could possibly learn about yourself would change that."

Jytte gave me a quizzical grin that I did not understand until she explained. "I saw your lips moving, but I heard the other Coyote's words coming out of your mouth. You are

right. I am willing try to try to recover the information you want." She shifted in her chair and tucked her hair behind her left ear. "Rajani, I may need your help, if you are willing."



the alien woman nodded her head. "I am honored by your trust. Yes, anything you need."

Jytte eased herself forward on the seat, then stood. "I think I can accomplish this better in my own rooms. I will be more comfortable there, and I have access to the types of graphic databases that I need to correlate things I remember with items in the real world."

I nodded. "If you need anything, let me know."

She reached into the pocket of her jumpsuit and handed me a folded slip of paper. "Perhaps you can figure this out while we determine where Pygmalion lairs when he's on Earth."

"What is it?"

"A list." Jytte smiled wanly as she and Rajani headed toward the suite's front door. "A list of files that Vetha has been accessing in our computer system—files that are not connected to what we are doing."

I unfolded the paper as the door closed behind the two women. The file names had been typed in a double row and could have been as simple as a list of people to be invited to a party:

Judas Iscariot Benedict Arnold

Brutus Adolf Hitler

Joe Valachi Kim Philby

Julius and Ethel Rosenberg Aaron Burr

Vidkun Quisling Alexander Haig Tycho Caine (DeepThroat)

I refolded it and tucked it into my pocket. Sinclair shot me a puzzled look. "What is it?"

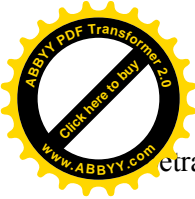
"As Jytte said, it's a list. It reads like 'traitors-r-us' and has my name tacked on to the end of it." I folded my arms across my chest. "I don't like ft."

"What does it mean?" Sin asked.

"It means I'm going to have to talk with Vetha." I felt the world closing in on me. "ft means I have to find out if she's gathering information to figure me out, or if she's trying to send me a message."

 Dark Conspiracy 3-26.jpg

Vetha arrived in the Lorica Citadel a little over four hours after Jytte gave me the list of files, Crowley and Sinclair left to get sleep, but I used the time I had to call each of the files up on the computer in my suite and simply confirm what I knew from looking at the names. Each and every one of the individuals on the list had



etrayed an ally or master during the course of his or her career.

Finding myself included on the list did not surprise me at all when I knew Vetha had compiled it. I knew that Fiddleback viewed me as a traitor, but the feelings I had gotten from Vetha had never been strong nor particularly malevolent. In fact, the nastiest thing she had done to me was to include me on this list.

Through the computer system, I sent her a message saying I wanted to speak with her. Within 15 minutes, she arrived via the private elevator from the executive visitor suites Lorica maintained for visiting officers from other companies. She looked exactly as I expected from when I last saw her, though the chitin on one arm segment did seem creased. As Crowley had mentioned, she had been hurt; I assumed that was a scar.

The one thing that did surprise me about her arrival was the fact that she carried a board game with her. She set it

down on the coffee table in the sitting room, then bowed her head to me. "It is good to see you well, Coyote. Your recovery has pleased our master."

"Your master, not mine."

Vetha said nothing as she seated herself on the floor. As if she were the hostess, she pointed me to the couch opposite her. Sitting down, I sat toward the edge of the couch. Vetha ignored me and proceeded to open the Scrabble box. She carefully laid the board out, then turned all of the lettered tiles face up. Holding one fingerlike appendage up before her mandibles, she cautioned me to silence, then plucked letters from the box and laid them out on the board.

The sentence she laid out said: FBACK HAS NO TOLERANCE FOR GAMES

I blinked.

"Your move, Coyote." Vetha looked up at me, her eight eyes filled with dark expectation. "You have seen the ruins of the camp?"

I nodded. "I have. Did the two Plutonians you took back to their dimension survive?"

"They did." Vetha's forelimbs moved quickly, rearranging and adding letters to those on the board. FB CAN MONITOR OUR CONVERSATION BUT THIS GAME IS BENEATH HTM

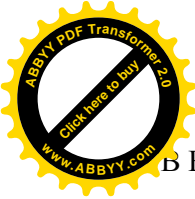
"The chances of salvaging anything from there are nonexistent." I laid a message out as I spoke. YOU CAN SPELL WITHOUT HIM KNOWING

"I concur." TRANSLATOR FB NO GOOD WITH LANGUAGE "I believe that puts you 50 points down."

"The game is not over yet. Pygmalion has hardened his proto-dimension, but we have an angle we're working on to crack it open." I quickly put down a new message. FILE NAMES MSGFORME

SI TRAITORS

"That's another 20 points for you. Good use of Spanish." AM IA TRAITOR



B EYES YES NO TRUST "And 37 for you."

I KNOW HE DOES NOT TRUST ME I felt excitement rising in me as I fished for letters in the pile on the table. While I had not imagined the synthesis of the *Myrangeikki* race was voluntary, Vetha's antipathy toward Fiddleback surprised me. I would have thought he would not have used her as an envoy if the chance of betrayal could present itself. Then again, I reminded myself, Fiddleback's incredible arrogance had already failed him twice.

U NO TRUST FB Vetha swept away the word and substituted another after I nodded in comprehension. U NO TRUST ME

I removed some of her letters and smiled as I substituted others. I TRUST U

NO DO NOT TRUST FB OR ME She looked up and I read the urgent pleading in her eyes. PROMISE

DONE WHY U TELL ME THIS

BEING ME IS SWEET DO NOT WANT U PART OF FB

I hesitated. "That's game, I guess. Best two of three?"

"Yes."

Although I only had recently cobbled together my current identity, the idea of subsuming it within another individual did not sound inviting. To become part of Fiddleback, to become one of the creatures on whose misery he fed, was not something I desired for myself or anyone else. I'd sooner commit suicide than have that happen.

Vetha went first. FB WILL BETRAY YOU

HOW "Double-word score there."

ME ANOTHER NO DATA

I shook my head. U NO BETRAY ME

Vetha snaked a hand out, the limb telescoping toward me with switchblade speed. Her three fingers closed on

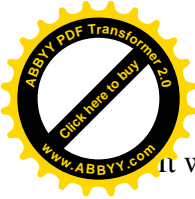
my throat, then released quickly. As I choked back a gasp, she assembled a message. INO WANT PUPPETTO FB NO TRUST ME

"Big score there." I rubbed at my throat and coughed lightly. GOT MSG

GOOD U SHOULD NOT BE I Vetha shook her head. "I hope this new plan to get Pygmalion works. He cannot be allowed to be victorious."

"I agree." I dropped letters in a row quickly. PYG FIRST FBNEXT

"Ah, you win." Vetha nodded to me. "I am fatigued. Another time we will play the deciding game, yes?"



it will be my pleasure." GRACIAS

U WILL NOT BE I HAPPY ME

We got very lucky with Jytte and her recollections. She has an excellent mind for details, and the year in which she escaped had been the wettest on record since 1992 in Arizona. Throughout the deserts, wild flowers bloomed and other plants thrived, covering the area with vegetation seldom seen more than once a decade.

Working with Rajani, Jytte was able to specify plants and later correlate her remembrances with botanical data. More importantly, though, because of the unseasonable weather, an inordinate number of photographic and videographic records from that year existed. Starting with tapes archived by the Kingman television station and falling back to CD-ROMs burned by Northern Arizona University students doing a botanical survey of the upper plateau, Jytte managed to pinpoint the area through which she traveled.

Jytte went ahead and narrowed down the likely places where she could have been held. She smiled sheepishly when she presented a floorplan for the place, noting, "I determined this had to be the correct location because of

how hard I wanted to deny the possibility that it could have been the place I sought."

In a briefing room, with Sinclair, Rajani, Jytte and Crowley, I looked down at the representation of the Pulliam Estate. It had been built after the 1996 election as a retreat for the former vice president after his humiliating defeat in the presidential election. He lived there, a virtual recluse, for two years until he and Pee-wee Herman teamed up for remakes of the Martin and Lewis films. Eventually, he moved to France to be with his audience and sold the place to a holding company, Fair Lady Properties.

"I obtained the floorplan from notes made by the last assessor to go out there. The security is as noted and was suitable for the protection of a former vice president." Jytte glanced down at some notes she had made. "Recent utility records indicated a lower usage than was present during the days the first occupant owned it, suggesting either an independent power source or some of the systems being turned off."

Crowley stared at the floorplan for a moment, then nodded. "Big enough, isolated. The greenhouse extension could be used for almost anything and easily converted into a lab. It's on the top of a small plateau, which means guarding the entrances is easy. The property is large enough to hold the troops he would bring through if he was looking at a limited strikeforce. From the location here to the north of Kingman, both Flagstaff and Las Vegas are well within striking range."

I glanced at my watch, "It's 9 a.m. now. Hal, Bat and the other wounded are due back here on the plane this afternoon, it will take us 3 1/2 hours to get out there." I looked over at Crowley. "Soft penetration, quick recon?"

The occultist nodded. "In and back out fast. If it is the staging area, we will know. If it isn't, maybe we can find

clues to what is."



Jytte looked up at *me* from the far end of the table. "If we leave here by 5 p.m., it will be getting dark out there."

"We?" I searched her face for a clue about her feelings, but the mask had slid back into place. "I would not have thought you want to go back there. I assumed Crowley and I would handle this."

"I know, but logic would dictate that having me along would mean instant confirmation of the target's identity."

"But, Ms. Ravel, you could also come undone." Crowley shook his head. "Are you certain your remaining behind would not be best?"

Jytte met his questioning gaze openly. "No, for two reasons. The first is that I actually do need to face what I left behind there. If I do not do that, I will become just like a plant that outgrows its pot. As much as I might not like to acknowledge my past, and as much as I don't want to discover it all at once, I do need to know who I am so I can grow."

I nodded. "And the other reason? You're not thinking of shooting the place up, are you?"

"No, but there is one thing I don't think you've considered, gentlemen. I have." Jytte set her fists on her hips and I knew instantly we would not be leaving her in Phoenix when we headed out. "If I escaped from that facility, the chances are excellent that more people like me are still trapped there. I may not know who I *was*, but I do know that the person I am now cannot leave those people behind. Having once been in the state of mind they are likely experiencing, you'll need me to get them out."

 Dark Conspiracy 3-27.jpg

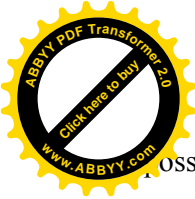
I studied the buildings on the Pulliam estate through the Starlight scope Crowley passed me. A greenish tinge defined the buildings, clinging to their sharp lines and outlining the conservative nature of the architecture. The main building, a ranch-style house, had a two-story addition at the northern end. Beyond it, I caught a hint of the greenhouse that had been pointed out on the floorplan.

The out-buildings consisted of a pool house, a guest house and a detached garage large enough for at least three vehicles. The garage had apartments built into its second story. Kennels stood between the garage and the main house.

"I don't see anything. Mo movement, no lights, nothing."

"Agreed." Crowley took the scope from me and offered it to Jytte, but she shook her head. "I think we can proceed."

Wordlessly, the three of us got up from the low hill that hid our Range Rover II from sight of the house and started to work our way down the hillside. Moving in the dark, with only a sliver of moon to guide us, we had to go slowly to avoid injury and doing anything that might alert people on the estate of our approach. If things went as well as



possible, we could be in and out with no one the wiser.

Despite our desire to make this reconnaissance foray quiet and bloodless, each of us packed a considerable amount of hardware. I wore two Colt Kraits—one on each hip—and a Wildey Wolf in a Bianchi shoulder holster under my left arm. The automatic pistols had served me well during the time I'd been in Coyote's cadre and, after the incident with the Aryans, I felt damned near naked without them. I also carried an HK MP-7 that was suppressed and silenced, just in case I needed to fill the air with a lot of slugs in a hurry.

My black fatigues made me one with the night. The thigh pockets were where I stashed the clips for my pistols, while the pouches lying flat against my stomach carried the spare ammo for the MP-7. My canteen hung from my belt at the back. Beneath the fatigues, I wore a standard Kevlar vest with trauma padding thickening it over my midline front and back, fit by no means made me invulnerable, but widened the line between instant death and serious wounding. As I often walked that line, broadening it made the journey so much easier.

Jytte wore the same sort of fatigues as I did, and she tucked her long, blond hair up into a black watch-cap. She decided against carrying any pistols and instead opted for an M1 77 carbine. While it used the same rifle cartridge as its big brother, the M1 6A2, the carbine's collapsible stock and shortened barrel made it perfect for close combat. She carried enough spare clips to finish a war, and I hoped she would not initiate anything we were ill-equipped to survive.

Crowley eschewed fatigues in favor of a thick black sweater and black jeans. He used a harness and belt to carry the Mac-1 Os he favored, as well as their spare clips. In a holster on his right hip, he also carried a silvery baton that I assumed to be some sort of stunner. I asked him

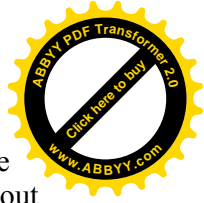
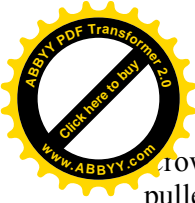
about it, but he only descnoea it as an oia inena ana wouiu tell me nothing more.

Crowley led the way across the cactus and tumbled rock expanse between us and the estate. I brought up the rear and caught bursts of anxiety from Jytte. In driving up toward to the area, she had been subdued and drank in everything Crowley and I could think of as last-minute instructions about the recon. When we left Route 93 and headed north, she became more agitated, leaving none of us with any doubt concerning the choice of targets for the night's outing.

Halfway to the target, we stopped in a shadowed gully and drank some water. Using simple hand signals, Crowley urged caution and silence. I reached out and gave Jytte's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. She smiled at me, the tremor in her bottom lip betraying her nervousness, then followed Crowley back into the night.

The only viable approach to reach the top of the low mesa was up the causeway that clung to the side of the mesa like ivy. While the road had been graded, it had not been paved or landscaped. The rocks on either side gave us plenty of cover, if we needed to hide from a vehicle going in or coming back out. Because of the stillness of the night air and the utter darkness so far from civilization, we assumed we would have plenty of warning about any approach.

We found the first passive security device halfway up the causeway. Thick cement blocks had been set in the roadway so that a driver would have to swerve around them. Anyone attempting to dash up the road to make a quick car-bomb attack or the like would have to slow down here or literally go off the road and down the side of the mesa. Slowing would make negotiating the barriers feasible, but would also leave the vehicle open to fire from guards located farther up the hill.



Crowley dropped to one knee in the shadow of the first barrier. From a pouch on the left side of his belt he pulled out a small aerosol can and pumped some air into it. He hit the nozzle, and a thin mistcloud hissed out. The cloud drifted invisibly through the darkness, then became a dazzling spot of purple-blue light for a second.

From an earlier explanation I knew the chemicals in the mist fluoresced under ultra-violet light. Using the spray cautiously, Crowley was able to define where (IV security lasers criss-crossed the area in a warning net. He located more than 1 felt comfortable negotiating, but far fewer than required to make our passage impossible.

Past that, we continued up the causeway to the main gate. A chain and padlock held the cyclone-fence closed. I squatted next to Crowley, and he pointed out the wires that electrified the fence. He produced a two-tined probe with a small LED display and thrust the tines in between the strands of the fence. Clearly puzzled by the result, he used the device twice more, the last time actually touching the tines to the wire itself.

He drew his hand across his own neck, letting me know the fence was dead. Standing, he crossed to the padlock and produced a set of lockpicks. He had Jytte hold the lock steady while he opened it, then he pulled the gates far enough apart for the three of us to slip between them. Closing the gates, he reset the lock but did not snap it shut.

A close inspection of the estate showed us what the Starlight scope had hidden. Long, dry grasses predominated in the yard, even growing up in between the slabs of concrete laid down for the driveway near the garage and back behind the pool house for a helipad. One of the doors to the pool house stood half-ajar, and a couple of tum-bleweeds lay up against the interior of the fence.

The whole compound looked deserted, but clearly it had not been abandoned for terribly long. None of the

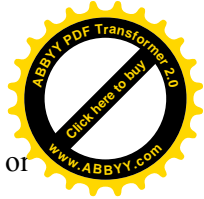
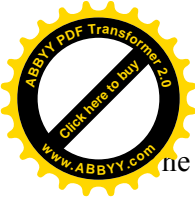
windows I could see were broken. From the causeway, we did have evidence that the laser-intrusion system still functioned—indicating a basic desire to keep the place inviolate. I found myself hoping that this place had been abandoned only since Pygmalion had taken Ryuhito away. That would explain the good shape it was in *and* let me imagine we might find something of use in it.

The three of us made our way to the main building. As we closed on it, I began to feel uneasy. It was odd because I felt fairly certain that no threat to me existed in the whole place. In addition, the sensation rose and fell as if it were an emotional siren undulating out a warning. As I got closer to the house, the sensation became stronger and almost overpowering.

Jytte slumped against the building's wall, and I knelt beside her. She gave me a weak smile, but I saw it wax and wane with the siren. I nodded to let her know I felt it, too, as Crowley used his lockpicks on the front door. I heard a click, then he slipped into the building. I wanted to get up to follow, but my resolve crashed head on into the rising tone of the siren, and I could not move.

Suddenly, the emotional siren stopped. Crowley reappeared at the door and waved the two of us in. I helped Jytte up, and we followed the occultist into the house. He shut the door behind us, then led us over to a small cloakroom. He twisted a coat hook built into the wall and caused a panel to withdraw.

At first glance, I knew I was looking at an alarm system. Bright little lights on a crude schematic of the grounds defined different areas of the estate. Around the house, the pool and a portion of the fence, an angry red light pulsed repeatedly. Green lights marked the rest of the compound, it all looked almost normal.



the reason it was not normal was because the components built into the alarm panel were not mechanical or

electronic. The panel had not so much been assembled as it had been grown. Wormlike creatures glowed red and green. Wet lines of mucus traced the connections from the circuitry and detection devices outside the building into this panel. Down below the light display, I saw a number of small creatures that looked like horseshoe crabs in miniature. One of them had a hole in its carapace that leaked a thick, green fluid on the ground.

Crowley kept his voice a low whisper. "This is the place. Dark Lord equipment. The alarm sent a message of unease out. It was a distress signal, and I would wager it did not make it through the armored shell of Pygmalion's dimension."

I pointed to the red alarm lights around the pool house and fence. "You neutralized the alarm for the main house by killing it. Why weren't these two working?"

The occultist flicked a lockpick against one of the other crabs. Its brittle shell cracked and fell to dust on the floor. "Those alarms went off a while ago and died from their exertions, I would assume."

"Since the alarm was going off when we arrived, we have to assume others were here recently." Jytte worked the charging lever on her M1 77. "Or are still here."

I nodded. "Let's do it like we planned. We start at the top and work our way down."

I led the way from the front door back into the house. From the floorplan, we determined two likely spots for Pygmalion to maintain an office. The first was where the former vice president had put his office. The advantage to it was, according to the floorplan, a number of built-in shelves, a built-in safe, hidden bar and an external door to the pool. I did not think those practicalities would matter as much to Pygmalion as his desire to set himself up in a place that once belonged to the second most powerful man on Earth.

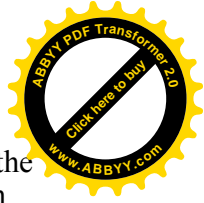
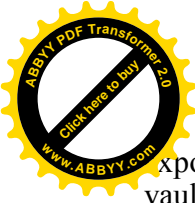
Stalking through the house, I began to assemble a picture of Pygmalion that surprised and revolted me. The original Santa Fe decor, which we had seen in numerous magazine layouts on the estate, had been stripped out and replaced with something much more European. Heavy dark woods predominated both in fixtures and furnishings, as if their bulk and age could give the owner a legitimacy he could not otherwise possess.

Just looking at the items, I knew they were antiques that had been lovingly restored. I admired the workmanship and, as we moved deeper into the house, I saw that the restorer's skill had gotten much better. I got the sincere impression that the house itself was a work of art, or a retrospective display of work that had filled a career.

I had not doubt Pygmalion was the artisan and that by looking back over my shoulder at Jytte, I would see one of his finest creations.

The leftmost of the double-doors to the office stood open. I peered quickly through the crack, then slipped into the room. I crouched immediately and swept the room with my MP-7, but I saw no targets so I did not shoot. Reaching back, I opened the door more fully and waved my two companions on in.

Crowley crossed immediately to the huge portrait on the south wall and swung it away from the wall to



xpose the safe. Jytte entered the room, then stopped in the center of it. She looked up and around at the vaulted ceiling, then slowly started to spin around as if in a daze. She made one complete circuit, then started another before she shivered and blinked her eyes.

I walked over to the huge, hardwood desk near the bank of windows in the west wall and dropped myself into the chair behind it. "It's Pygmalion. This chair is cranked high enough that I'll smash my knees on the desk if I pull myself up to it," I whispered.

The occultist grinned. "This safe is very good. It will take explosive to open."

Jytte said nothing, but drifted toward the bookcase built-in beside the door. She reached up and tugged on one book, bringing it halfway out of the neat row. Nothing happened, so she shifted to a lower shelf and tugged two or three books out of place. When that produced no results, she went to a third shelf, her pulling becoming more frenzied.

Suddenly, a rumble sounded through the room. Jytte jumped back as the shelving unit slowly slid forward, then to the side to block the door. Where it had stood, I saw a gray rectangle sunk into the floor. Light came up from below, giving Jytte's face a granite hue.

Crowley ran over beside her, then knelt near the hole in the floor. I came around the desk on the other side and tried to squeeze past Jytte and the moved bookshelf. She remained in place, and one of the pulled-out books stopped me.

"Coyote, we may have hit pay-dirt." Crowley looked up at me. "I can't see much more than a stairwell, but it goes far enough down that it's safe to suggest the whole mesa is hollow."

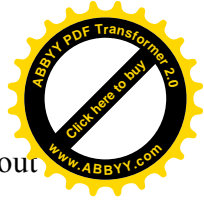
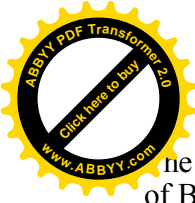
"Could be," I mumbled as I pulled the book that had stopped me from the shelf. With it in my hands, I corrected my earlier impression and saw it for what it was: a leather-bound binder. In the darkness, I could not tell if the cover was blue, but the dim light reflected beautifully from the gold foil stamp of the Build-more logo on the cover. As I realized what I had in my hands, I also remembered the last thing I'd seen before the grenade went off.

I drifted back over to the desk and laid the folder down in the muted puddle of moonlight making it through the wispy drapes. "I don't know what's down there, Damon, but we may have our staging area right here." Page by

page, I flipped through the proposal, skipping the standard boilerplate stuff that had been in the one Darius MacNeal had sent to me, and concentrated on the diagrams in the back.

The plan was brilliant. It consisted of the equivalent of sinking an aircraft carrier in the ground so only the superstructure remained visible. The base, which would be powered by a set of seven geothermal generators, would have the facilities for outfitting, maintaining and manufacturing the things needed for a full-scale military assault.

I closed the binder. "This is it. Build-more is putting it together for Pygmalion. Sin said something about a secret project in Nevada using up a lot of Build-more resources. This thing is dated two years ago, with an estimated 30 months for completion."



the occultist straightened up. "We have what we came for. We will have to get location information out of Build-more."

The image of the Build-more grenade flashed before my mind's eye once again. "That will be a distinct pleasure. Let's go."

"No!" Jytte looked at the two of us. "We have to go down there. We have to see what is there."

"Jytte, we have the information we sought. It is time to leave."

"You cannot! We, /have to know what is down there." Jytte descended a couple of steps. "I need you to come with me. I've never asked before. I need you now."

I acknowledged the plea in her voice with a nod. "We'll take a look."

A flash of rainbow light from outside filled the library with a second of brilliance. All three of us hunkered down reflexively, but heard and felt no alarms. "What the hell was that?" I asked.

Crowley shifted his shoulders. "That sort of light display usually only comes when something comes through a dimensional gate. With the direction it came from, I'd guess the pool or helipad. Now we know why other alarms had been going off."

Jytte's eyes narrowed to blue slivers. "So we are not alone?"

Crowley shook his head. "No. I'd guess some extra-dimensional creatures have recently discovered this place and have started looting it."

I rechecked the clip in the MP-7. "And, in this case, I'd suggest that enemies of our enemy are not our friends at all."

 Dark Conspiracy 3-28.jpg

I shivered as I worked my way past Jytte and on down, step by step, along the stone stairway. Harsh, bright lights set at the base of the stairs leeched color from the red rock nearest them, leaving it a baby-flesh pink. I held my left arm up to block the direct light and kept the MP-7 pointed downward. I kept it trained on the dark square 20 feet below me, ready to blast anything that appeared in the corridor leading deeper on into the mesa.

I realized, as I descended, that my shiver had come from more than fright. The air around me grew cold. I could not see my breath, but this did not surprise me because dry desert air does not allow breathmist to form except at more frigid temperatures. Even so, the chill reminded me of a refrigerator and made me mindful of ice caverns located amid the extinct volcanoes in the north of Arizona. Part of me wondered if the complex was natural, while the even sides of the corridor and the edges on the stairs told me it was not.



Oddly enough, the lack of adornment suggested the stairs and the corridor below had not been crafted by Pygmalion. I could not imagine him having created either without the addition of leering gargoyles or seductively simple and sensuous carvings to decorate them. As

bizarre and grotesque as Pygmalion's choice of medium for his work, he did have an artist's touch. Realizing that meant, then, that he had chosen to leave this area plain, and I determined that must have been to provide contrast for whatever work he had wrought in the heart of the mesa.

As much as I might have wished it would be otherwise, I found my assessment of him had not been wrong. At the base of the stairs, I entered a corridor which I found a bit small and tight, but for one of Pygmalion's statues it would have been quite roomy. Curving around to the left, the only illumination in the corridor came from the backlighting of the stairs and hint of silvery-white light from farther on around the bend.

I turned back to my two compatriots and saw Crowley lay his left hand on Jytte's right shoulder and give it a squeeze. Even making allowances for her light complexion and the brutal lighting, she had taken on a ghostlike pallor. She leaned back against the wall with her eyes closed and, exposing her lovely long throat, tipped her face toward the ceiling.

"What it is, Jytte?" I whispered.

She shook her head slightly, then swallowed. "I have been here before. The stairs. I know this place."

Crowley gently cupped the right side of her face in his left hand. "You left *a* victim, you return a saviour. You have survived and you *will* survive."

"Thank you." I saw a bead of sweat roll down over her Adam's apple, then her eyes opened and she nodded. "After you, Coyote."

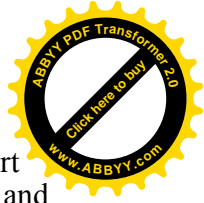
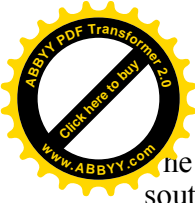
Though Crowley's words had been for Jytte, they emboldened me as well. Jytte and I were both constructs of a Dark Lord. We had both fled our former masters as victims, yet now rose to oppose them. We were the slavemaster's nightmare in black fatigues and carrying automatic weapons. We had both resolved that our

masters would pay for what they had done to us and others, and right around the bend we could start collecting.

I made my way down the corridor less cautiously than might have been prudent, but I felt armored with the righteousness of what I had come to do. That makes it sound ridiculously like a religious convert describing his visit to a den of iniquity, and it probably did approach that experience in the extreme. For the barest of moments I felt assured of the mythic quality of my quest to reach the lair of evil at the end of the corridor.

The difference between a myth and a horror tale, I discovered, is a matter of perspective.

The corridor opened on to a huge cavern that appeared quite natural in that stalactites and stalagmites filled it like petrified teeth in fossil jaws. Darkness hid the arched depths of some vaults, while shadows hinted at yet further chambers and corridors elsewhere. The uneven floor had a molten smoothness to it, as if it had frozen while yet fluid, or had been washed into gentle, undulating hills and valleys by eons of water seepage.



The vista struck me as appropriate and right, except that I found it in the middle of a mesa in the desert southwest. There the formation was utterly unnatural, which meant it had been planned and designed and created by other than random chance. Had the geographical and geological paradox not been enough to point out the problem with the cavern, its overwhelming aspect would have clued me in quickly enough.

Ice. The stairs and corridor had been so cold because an inch of ice covered every square foot of the cavern in a glittering, sparkling second skin. Icicles as long as I was tall, and sharpened to a needle's point, augmented the vast stalactite collection on the ceiling. Their frozen counterparts looked like stalagmite seedlings about to

erupt out of the floor and blossom like their stony companions.

All around the room I saw standing, sitting and reclining shapes that looked vaguely humanoid. Muted fleshtones reflected up through the ice-coats each of the figures wore. The different facets of the ice sliced up and reconstructed their images so the ice-folk appeared to be models for countless cubist artworks awaiting resurrection when that style came back into vogue.

I slid over to the nearest of the figures and crashed the MP-7's collapsed stock against the ice coating a figure's head. The ice shattered and, with a second blow, a big chunk came away. Aside from fragments clinging tenaciously to a few black strands of hair, I managed to clear the ice away from the right side of the woman's face. Peeling off my right glove I touched her but found, as I expected and feared, her frostbitten flesh felt lifeless.

Jytte sank to her knees beside me and touched the woman. She looked up, horrified, then buried her face in her hands. Her shoulders heaved with sobs. I reached out and hugged her, but I had the impression that she could not feel me, nor would she have heard me if I spoke.

Crowley crouched beside her, opposite me, and shook his head. "I think this place was kept cold on purpose, by Pygmalion. It would lower the metabolic rate of his constructs so they would go into a hibernation, it was his way of preserving their beauty." He pointed to the diamond-stud earring in the dead woman's ear. "I cannot think he would be so wasteful if he meant to kill them."

I looked around the ice cavern again. "If that is true, and it seems likely to me as well, how did the ice get in here?"

The occultist lowered his voice to a whisper. "This is the High Country, it is winter and within the winter we get storms. There has to be a hole to the surface and enough snow and rain poured in here to produce this."

"But what...?" My question died on my lips as other voices echoed through the cavern. I slide Jytte back out of sight, and Crowley hunkered down beside me. At his signal, I worked my way back toward the left, past Jytte, to a low wall of congealed stalagmites and looked to the center of the room.

I saw two nearly human creatures similar to a couple I had met and killed elsewhere in Arizona. They stood as tall as a normal man and, aside from a slightly grayish cast to their skin and their pointed ears, they looked utterly unremarkable. The clothes they wore made them look like refugees from some low-budget pirate movie and could only have been improved upon if one of them wore an eyepatch and had a parrot perched on his shoulder.



they did not disturb me because I knew they were Draolings. Dwellers in a nearby dimension, an intrepid few ventured through an interconnecting proto-dimension to play little homicidal tricks on humanity. Crowley had suggested Draolings were behind the Donner party massacre and might have been the Zodiac killer in California. With what I'd learned, I was willing to peg a Draoling as the Green River Killer in the Pacific Northwest and even suggest they played Svengali to the likes of Charles Manson, David Berkowitz and Jeffrey Dahmer.

Even with that sort of nasty pedigree, they did not concern me, because I knew how easy it would be to kill them. And how good it would feel to have done so.

What *did* concern me was the creature standing between them. Actually, standing is correct, but conveys the wrong image, because the massive beast appeared to be more at home in a four-point stance. Its stooped shoulders and crested spine just avoided brushing stalactites as it shuffled forward on little, bandy legs. Mottled flesh with a granitelike color pattern covered it from its toes on up beyond where the massive chest narrowed slightly past

the shoulders to form a neck roughly the circumference of a manhole. The lantern-jawed head featured pointed ears, a flattened skull and wide but hardly innocent eyes. Two triangular slits flat in its face served as its nose. It held its mouth open, revealing a phalanx of sharklike teeth.

The creature raised one huge fist and crashed it down on an ice-clad corpse with enough force to send a tremble through the cavern. The blow pulped the corpse's mid-section, tearing it in half. The two Draolings immediately scrambled after the upper body like hyenas fighting over carrion, while the larger creature grabbed the lower body with one ankle in each paw. With a yank that rippled muscles in its chest and thick arms, the monster tore the corpse's pelvis apart like a wishbone and commenced gnawing on a frozen thigh.

One of the Draolings pulled an arm free of torso, spilling his compatriot back in a tangle with the rest of the body, then nibbled on the torn deltoid muscle. "As a snack, frozen is fine, but I much prefer my meat fresher."

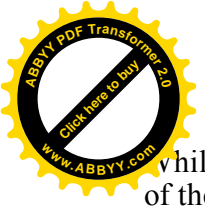
His companion broke the corpse's arm off at the elbow and peeled the frozen flesh back as if it were a glove. "Agreed. Snack now, then we can harvest something to be thawed and prepared correctly."

The behemoth just belched and spit a femur out.

The surreality of the whole situation hit me like a runaway train. Hidden in shadow within an artificial cavern coated in ice, I was listening to extra-dimensional creatures discussing human beings as if they were range-fed cattle. What Pygmalion had sculpted into examples of physical perfection like Jytte, these creatures saw only as Purina Draoling-chow. While the credo that suggested presentation was part of the enjoyment of a meal had often seemed silly to me—especially when a meal seemed priced more as art than foodstuff—the Draolings were doing the moral equivalent of killing and eating Best of

Breed at the Westminster Dog Show.

That momentary perspective of extra-dimensional morality put creatures like Fiddleback and the Empress of Diamonds in their place, not only were they Dark Lords, but they were from elsewhere and could not view us in the way we viewed ourselves. They were predators, and we were prey, with no rights to be imagined, much less respected. That whole round of thought also made Pygmalion yet more horrible for his willful abandonment of his humanity in exchange for the power of a Dark Lord.



While my whirlwind of thought precluded action, Jytte did not find herself so preoccupied. I saw her out of the corner of my eye as she stepped up into the open lane between our hiding places and the feasters. The rage pouring off her seemed hot enough to melt the ice and the stone beneath it, but she remained rock steady. She held the M-177 at her right hip and flipped the safety off with an snap that echoed through the cavern like a gunshot.

The Draolings looked up with smiles on their faces. "What have we here?" asked one around a mouthful of food.

Jytte hit the carbine's trigger with a mechanical precision that made the rifle seem part of her. The initial three-shot burst sent a trio of cartridges arcing through the air to clink and clatter off a stalagmite's icy sheath. The bullets caught the speaker in the chest, compressing it violently in a lethal Heimlich maneuver that spewed most of his meat-cud out over the floor. Blowing out his back, the bullets sent a spray of bright, arterial blood out to drench the large monster.

As Jytte shifted her aimpoint slightly to the right and let another burst go, my early training clicked in and my mind analyzed her attack with clinical clarity. Because she stood only 25 meters from her target, the 56-grain 5.56mm bullets were traveling well in excess of 3200 feet

per second when they actually struck the other Draoling. At that speed, the bullets fragmented the second they hit anything solid. The one that nailed the Draoling in the wrist severed the hand from the body, while the one that hit it in the ribs exploded into countless metal shards that shredded everything in the chest cavity. The last bullet hit the Draoling in the jaw, turning a leering grin into a gape of horror before the head snapped back and the body somersaulted away into the shadows.

Jytte shifted her gun to cover the behemoth, and a curious sensation rising in me forced me to shout at her. "No, don't." Somehow, I knew the creature, and I knew that to shoot it was not going to be effective.

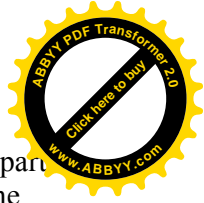
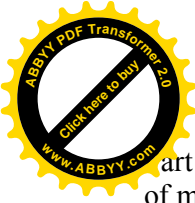
I don't know if she heard me or just chose to ignore me, but she tightened her finger on the M-177's trigger. The bullets hit solidly in a ragged line running from the monster's right hip on up to its left shoulder. They staggered the creature and dumped it back on its buttocks, but none of them pierced its hide.

Howling in furious pain, the creature rolled forward and, digging its black talons into the ice, scrambled straight at Jytte. Without giving the creature a second glance, Jytte hit the clip release and slammed a fresh magazine home in the carbine as the first dropped toward the floor. Working the charging lever, she started to bring the gun up again.

Acting without consciously knowing why, I vaulted the stalagmite wall. I knew there was no way I could land on the ice and remain upright, so I never even tried, landing on my left thigh and buttock, I slid toward Jytte and kicked out with my right leg. I hit her in the left hip, knocking her out of the monster's path, then I twisted myself up onto my left knee and drew the Wildey Wolf in my right hand.

The creature charged on, picking up speed. Icicles teased from the ceiling by its back cascaded in pieces

down around its shoulders. Ice fragments gouged from the floor filled the air like snow kicked up by a horse galloping through a winter's field. Its bellowslike lungs pumped air in and out, the huffing and puffing of an organic steam locomotive bearing down on me.



part of me knew, as the musty, sour breath hit me from 10 meters away, I should be terrified. The greater part of me, though, knew that to succumb to terror would be to die. Even as the creature raised its right paw, the black, scythe-blade talons trembling with expectation, I *knew* I had it. I raised the Wildey Wolf and squeezed the trigger.

The bullet entered the creature's face through the right nostril and immediately sent a blue-black geyser of blood back out in its wake. The creature's gait faltered almost instantly, and the raised paw caught a stalactite, breaking the stony protrusion off. That slewed the body around toward where I had been hiding. I flattened against the floor and felt its left foot brush by barely above me, then heard more snapping and crackling as the monster crashed to the ground and lay still.

Rolling on to my back, I saw Crowley helping Jytte to her feet. She shook her head and blinked her eyes a couple of times, but looked no worse for the wear. Crowley looked at me and smiled. "That was damned cocky, you know."

I frowned and reholstered the Wolf. "Nonsense. The nostril slit was about the size of a large pizza slice. A blind man could have hit it easily."

"I know. That wasn't the cocky part." Crowley's green eyes sparkled. "Shooting only once *was*."

Jytte stood and looked quizzically at her carbine. "Why did your shot kill it and mine had no effect?" She hesitated for a second, then added, "More precisely, how did you know my bullets would have no effect?"

I got to my feet without help and folded my arms. "I'd

seen Draolings before, and Crowley here had impressed upon me how they had been the genesis of some pretty fearsome folklore. Lots of things we've seen in other dimensions are like that."

Crowley gave Jytte a wink. "Many of Earth's heroic legends are based in encounters with creatures from other dimensions."

I shrugged. "Somewhere in the back of my mind, I guess I remembered a description of a huge, hulking creature that ate men. I think the cold had something to do with it and, perhaps, your name."

She frowned. "Jytte is a Danish variation of Judith... Oh, I see. Grendel."

I nodded. "Grendel's thick hide could not be pierced by ordinary weapons. I assumed the nasal membranes were not so tough."

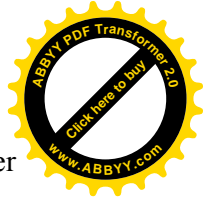
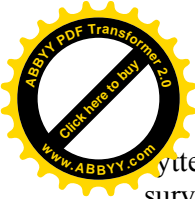
"Why not the eye?"

"Eyelid."

Jytte accepted my answer with a grim nod. "Thank you for saving my life."

I pointed at the two dead Draolings. "Thank you for doing what needed to be done."

"Speaking of which, what are we going to do here?" Crowley frowned as he surveyed the cavern. "Clearly, Pygmalion is not watching over this place that closely. If I can find the command center for the dimensional gate the Draolings and this Grendel used to get here, I can set it up to be useless for them."



Jytte looked at both of us. "I know the chances are slender, but will you allow me the time to look for other survivors?"

"By all means. Crowley, why don't you fix the dimensional gate, and I'll help Jytte search this place." I kicked the Grendel's body. "Do you know the dimension that gives birth to these things?"

Crowley nodded. "I tend to avoid it, but, yes." "Good. When we're done here, I want to drag this body off and dump it in its home."

Jytte frowned. "Won't that just anger these creatures?" "Could be," I smiled, "but it should also serve to remind

them that Earth is where Beowulf lived. I want to remind

them that forgetting that particular lesson is something

that can be downright fatal."

 Dark Conspiracy 3-29.jpg

Our search for survivors in Pygmalion's cavern proved fruitless, and a grim air settled around Jytte. Wordlessly, she listened to Crowley's simple instructions concerning dimensional walking, then helped the two of us lug the Grendel back to its home dimension. There in Grendelheim, Crowley used telekinesis to lift the dead creature into the branches of a gnarled tree, leaving it like some grotesque parody of the Reta.

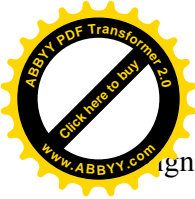
Crowley had left the dimensional gate at the Pulliam estate in a random select mode. "For this type of gate to work, there must be a link between it and the gate at the other end. Gates in RSM do not maintain a connection, and only the sending of a proper unlocking code from another gate can bring it out of that mode and under control."

"So nothing more will be heading through that gate?"

"Right. Oddly enough, that gate was not part of the estate until recently—probably after Pygmalion had abandoned it." Crowley interlaced his fingers and bridged them out in reverse, cracking the knuckles. "Draolings are not good for much, but they do have a knack for setting up makeshift gates. Theirs are of limited capabilities in terms of size and the distance over which they permit travel, but they function for Draoling purposes."

We appeared back in my office in the Lorica Citadel in Phoenix. "You mean they were not using a gate that Pygmalion had placed there?"

The occultist unbuckled his weapon's harness and set it on the table back in the conversation nook. "I saw no



signs of other gates there. It may be that he doesn't know how to create gates."

Jytte shook her head. "Is that possible? Pygmalion *is* a Dark Lord."

"True, but he was a human being until only a few years ago. He might never have been taught how to create them." Crowley pointed toward the window and the red warning lights blinking from the maglev train circuit around the city. "Nero Loring built a dimensional gate without knowing what it was, but only because he was given the plans by an agent under Fiddleback's control. The knowledge of how to build gates is quite limited, both in depth and distribution. The vast majority of gates are little rabbit holes—shunts from one dimension to the next. Fully operational, variable-selection gates are very rare."

I shot him a suspicious glance. "But most of the ones I have seen are of that rare variety. You even own one."

Crowley smiled broadly. "Your experience is atypical because you've been running with me, and I know where most of the good gates are. And, as for the one I possess—a small one with little more than a single-person capacity—I got it as many other Dark Lords got theirs: I stole it."

The occultist opened his hands. "While you've seen a lot of functional gates, there are hundreds more that are dead. They have no control functions, so they can never created a link out to anything. Someone with a working gate can interrogate them and set up a link, which is what Pygmalion doubtless had intended the gate Nero Loring built here in Phoenix to do with a dead gate he has somewhere."

"He came damned close to succeeding."

"Agreed. The trick here is this: Fiddleback has not found an active gate large enough to move him, nor has he been able to transplant the controls and power supply from another gate to his dead one. He's stuck out there unless and until we bring him in."

Jytte frowned. "We have dismantled the controls for the maglev gate here. Does that mean it is a dead gate and could, technically speaking, still function?"

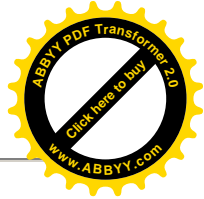
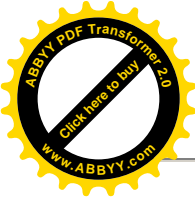
Crowley nodded. "Sure, provided someone has a power source sufficient to open it and move something that large. As we know, those power requirements are not easy to meet."

"That's good, else we'd have Dark Lords stacked up for landing approaches like planes at O'Hare in the morning." I walked around to the far side of my desk and glanced at the clock. "It's midnight now." Punching an icon on the surface of the desk, a roster came up, and I scanned it quickly, "It appears everyone is here from Japan. Bat is operational, Hal is home with his children. Dorothy is also with Hal, but Mickey and Natch are here in the citadel, as well as Vetha, Sin and Rajani."

"Coyote, we need to determine where Build-more is doing its work for Pygmalion." Jytte headed toward the door of the office. "I will get right on that."

"No, Jytte, we can get Sinclair to get us that information. He has to still have contacts in Build-more."

She stopped and pulled off her watch cap, releasing a flood of golden hair that half-hid her face. "Chances are excellent that Sin's sources are either ignorant or will report his inquiries to Darius. This is not because Darius assumes we know something about his secret project—and I wonder if he knows what it is himself—but because Darius wants to know what his son's area of interest is so he can control him. Darius has likely also heard that you



are back and, therefore, will perceive anything his son does as an action motivated by you."

Jytte's concise analysis surprised me, not because of its thorough nature, because I expected that from her. What stunned me was her precise insights into Darius MacNeal's character. Before, I might have expected her to cite instances where Darius had made moves to curtail and control his son's life without drawing the conclusion concerning the man's desire to dominate Sinclair. Now, without an example, she picked out his motivation and made her point quite eloquently.

"I concur. How will you get the information we need?"

She smiled confidently. "Even if he had been paid in advance, Darius MacNeal would not pay cash for anything on the project. He and his people will be using credit. His workers will be using credit. Some of them will also be calling family members here in Phoenix. By hitting the phone company records and credit card company records, I can pinpoint the area where his workers are spending their money. Rental car mileage records can give me an approximate radius of travel from that point. Delivery company records, like United Parcel Express, can track and perhaps zero in on a location.

"Once I have the area, I can tap into LANDSAT photographs of the area and compare those with more recent photo-recon of the targeted region. I could even work a back-channel deal with the Ukraine Satellite Maintenance Ministry to have one of their old spy satellites make a pass over the area. As much as this base is supposed to be a secret, its construction is going to leave a large footprint. I will find it."

As Jytte spoke, I heard an animation and determination in her voice where I had only heard mechanical precision before. She had once used computers and her skill with them to create a safe haven for herself. She did what we

had asked of her because it meant that we would leave her alone while providing her with all she needed to survive. Her work was her way of appeasing the people who insulated her from the outside world.

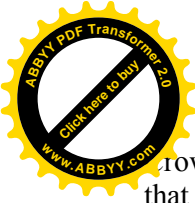
She had changed, and changed radically. She reacted to the challenge of locating the base like a tiger smelling blood on the hunt. She wanted the base's location because it was another place connected with Pygmalion. I could not tell if she wanted to avenge the dead we found at the Pulliam estate, or if she was out to get a direct shot at Pygmalion herself, but it made no difference. Instead of doing things because she had been assigned them to do, Jytte had defined her task and now eagerly looked to leap into it.

I gave her a respectful nod. "I have no doubt your strategy will work. Go to it."

She nodded and headed out. As the door closed behind her, I turned to Crowley. "We'll have to do another scouting run on this facility."

The occultist nodded. "Agreed. Since we know it's in Nevada, we could even head up there early and be in position when Jytte finalizes the location. Depending how things set up, we should not have any trouble learning the nature of the facilities in place for transferring troops over from Pygmalion's home dimension."

I frowned, an irritating fact about the assault on Turquoise bringing itself to my conscious attention. "With Turquoise, you said that Pygmalion had Ryuhito's troops tunnel out to a dimensional gate, then get sent through. Do you think he will have the same setup maintained for this base? Will he insulate himself that way?"



Crowley's left hand strayed to his goatee. "Interesting point, and one that we need to answer. I would assume that *if* he has insulated himself that way, the gate out would still be within the same cluster as his home base."

That means our plan for bringing Fiddleback in could still work."

"Provided the conditions on the other side of the gate are suitable to our existence." I sighed. "If Pygmalion outsmarts us and used an inhospitable proto-dimension as his staging area, he wins because our ambush falls prey to where-ever he has chosen to stage his attack."

"A strategy worthy of a Dark Lord, yes, but is Pygmalion that cautious? He was human until not long ago."

I smiled. "I'm human, and I thought of *ft*."

"Yes, but you were trained in the ways of death and warfare—*ft* makes sense for you to think of that sort of thing." Crowley stared at me for a second, then smiled grimly. "Still, your point is well taken. We will have to penetrate the base and see if we can confirm the location on the other side of the gates."

"I concur."

Crowley tugged at the heel of the glove on his left hand. "And that means we'll have to bring Mickey with us."

I wanted to ask him if he was insane, but the matter of fact way in which he spoke made me think before I reacted. Mickey had spent what must have been an eternity in Pygmalion's home dimension. He would know *ft*, and could confirm for us that the place connected to the base Build-more was constructing was Pygmalion's stronghold—much as Jytte had managed to do on our recent recon of the Pulliam estate, *ft* was the right choice, the logical choice, but part of me rebelled at the idea of bringing a 5-year-old child back to the place where he had been traumatized.

"Wouldn't a videotape suffice? Couldn't he identify it in another way?"

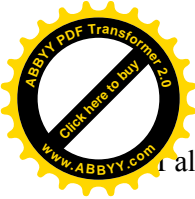
"Coyote, *ft* might be a scent or the way the breeze feels on his skin that identifies *ft* for him. We can't capture that on video." Crowley took a deep breath and exhaled it

slowly. "I know that bringing Mickey creates all sorts of risks on a quiet insertion, but he's a good boy. He'll do what we ask him."

I returned to the day I'd asked if Mickey could be trained to kill again. Hal's resistance to my suggestion, and my surprised reaction to Bat's indifference to Mickey's age again hammered at me. I had never seen anyone who could do what Mickey could, so I could think of few threats on our mission that could harm him. Yet even if I could have guaranteed no chance of injury to him, I would still be reluctant to bring him with us. I felt as though the only way I could make up for the abuse he had suffered at Pygmalion's hands was to make sure he never suffered again.

Even with that as my goal, I knew it had been my plan that had gotten his father killed. "Damon, he's an orphan."

"But he is the only one who can make the correct identification for us. Ryuhito is out of commission and will remain so until and unless we have no choice but to bring him into the fight." Crowley chewed his lower lip.



"I also don't believe Mickey knows he is without any parents."

"No one has told him?!"

"Who would? Rajani is the only logical candidate, and she is dealing with the death of her own father. No one else would have taken the initiative and a few, like Bat, would have been specifically ordered not to do the job." The occultist inclined his head in my direction. "He has to be told."

"And you think it is up to me?" I shivered. "I never knew I had parents, Crowley. I was raised in the GalBro Headquarters with my only human contact coming in the form of tutors and trainers. I knew no one well enough to call him a friend. From birth, from before birth, Fiddleback made me into an assassin who could kill coldly and efficiently. How can I explain to Mickey about the loss of

his father when I cannot even begin to fathom what that will do to him?"

"Fiddleback wanted to make you an emotionless drone, but he couldn't. Emotionlessness demands a lack of passion, a lack of pride in your work. A hunter cannot be without emotions. They are there, Coyote, and you can tap them. You have, in realizing you hate your former master enough to rebel against him, and in realizing the debt you owed to your predecessor. You have accepted Coyote's crusade to oppose the Dark Lords and prosecute it with a fierce loyalty to humanity." Crowley nodded at me. "You can find it in yourself to explain things to Mickey and, I think, you need to do so to finally gain back the last piece of your soul that Fiddleback still owns."

Something in Crowley's words burrowed deep into me and began to twist in my guts. As he spoke, I sensed the location of the piece he had seen missing. I desperately wanted to fill that void, but I could not. I realized he was right—telling Mickey about his father would heal that wound, shrink that abscess in my soul. I did not know how it would accomplish that end, but I just knew it would.

I looked up at him. "How is it that you are so closed to others, yet you can see into our hearts so easily?"

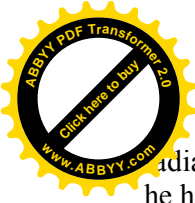
"Perhaps it is just anti-matter knowing matter, or shadow knowing light." Crowley shrugged easily. "It makes no difference, does it, really?"

His smile grew as I shook my head. "I thought not," he said quietly as he headed for the door. "I'll send Mickey up. Good luck to you both."

Mickey arrived dressed in a white T-shirt that showed Heidi Stiletto, the buxom songstress of the rock group *Hell's Belles*, giving everyone a good look at the trident tattoo on her right cheek. A pair of gym shorts completed his ensemble, and I suspected he got both articles of

clothing from or in imitation of Bat. The short-sleeved shirt and short pants hid little of the carbon-fiber armor beneath his flesh, making him look like a man-zebra with twisted curls replacing orderly stripes. His hair had been combed into place by his fingers, but enough of it stuck out in odd directions that I suspected he had been sleeping when Crowley sent him to me.

As unusual as he looked in his borrowed clothes and decorated flesh, the expression on his face was one of childish innocence and even happy anticipation. I realized as I watched him walk across the carpeted floor and half-leap on to the end of the couch, he felt proud to have been called into my presence. I could feel it



radiating off him like pure sunlight burning through the blue sky above the Frozen Shade. He had no idea why he had been called to see me. He was just happy, and I was going to destroy that happiness.

"Good evening, Mickey. I hope you will forgive me for waking you."

He nodded his head emphatically up and down, then grinned. "S'okay. I like being awake. When I sleep, there are bad dreams sometimes."

"I'm sure there are." I smiled at him. "I have them as well, sometimes. All we have to do is remember they are dreams and cannot hurt us."

Another big nod acknowledged my statement.

How to begin? How can I do this? I stopped my pacing and clasped my hands at the small of my back.

"Mickey, the reason I wanted to speak with you here is because I have some news for you. I am afraid it is not good news, it is bad news—no, you didn't do anything wrong—but it may hurt you, inside, and make you sad. That's okay, to be hurt inside. You can cry if you want."

His look of puzzlement half died as he pressed his lips together and shook his head. "My father said to be brave

and not to cry. He said it would upset Dorothy."

"I see. Then, perhaps, you could cry here, and we will not let it upset Dorothy." His determination to be brave slammed down on the rising fear I sensed in him. He shunted his fear away and concentrated on what I was going to say. Like a good little soldier, he was determined to do what his father had told him to do. "Mickey, your father will not be coming back."

Anguish shot through the child like lightning and immediately slaved itself to a rising sense of self-doubt in the boy. His mouth dropped open in what would have been a prelude to an outcry, but he held himself back. I could feel the emotional riptide pulling him one way and another, then I found the thing creating it and immediately acted to shield Mickey from his own worst fears.

"No, Mickey, your father is not going away because of something you did. He would like nothing better than to be here right now. He loves you very much and, were it in his power, he would be here with you. The fact is, though, he cannot."

"Why?"

The quavering tone in Mickey's voice told me that his self-doubt had not been vanquished. I dropped down into a squat and rested both of my hands on his right knee. "Mickey, your father knew that in the time you were taken away from him that you were hurt."

"I am all better."

"Yes, Mickey, you are better. You had your physical ills healed, and your father was happy for that. He remembered how you were and was very proud of how you managed all alone to go through what healed you. He was proud and he was happy because you became more than he ever hoped you would. But, at the same time, he was sad."



why?"



"Why?" I hesitated, as faint chords started to resonate through me. I felt outrage at the way Pygmalion had manipulated the boy. His body had been healed and brought forward to adulthood, then changed and modified, yet the boy had not been intellectually made into a man. Pygmalion used Mickey's innocence to manufacture a killing machine that did not have to wrestle with the morality of what it did because it had not matured enough to understand that much of right and wrong.

I suddenly realized two things. The first was that Fiddleback had manipulated me as much as Pygmalion had Mickey. Fiddleback had just taken longer and been more careful so I never realized that what I knew as existence was not normal. I, too, had been playing games in accepting roles and eliminating targets. I had avoided moral conundrums by holding myself to a different standard: I did what my master asked because that was right in my mind. Mickey had done the same, with Pygmalion using his lack of sophistication as a shortcut to the same ends that Fiddleback had achieved with me through a lifelong program.

The second thing I discovered in that moment was that the missing piece of me had been compassion. I had never known it, nor had I needed it in my time before Coyote so radically changed my life. Even since the transformation, I had not been compassionate. Any act of kindness I performed had come out of my need to enhance my power base. When, so long ago, I forced Rock Pell to give money to the family that had harbored me after my escape from the Reapers, I had done so to dominate him, not to be kind to them. The job offers for this operation, while generous, had been to further my ends.

Coyote, my predecessor, had always asked those he helped to "pay forward." He made them look at helping others for totally selfless reasons. He had done the same

with all those he had aided. Finally, in order to position me to be able to take down Fiddleback and now Pygmalion, he had committed the ultimate act of compassion and allowed himself to be killed so I could give life to so many others.

"Mickey, while Pygmalion took away your problems, he also stole your childhood. You may not understand it now, or for years to come, but he took from you something that no one can replace. That made your father sad, and it made him angry. It made him determined to fight so Pygmalion could never do that to anyone else.

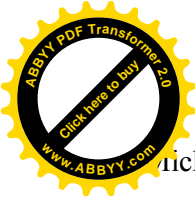
"Your father fought long and hard to stop Pygmalion. Your father helped save many others, but he could not save himself. Still, he hurt Pygmalion. He slowed Pygmalion down."

Little-boy eyes looked out from the man's face. "He did not stop Pygmalion."

"He did not. Your father was hurt, badly hurt." I saw puzzlement in Mickey's eyes. "Pygmalion's creatures play rough."

The boy-man snapped his right arm out faster than a striking snake and withdrew it in an eyeblink. "I can play rough."

I smothered the part of me that wanted to welcome Mickey as a full ally and shook my head. "I know, but now is not the time to play rough, Mickey. Your father would not have wanted it, nor do I. I do, on the other hand, need your help."



Mickey looked up expectantly, his eyes bright.

"Mr. Crowley and I are going to go on a trip. We want to find the place where Pygmalion took you."

"The bad place."

"The bad place, yes."

Mickey nodded. "It is a long way away."

"I know, but we think we know a shortcut. I need you to

tell me if we are right or not, okay?"

"Yes."

I gave him an open smile. "Mickey, some people may not understand why we are trying to find Pygmalion. They may try to hurt us."

"They will play rough."

"Yes." I looked at him, seeing the killing machine I might have once become, and I shivered. "You can protect yourself, but don't hurt them. Don't break them. Do you understand?"

He nodded his head solemnly. "My father said I was a big boy now and had to act like one."

"Good," I said in a convincing tone. Mickey clearly had no idea that big boys play with guns and play plenty rough. As I looked at his naive smile and felt the willingness to please roll off him like the scent of fresh-baked bread filling a kitchen, I had no desire to enlighten him. Pygmalion had stolen his physical youth, and I was not going to antique his spirit.

I didn't know if that was compassion, but I knew there wasn't a Dark Lord in existence that wouldn't have missed the chance to add to Mickey's misery. I assumed that as long as what I did was the exact opposite of what a Dark Lord would do, I could not be going far wrong.

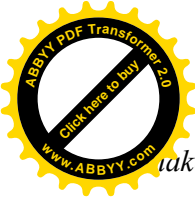
I felt the void in my soul close. I smiled at Mickey. "C'mon, let's get some supplies together and then we'll be off."

"To the bad place."

"Right, once really quick now, and then, very soon, again..."

Mickey's eyes narrowed. "We will make everyone good?"

The idea of making a Dark Lord good struck me as likely as Dan Quayle staging a Nixonesque political resurrection. "We'll do our best, Mickey." *If not, we'll*



like a Dark Lord dead and that, in my book, is good in and of itself.

 Dark Conspiracy 3-30.jpg

Crowley and I both realized that the most difficult part of the penetration of the secret construction site would be keeping Mickey in line. Five-year-olds are not known for their attention span. Had Crowley and I been alone, we would have just become two workers at the site and entered it along with everyone else. While Mickey might have passed for an adult worker because of his size, his wide-eyed wonderment and propensity to giggle would betray him in an instant.

The plan we decided to adopt was as outrageous as it was daring. Using Sin's knowledge of Build-more and his connections with people who could manufacture Build-more identification cards, we produced one for me that billed me as Simon "Mike" Michaels from the Auditing and Fiscal Procurement Department. Sin said project managers considered AFP the corporate equivalent of the IRS, and would sooner give lepers full body massages than stay in my presence overlong.

For Mickey and Crowley, we came up with another set of identities. Mickey was to play Mickey, a retarded young man who had the mind of a 5-year-old. Crowley became Damien Collins, the trustee of a substantial trust fund settled upon the boy by his father's family. Each of them

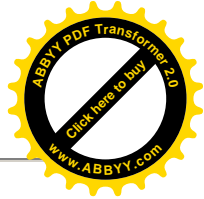
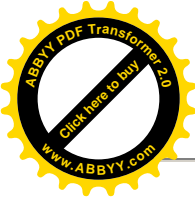
were given visitor badges, and Mickey had a nametag that read "Hello, I'm Mickey!" on the lapel of his blue suit jacket. We swapped the Heidi Stiletto for a more benign design featuring a cartoon mouse that both pleased Mickey and made it much easier for him to remember his new role.

By the time we had obtained our IDs, changed clothes and gotten a little sleep, Jytte had pinpointed the construction site as being just a little south and east of Skull Mountain in the Nevada desert. That placed it within the old Department of Energy test site for underground nuclear explosions. I doubted that they were using one of the holes blown by a nuke for their facility, but the location doubtlessly cut down on the number of casual visitors.

We took the Lorica CV-27 Peregrine from Phoenix all the way to Las Vegas, then rented a Range Rover II and headed north on 1-95. Forty miles out of Indian Springs, we turned off north and rumbled over 15 miles of twisty mountain roads to the little hamlet of Mercury. The Rover handled the road fine, but I knew our journey had been made much easier because the roadway had clearly been enlarged very recently.

Mercury should have been a ghost town. Most of the buildings dated from before the last century, back when silver mining provided the wealth that drove the community. When the mines in the area played out, it had begun to die, only to spring up again in the post-Depression era as a winter haven for those who did not like the idea of shoveling snow. Newer buildings outnumbered old, but their condition was little better than those built before the 20th century.

The nuclear tests in middle of the last century all but killed it off again, leaving only the stubborn or foolhardy to reside there. With the construction project, though, a new prosperity hit the area. Mercury became a boomtown



again with a few of the buildings sporting new coats of paint and hastily created signs to let the construction workers know these were brothels and saloons. These colorful buildings made the whole town look as if it were a half-colored movie, with everything else done in the aged sepia tone of dirt and adobe.

We arrived in the middle of the night. As a result, beyond the hills that served as a backdrop to the town, we saw an artificial dawn to the north. I pointed the Rover toward it, threading our way carefully through the crowds of men wandering back and forth across Mercury's main street. Another 20 miles by road beyond Mercury, we came around a bend and saw Pygmalion's new base for the first time.

Even having seen the plans for it, I was not prepared for the sight of the whole thing. Because of our perspective, the project reminded me of some mechanistic ant farm. A huge hole had been gouged out of the earth and, because massive equipment had to be installed, it had been left open. Massive banks of lights—more than enough to light a dozen Wrigley Fields—turned day into night at the site, which had to be a total reversal for workers from Eclipse. The building itself was being constructed from back to front, bottom to top, with the lowest two floors already complete and hidden from prying eyes by concrete walls. The rest of the building already had the floors poured and, in certain areas, looked to have been finished.

Crowley looked over at me and shook his head. "It's incredible. Out here, in this desert, he could have a couple of army divisions in that thing and no one would ever know."

I had to agree with Crowley's assessment. The steel-girder outline for the superstructure looked positively puny compared to the rest of the underground facility.

When complete, the above-ground portion of the project would look like a small office building or a very rich person's dream house built far away from the pressures of civilization. I had no doubt that after the hole had been filled in and the desert landscaping had been restored, no one would give it a second thought.

I pointed to the high-tension wires coming in from the south. "I guess the geothermal generators are not on-line yet. That must be drawing power from Hoover Dam."

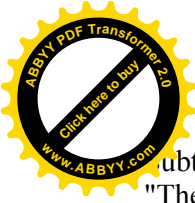
"Agreed, though blowing the lines may not take the facility off-line, it might just be that they've not powered up the 'therms because MacNeal is getting a kickback on the power he's using and billing to Pygmalion, not because they are not functional."

"Good point." I braked as we came down the hill and hit the first checkpoint. A man in a red-plaid flannel shirt yawned and looked squint-eyed at my identification. He waved us on through without comment, so I headed off on the straight and very level road to the second checkpoint, it lay just beyond a makeshift parking lot, and I gathered workers left their vehicles outside the construction site itself.

An armed, paramilitary guard in a blue-and-gold Build-more uniform waved me to stop and roll down the window. I did so with a smile and presented my identification. "Evening, Mr. Kwan. Quiet night?"

The guard glanced at my ID, then up at my face. "Yes, sir, it is quiet." He looked beyond me at Crowley and Mickey. "I need their IDs."

"How silly of me, of course." I handed him the tags he requested, then smiled slyly. "As you can see, Damien, we have very alert and diligent security personnel. They are worth more than every cent we *pay* them."



subtle though my hint was, Kwan stiffened when he got it. He handed the ID cards through the window.
"They

seem in order. You can park..." he began to explain, looking back toward the lot, but I looked forward toward the building and he followed my line of sight, "... overthere near the project manager's trailer. Mr. Preston is running things during this shift, and I'm sure he'll want to talk with you."

"Thank you, Mr. Kwan, I appreciate your help."

I heard him say, "Glad to be of service," but his eyes told me he hoped I would forget him the second he passed out of sight.

I parked behind the Ford-Revlon Elite beside the trailer, and the three of us alighted from the car. Crowley and Mickey remained beside it, in clear view of the trailer's window. I mounted the steps quickly, knocked once lightly, then pulled the door open and entered the narrow project brain-center.

A man in a white shirt with his sleeves rolled up to his elbows looked at me from his vantage point by the window. "Bill Preston. You're...?"

"Michaels from AFP. I need some hardhats to take them on a tour of the project."

Preston frowned. "No one told me about a funding tour."

I gave him an easy if-you-were-meant-to-know-you-would smile. "This is a very quiet little visit. You didn't hear this from me, but that young man could quite possibly be the illegitimate son of a certain ex-vice-president and a TV journalist."

The construction chief looked back out the window. "Right height, but he looks too smart. You'd think the vice-president would have more things to do than get caught up in anything dealing with a TV personality."

"You would think so, wouldn't you?" I let my voice drop into a conspiratorial whisper. "You know the VP was big on family values, so his family did the right thing. They

settled a big trust fund on the kid to take care of him and keep him out of sight. Damien Collins is his trustee. Turns out he's a chip off the old block—body of a man with the mind of a 5-year-old."

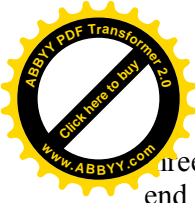
Preston snorted. "Ignorance breeds true."

"So it seems." I began to wonder how Sinclair had escaped having his father's sensibilities, but I cut off that rumination as troublesome. "I want to give them a quick run-through. The kid likes flashing lights and that sort of high-tech stuff, so I'll be taking him everywhere."

"Need a guide?"

I forced a frown, then sheepishly withdrew it in place of a slight smile. "I wouldn't want to take you away from productive work, would I?"

"No, no, not at all." He started to point to a shelf of hard-hats, then came around from the blueprint table to pull



nee off for me. As he did that, I smoothed down the blueprint and saw a large blue splotch toward the west end that read "Fair Lady Electronics."

Preston saw what I was looking at and smiled nervously. "That section of the project has been finished ahead of schedule. No overruns."

"Excellent. Don't worry, Mr. Preston, I'm not here to audit you. At this time." I nodded to him and took the white plastic hats. "I appreciate your cooperation."

"If there is anything I can do..." He tried to smile, then looked concerned when a hat brushed my jacket back enough to show him the Colt Krait in my shoulder holster. "Ah, wearing a gun might make some of the boys on the site kind of nervous."

I raised an eyebrow. "More so than a man from AFP?"

"Ah, no, ah, probably not."

"I appreciate your concern, Mr. Preston. You might not believe it, but some people in Build-more don't like folks from AFP. I like to feel secure."

"I can understand that, sir, the secure part, that is."

"Indeed, I thought you would. Carry on, Mr. Preston."

I closed the trailer door behind myself and descended the metal steps. Tossing one hat to each of my companions, I donned mine and headed in toward the center of the base. Away from the trailer, I told Crowley, "Fair Lady Electronics put in several sections of the project. Looks like they have a city-block-sized area on each floor, located approximately beneath the helipad on the surface. I'd like to think that's what we're looking for, but I can't believe Pygmalion would be so stupid as to use that again as a name for a group he has doing business here on Earth."

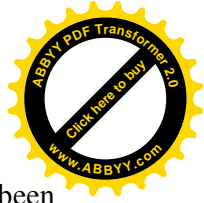
"You're forgetting, my friend, that Dark Lords tend to be arrogant in the extreme. When you take someone as unimaginative as Nicholas Hunt and give him unlimited power, he becomes enamored of his own little inside jokes. What he thinks is clever is really trite. He does what is ultimately stupid because he wants someone to figure things out so they can appreciate how clever he really is."

"Like movie directors making cameo appearances in movies..." I offered.

"Or authors writing themselves into books or, worse yet, using characters to mouth and espouse the writer's views on a subject. It's a form of narcissism they defend as creativity, but it's really a cheap trick that feeds their egos." The occultist shrugged. "Pygmalion sees himself as an *artiste* of sorts and wants to orchestrate everything. Symbols mean a lot to him, hence the naming of his companies."

Our conversation went on hold as we mounted the gantry to the fourth level of the construction area. Most of the workers ignored us, making the most difficult part of our trek pulling Mickey away from wanting to watch welding operations. We managed that without too much

trouble and approached the Fair Lady section of the project. Not unexpectedly, a couple of Build-more



Security guards stood in the area. They appeared distracted, which bothered me a bit, but as they did not challenge us and had not yet shoved clips into their FN-LAR assault rifles, I assumed our covers had not been broken.

We slipped into the Fair Lady area and Crowley coughed lightly. "We're definitely not in Kansas anymore, Toto. Look at this."

What I saw impressed me as well. The whole Fair Lady section formed a shaft that ran from surface to bottom in the facility. While the area was square, a central cylinder roughly 50 feet in diameter linked each level. A guard rail, finished in the same flat, black matte that marked this whole portion of the project, kept people away from a dangerously long drop and surrounded the cylinder entirely except at the northern- and southernmost points.

At those two places, 12-foot-wide ramps led up at a 30° angle for about 25 feet, then leveled off 10 feet above the level of the floor. There they connected to a 20-foot diameter disk made of the same synthetic, insulating black coating that covered the walls and floors in the cylinder stations. The ramps held the disk firmly in the center of the cylinder, but the gap around the cylinder edge still made for a long fall if anyone on the disk was not careful.

Running perpendicular to the ramps, a blue crystal lattice appeared to have grown up out of the disk's midline. I could see no seam between the disk and the crystals, but I hardly thought they were made of the same material. I could see no structure within the crystal, but somehow it had grown up into a hollow rectangle with rounded corners both inside and out. Twenty-five feet long and half again as high, it appeared to have been made all of one piece and naturally faceted, because I

could see no signs of workmanship.

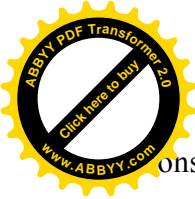
I turned to ask Crowley what it was, but he had already moved around toward the east to a control bank, and it looked more complicated than anything I would have imagined in a facility built in America, for the buttons had no icons to suggest their use. As I studied it more closely, I seemed to recall having seen something similar to it before, and I suddenly recalled a dimensional gate control panel I had seen and used in Plutonia. "Is that what I think it is?"

Crowley frowned, "It's meant to look like it, but it doesn't really work." Each of the buttons on the 10-by-10 grid glowed with one of the colors that corresponded to the mnemonic Roy G. Biv: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. I knew that after violet came ultra-violet, which I couldn't see, and then the "off" position. Selecting the correct pattern of lights would program the dimensional gate to link to another gate. If that remote gate was receptive, stepping through the gate would instantly transport a person to that other point.

The occultist punched the buttons through a new color pattern. I glanced at the gate and saw nothing happen. Crowley waited for a moment, then reset the original pattern and shrugged. "This thing has power running through it, but it cannot interrogate a remote gate. I punched up the code for the gate at Pygmalion's place. I should have gotten a new pattern on the board that I would have had to complete so I could travel there, but nothing."

I pointed at the crystal rectangle. "So is that a dimensional gate or not?"

He shrugged. "I think so, and I think it's operational, but I don't know why it would be. In any event, if it is, the coding is in that crystal and it only goes one place." He reached beneath the right side of the



console, then nodded. "Power switch is in the "on" position."

Mickey scowled. "Does it go to the bad place?"

I nodded. "I think we'd best find out."

I loosened the Colt Krait in its holster and saw Crowley do the same with the Beretta M9 he had chosen to bring on the expedition. From the start, we had known we would have to try to go through any dimensional gate we could find, and would have preferred to be loaded with heavy weapons and explosives. Unfortunately, the way we had to get into the base precluded that, so the two of us settled for using pistols that carried Teflon-coated, armor-piercing bullets. Hardly subtle, but if things got nasty, subtle was not much of a concern.

I led the way up the ramp and moved toward one edge. Crowley moved to the other, leaving Mickey between us. "On three, gentlemen," I instructed them. "One... two...three."

Stepping through a dimensional gateway is normally a disorienting experience. Colors flashed before my eyes, but that came from the transition from a dark cylinder to the bright sunlight that greeted us on the other side. The external heat also spiked and could have led me to believe we had just exchanged night for day in the Arizona desert, but the air smelled different and felt even less humid. While experiencing none of the discomfort dimensional gating usually causes, I knew we were far away from Earth.

It took my eyes a couple of seconds to compensate for the shift from dark to light. When vision returned, I found myself standing on one platform of a whole tower created from the blue gemstone that made up the gates in the Nevada base. I looked down at my feet and saw the disk on which I stood had been coated with the black, no-skid covering as back on the other side, and I could not be 100% certain the same disk with the same rectangle was not existing in both places at the same time.

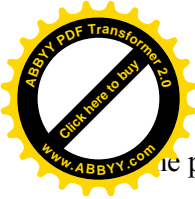
Out beyond the tower, as far as I could see to the

horizon, a city built of black-purple obsidian rose up out of a black sand desert. While some of the outlying buildings seemed little more than shelters constructed like houses of cards from stone slabs, the hub of the city was very much a work of art. Each building appeared not so much built as *sculpted*, and I had no doubt that from the air the effect would be as stunning as an Aztec calendar stone or a primitive sand painting.

Vast though the city was, and as captivating a vision as it constructed, it did not hold my attention for long. To my right, Mickey nodded his head emphatically, telling me wordlessly that we had arrived in the bad place. Beyond him, I saw Crowley's shadowform and he clearly understood what Mickey meant to communicate. We had arrived at our destination and now we needed to return, if that were possible.

Unfortunately, standing directly to the north of us, three men were enjoying the view of the city. Two were dressed in suitcoats and white shirts, with the conservative sort of haircut I had grown to expect on young executives. The third man stood tall and gangling. The Build-more security uniform he wore in no way disguised his lack of shoulder breadth and the stiff collar called attention to his scrawny neck.

"...Now this is just a Saudi Arabian test site of course, since it's petrodollars building the place in Nevada, but wait until we hook up with Hawaii..." the security man droned. His companions took notice of us first, and he turned to follow their lines of sight. "Oh, hello," he began, then his voice sank and his hand started to go for



He pistol on his right hip. "I know you. You're Tycho Caine."

 Dark Conspiracy 3-31.jpg

"And you're Watson Dodd." I knotted my face in a snarl and pointed to a spot beyond him. "Over there, *nowr* I ignored his half-drawn gun and passed between him and the other two men with long purposeful strides. "I said *nowr*

It seemed like a lifetime ago, but I had met Watson Dodd and his wife through Marit Fisk, a woman who had been one of Coyote's trusted aides. Marit and I had become an item, and our break-up was anything but pretty. Watson had, at that time, been in Build-more's Operations division and what little of his talk I had caught here showed he should have been back there pursuing marketing goals. When Sinclair MacNeal had left Build-more, Dodd had been elevated to replace him in the security hierarchy because Darius had wanted a puppet he could dominate in that position.

Dodd's presence explained the uneasiness among the guards on the site. I knew the bluff I was going to try to run might not work, leaving me with the alternative of killing Dodd and the two men with him. I was reluctant to do that—more because of Mickey's presence than because I knew Dodd's wife had been very pregnant a couple of months back. Killing all of them might have been more

efficient, but in resisting that course of action I guess I found the down side of compassion.

I would have smiled at that thought, but saving Dodd required an angry snarl on my face. I kept my voice a strained whisper. "Dodd, what the hell are you doing here?"

Watson blinked his eyes and pushed his glasses back into their place on the bridge of his hawk-beak. "I.. wait, I'm security here, I should ask the questions."

I stared at him hard enough to bore holes clean through his skull. "Security? Security? If you'd been doing your freaking job, Dodd, how the hell would I be here? When I heard you were in charge of things, I figured my security check would be tough, not a piece of cake like this. You've disappointed me, and you'll have made the sultan very, very angry."

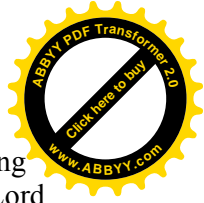
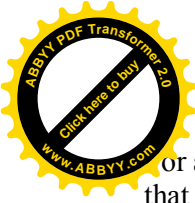
"What? What sultan?"

I shook my head. "Okay, you get this once and you forget it immediately. You didn't hear it from me, and the only reason I'm telling you is because you knew Marit, got it?"

He nodded, eager to be let in on *a* secret.

"I heard you telling those two this was in Saudi. Anyone who isn't a neuron shy of a synapse knows it can't be Saudi, it's Brunei. The sultan hired me to find out how secure this whole operation was. Even Darius does not know I'm doing this, nor should he. If he finds out, you get burned, and I won't do that to a friend of Marit's."

"What happened to her?"



or a half-second I contemplated telling him the truth. Part of me wanted to see how he would take learning that she had been turned into an agent by one of Fiddleback's minions and that, because of her, the Dark Lord himself almost took over Phoenix and the world. "She and I were working for the sultan gathering information on invest-

ments. A rival terminated her."

I looked beyond his right shoulder at the other two men. "Who are they? Should we kill them?"

Dodd's eyes nearly bugged out of his head. "Kill them? No! They're just two guys I knew in Ops. They're okay."

"If you vouch for them, that's fine with me. They'll have to develop amnesia."

"What?"

"They never saw this place, never saw us, right?"

"Right."

"Good." I frowned for a moment. "Look, I'm not going to report this breach, got it? In fact, I'm going to fax you a password- and-challenge system that I want you to have in place by next Thursday. Some time after that, I will try another penetration, a small party, just like this time. I want your people sharp so we can impress the sultan."

Dodd nodded solemnly. "I appreciate this. Security stuff is still new to me."

I smiled. "Dottie deliver yet?"

Dodd grinned ear to ear. "A boy, Chipper."

/ hope he takes after your wife's side of the family. "That's great. After the next attempt, I'd like to visit with your family, if that's okay?"

The security man nodded emphatically. "We'd love it."

"Good, we'll set it up then." I shook his hand. "You'll get my fax by tomorrow or the next day."

"I look forward to it."

"And you'll take care of those two, right?" As I asked the question I let my jacket gap open and he saw my pistol.

"Yes."

"Great, then. I'll be seeing you."

I slapped him on the shoulder, then headed back up the ramp and walked through the gateway. On the dark side, I paused for a moment to let my eyes adjust again to the night, then I laughed in relief at having bluffed



odd. I



looked at my watch and saw that little journey there had pushed the analog portion of it well into the middle of the afternoon while the digital display correctly listed the time as 3:05 a.m.

Crowley and Mickey joined me on the platform, and we left the facility in silence. Once back in the car and headed toward Mercury, I looked over at Crowley. "So, any theories about what that gate was back there?"

The occultist frowned. "I saw what you saw, and I have a guess. It's basically this: Those crystals either co-exist in two dimensions—which would require an incredible amount of energy, and I saw no evidence of that being pumped in there—or they have identical lattices. In effect, they would be clones of each other. When energy is pumped into them, it creates a link that bridges the gap between the two. Going through there did not feel like it normally does. I've heard rumors out there of such special gates, but this is the first I've seen of them."

"Mickey, that was the bad place?"

"CJh-huh."

"Good. All we have to do now is get in, bring Fiddleback in, and let him eliminate Pygmalion."

Crowley smiled wryly. "Kind of like scuttling a ship to get rid of rats."

"It is that, but when a rat is promoting himself to captain of the ship, almost any solution that will work is viable."

Crowley asked me what I had said to the security man. "I told him we were working security for the person who was financing the project. I told him I'd fax him a pass-word-and-challenge system so he could have it in place by next Thursday, when we return."

"Ah, the fox instructing the chickens how to guard the henhouse."

I nodded. "Something like that."

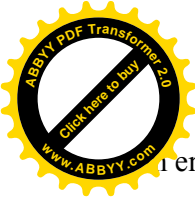
"Think he bought it?"

"I don't know, but I hope so." I gave Crowley a sly smile. "If he does what we ask, it becomes an easy job to break in again and do what we need to do. If not..."

Mickey leaned forward from the back seat. "We play rough."

"Very, very rough, Mickey. Very rough."

The Peregrine landed on top of the Lorica tower just before dawn. I dictated instructions for Lilith, then caught four hours of sleep. I would have preferred it to be dreamless, but visions of Mart's death played through my head again and again. I wrestled control of the dreams away from my unconscious mind and directed them toward the happier, passionate moments we had known together, but whenever I got caught up



eroticism, the dreams melted away, leaving me skeletal nightmares.

The person I had been for the vast majority of my life would have ignored the dreams, but I had changed. I didn't know if I had truly loved Marit—I don't know if I was capable of love before knowing compassion—but the new person I had become demanded I re-examine her death and my part in it. Had I a choice in doing what I did? Did she really have to die?

I knew better than to fall into a guilt trap. Marit had betrayed Coyote, me and the rest. She had allied herself with the creature Fiddleback had molded into Nerys Loring. She had sent other friends to their deaths, and she had almost had me killed on at least one occasion. That she deserved to die was not a question. What I did want to know was if there was any way I could have dealt with her treason without killing her.

The fact that I had been trained as an assassin meant I had an understanding of almost all the antipersonnel devices that had ever been created. I had manufactured the thing that killed Marit. Examining the alternatives, I

could find nothing that would have been 100% certain to neutralize her as a threat. Anything less effective could not be trusted, nor could she.

She had given me no choice. She had gambled everything against a promise of immortality and eternal youth. I fulfilled half that bargain, for she never got any older. I would have preferred it to be otherwise, but in connecting the dots, I created a picture that excluded her.

I climbed out of bed, showered and dressed in sports slacks, a polo shirt baggy enough to hide the vest I wore, and some running shoes. I placed a quick call to Bat, got a grunt of assent in return for my requests, and called Ulith. She reported that she had begun to procure what I needed from her and that all would be ready by dusk.

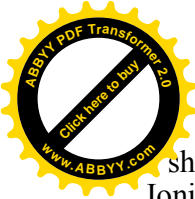
My call to Bat, among other things, had caused him to set up an appointment for me at noon in a tiny Eclipse pawn shop that huddled up against the bulk of City Center. When I walked in, it looked to me as if nothing at all had changed since my first visit there months ago. The teenager behind the fenced-in counter chuckled slightly as he read from *A Night in the Lonesome October* by Roger Zelazny. I smiled slightly as he looked up and started to share something with me, but he just mumbled, "Snuff is a killer," and went back to his reading.

I threaded my way through shelves and shelves of the dust-laden detritus of civilization. I saw a whole host of appliances that had been manufactured in the United States only a dozen years before, but ignorance of how to affect the little repairs they might need meant that they rusted away to nothing while people made do with inferior products from the Russian Commonwealth or Mexico. People, by their reluctance to learn how to make changes, just grew used to accepting less and less in their lives.

I reached a gateway in the back, and the kid behind the counter buzzed me through. Beyond it, down a narrow

corridor that went left and back right, put me in front of a steel door. A periscope built into the panel above it swiveled around to study me, then the door slid open. Beyond it, I descended a spiral staircase and entered a low ceiling's bunker that bristled with a wide selection of weapons.

A dwarf slapped the handles on the periscope up and it descended into the floor. "Good afternoon. I believe you were Tycho Caine when I met you last, but the television said you were Michael Loring when you were all but killed a few weeks ago."



shrugged and shook his hand. "You cannot believe everything you hear on the television, I guess, Mr. Joniak."

"No." Bronislaw Joniak climbed up on a stool behind a counter. "Luckily for you, Bat said you were also known as Coyote. You don't look like the Coyote I knew, but you'd not be wearing that name if it had not been assigned to you. What do you need?"

I looked around the dimly lit room, peeking at objects half hidden by the railroad tie pillars that held the ceiling up. A Chrysler Combat Exoskeleton stood guard over the back half of the room, preventing anyone from moving in toward the confusion of crates nestled there. Off to my right, in what passed for the client waiting area, Joniak had a number of sample weapons mounted on a pegboard, and I studied it before I began to place my order.

"This will be very expensive, and I will need some trustworthy personnel to fill out my ranks."

Joniak made a note on the pad he held in his lap. "I have contacts with an ex-Ranger company that maintains a survivalist community near New River. They're clean and experienced. They're also expensive."

"Fine, contact them. One week's work, with an option to extend for two more. Standard compensation with signing bonuses and completion payments. I only want

those who are night-combat trained, and I have a special screening they will have to go through at the Sunburst Foundation. If they wash out during the screening, they still keep their signing bonus and will be on reserve in case we need them."

The dwarf smiled as he made notes, "How many men?"

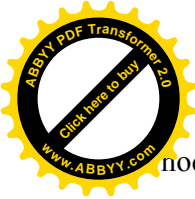
That was a very telling question. What was left of the Japanese Imperial Defense Cadre had remained in Japan to recover. While I had no doubt the emperor would give us the men we needed, desert warfare was not their forte. I decided to leave them out of this assault and hope, if we failed fully or in part, they might be able to form the core of a resistance movement to whichever Dark Lord did win.

"Minimum is an even hundred, max is one-fifty, with a minimum reserve of 50. This is going to be wet work. I will pay extra for anyone who can work as a gunner on a Peregrine. Make the rates and bonuses 50% higher than usual, 100% for the gunners."

"Are you planning a war, Coyote?"

"Hoping to prevent one, actually." I gnawed my lower lip for a second. "I need military-class body armor for 250 people. I want assault rifles for that many as well, with 1000 rounds of armor-piercing ammo for each. Half of that should be in clips, the rest loose. Nightvision goggles for everyone as well. I will also need four M2 heavy machineguns, one for each of two Peregrines. I want 4000 rounds of high-explosive, incendiary ammo for each of those guns. I already have techs working on installing the fire-control systems. Can you get me Sidewinder missiles?"

Joniak pressed his lips into a flat line as he thought for a second. "Yes, but I can't get mounting pods for your Peregrines. When Lorica bought them, they should have gone for the military version and just pulled the weapons."



nodded. "I concur, but that was not my decision to

make. I will need troop transports. The Peregrines will carry my advance party and 14 of the Rangers. Get me trucks enough to move the rest."

"Would you like some Bradleys? I can get you a half-dozen fairly cheaply."

I hesitated. The armored personnel carriers would give me added firepower with their TOW rockets and chain guns. On one hand, they would mean nothing in the battle with Pygmalion, but on the other, they could help hold the base against any influx of help from our side of the gates. "Okay, the reserves will use them."

I stepped over to the peg board. "I want 50 LAW rockets, 400 concussion grenades, 400 fragmentation grenades and 500 pounds of Semitek. I'll be rigging that into a truck bomb, so be sure to get me some sort of vehicle that can be directed by remote control from one of the Peregrines." I purposely made it sound like I meant to use that to get in to wherever we were going, but I really wanted it to blow the facility if we could not defeat Pygmalion.

The dwarf shook his head. "There are Central American countries that don't have what you're asking me to get."

"Does that mean you can't deliver?"

Joniak shook his head confidently. "I can deliver. How soon you want it all?"

"Two days? We go soon, the faster the better."

"Rush job, not a problem. I'll just have to bring things in from the warehouse." He looked up at me. "Is there anything else?"

A remark he had made during my last visit popped into my brain. "You suggested tactical air support was available if we were operating outside Eclipse. Was that smoke or were you serious?"

"Serious as death itself." The dwarf poked his pencil at

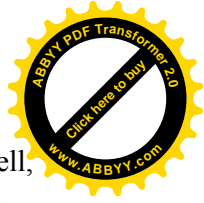
a binder full of plastic sheet protectors lying on the counter. "Check it out. If you see anything you like, let me know."

I flipped past pictures of a Hind helicopter and an A-10 Warthog, then stopped. As I looked up, I saw Joniak smile appreciatively. "You can get me one of these, fully loaded?"

The dwarf nodded. "You have excellent taste. That's my own personal bird. I'll be flying it."

"That's not necessary."

"Ah, but it is." The dwarf put down his notepad. "First of all, you now owe me about 17 million dolmarks, and I'm interested in protecting my investment. More importantly, though, I have *a* debt." He gave me a smile. "And, as per terms of the contract, it's time for me to pay forward."



got some more sleep after returning to the Lorica Citadel. I did not dream this time, which was just as well, because after being in Mr. Joniak's death emporium, I might have started having Bat's dreams. Rested and refreshed, I showered again and put on one of my best suits before going up to meet Lilith in the Peregrine on the roof.

With her at the controls, we took off and headed northwest out of Phoenix. She filled me in on the logistical end of the operation I had outlined to her in my dictation earlier. Everything seemed to be working on or ahead of schedule, and I made notes to brief Hal about screening our mercenaries for their ability to see things outside our dimension.

It took just about an hour to reach our destination, and Lilith set the Peregrine down in the parking lot on the Arizona side of the Hoover Dam without so much as a bump. As she shut the craft down and set the security devices on it, I went back into the passenger compartment

and hauled out a fairly heavy suitcase. Shifting it from hand to hand, we walked down to the dam and told the guard at the information booth that we had an appointment with Paul Warner, the night supervisor.

The guard used the phone to confirm our claim, then took us down in the elevator to the offices in the heart of the dam itself. The place felt mildly claustrophobic to me, but I applauded the idea to locate offices in the middle of the dam. I felt having to work within the structure would certainly motivate the staff to report even the smallest problem, preventing a disaster that might cause the dam to collapse and kill millions downstream.

Warner looked like a stereotypical civil servant. Not an overly large man, his black hair had thinned appreciably while his middle had thickened a bit. On his desk I saw a picture of a woman and two children, which I took to be his family. He smiled when the guard ushered us in and pointed us to two cracked-vinyl chairs. Lilith discreetly brushed dust from the chair before she sat, but I remained standing.

The supervisor frowned when I rejected his hospitality. I lifted the case up and gently slid it onto his desk, moving the picture of his family aside. "Forgive my lack of manners, but I do not have much time. I appreciate your granting us this meeting at my assistant's last-minute request."

Warner half-smiled. "Ms. Acres was quite persuasive. She said you had a business proposition you wanted to speak to me about?" He looked around his dingy office, and I could read from him an intense desire to escape his job. "What can I do for you and Lorica, Mr. Loring?"

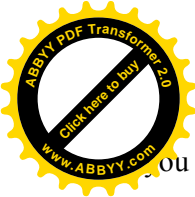
I tapped the case. "In here I have 10 million dolmarks in negotiable securities and Japanese government bonds."

"What for?"

"You have just won the lottery, Mr. Warner. This is the

first payment. You will get one per year of your life, on the anniversary of this date, or your heirs will get a grand total of 20 payments if you die before 20 years is up. Do you understand this?"

The man blinked at me and sat down on the edge of his chair, almost tipping it over. "Jesus Christ! What do



"You want me to do, kill somebody?"

"If I wanted someone dead, I'd give 50 dolmarks to some street punk and have him do the job for me." I walked over to the huge map of northern Arizona, south-em Nevada and Utah tacked to his wall. "In that case there is also a cellular phone, a very exact stopwatch, spare batteries for both and a very complete set of instructions. Within the month you will get a call on it. When that call comes in, you will execute those instructions to the letter. Do you understand that?"

"That's 200 million dolmarksr Wamer gasped and loosened his tie. "For that much you could buy this freaking dam."

"I don't want to buy it, Mr. Wamer, I just want to rent it, for about an hour, maybe less. When you get that call, the turbines go to full and everything goes to the Mercury grid as per the plan, got it?"

Wamer stared at the map blankly for a moment, then nodded. "Pity about them brownouts in Vegas, but what the hell. I've never won anything there anyway."

The lighter load in the Peregrine made our return trip a bit faster. When we got into Phoenix's airspace, we were vectored west by Scorpion Security and almost denied permission to land at Lorica. Scorpion wouldn't tell us what was wrong, but I switched my radio over to the local commercial stations. KTAR's Charles Goyette was on the air reporting a massive theft of weapons, explosives and vehicles from the Arizona National Guard Armory just

east of the Lorica Citadel.

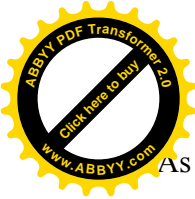
I smiled. We knew where Pygmalion was, we knew who was guarding the approaches and we knew what we'd need to get to Pygmalion. For the first time since the whole mad war against Pygmalion had been proposed, I actually began to believe we might have even the slightest chance of defeating him.

 Dark Conspiracy 3-32.jpg

I found Natch waiting for me in my suite at the top of the Lorica Citadel, but one look into her cerulean eyes told me that she was not my visitor. "To what do I owe the pleasure?" I asked as a loosened my tie.

The Empress of Diamonds forced Natch into a stiff shrug. "What I have learned leads me to believe you will be taking action soon. I would have thought you would have made things easier for me by having Natch accompany you on your preliminary operations."

"I thought about that, but I knew ft would produce some difficulties. First and foremost, information here is handed out on a need-to-know basis and, quite frankly, she has not needed to know. If I were to draw her in, Vetha would notice and Fiddleback would become curious. Second, and just as vital, Natch has an emotional attachment to Bat and having her come back has doubtlessly improved both his disposition and increased his healing rate. I need him as much as I need her."



"As much as you need me?"

I shook my head and dropped into a squarish chair with white leather upholstery. "On the power level we're talking about, no. But in terms of the operation where you will be vital, yes and more so. Without them, getting to the point

where we can destroy Pygmalion *and* Fiddleback is impossible."

She nodded uncharacteristically long for Natch. "I understand, and I do trust you, Coyote."

"Good." I gave her a quick grin. "One thing—to cover a contingency plan—Crowley suggested that Fiddleback has control over a proto-dimension where he has a dead dimensional gate. He says the gate we set up in Pygmalion's dimension will interrogate that gate, then create the link. What do you know about the dimension where he will be waiting for us?"

Match's left hand toyed with the solitaire diamond in the pendant hanging at her throat. "Not much. I've never been there—it is too far from my power base for me to travel safely—and I have never met anyone who has and returned to talk about it. Why do you ask?"

I smiled. "Once we learn the coordinates and bring him to Pygmalion's dimension, I was thinking of sending a truck bomb through to blow up that dead gate. It would make sure he remained where we wanted him. I need to know if that will work, or if the physics there will scotch that plan."

"I wish I knew, because I think that would be a most interesting course of action. Alas, I do not." She flipped me a brief salute. "You are most dangerous. I admire that."

"Thank you. Be ready and arrive promptly." I briefly outlined what I intended we do to Fiddleback. "We don't want to tip Fiddleback to your presence, so you must wait until Pygmalion is dead before you come in."

"I understand. Until then." Natch blinked her eyes a couple of times, then staggered a bit. She looked up, surprised and concerned about finding herself in my suite. "Coyote?"

I nodded. "You said you wanted to give me a report on Bat's condition? How is he?"

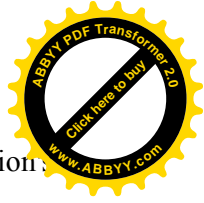
"I did?" She shuddered, then smiled sheepishly. "Bat's fine. Still has stitches in him, but he's ready to roll."

"Good, he has four days. We have to be ready to move then. Got it?"

"Word up." She gave me a haunted grin. "That will be the fight, right?"

"The main event, Natch." My smile slowly died as all that was at stake flashed through my mind. "The big fight—winner take all."

Two days later, Bronislaw Joniak called me to set up a meeting with the officers of Omega Ranger Company. We had filled our line troops and reserves, with the vast majority of the men being able to see and operate in other dimensions. Crowley noted that while the empathic skills necessary to be able to do that were rare in the human population, he had noted a propensity for the more creative and adventurous in the population to



possess those talents. Even Joniak had tested out positively, so he was clear to pilot his aircraft in Pygmalion's dimension.

The meeting with them went well, with their tactical experience adding minor refinements to my general assault plan. After we had all signed off on it, we decided the assault would go down 48 hours later. During that time, we completed the conversions of two Lorica CV-27 Peregrines, and Joniak was able to fully arm his bird. Nero Loring got his equipment loaded up and in position for deployment.

I faxed Watson Dodd the password routine and a copy of our battleplan that left out our air assets and the half-dozen Bradley M2s Joniak had procured from his "warehouse" at the National Guard Armory. The area around the base really left little in the way of room for defenses against a truck invasion like the one we outlined on the paper I sent him. He would be forced to gather his forces

in certain areas where the natural landscape created defensible positions, and we could eliminate them very easily with either air support or a convert assault by the Rangers on the ground.

I circumspectly questioned Sin about Rajani, her state of mind and her emotional strength. I knew she had the ability to tap into Fiddleback's thoughts, but I also knew it was a draining and even tortuous experience for her. In many ways she was my ace in the hole because even Fiddleback did not know about her skill. With Vetha having warned me that at some point Fiddleback *would* betray me, I wanted Rajani along as a trip-wire to give me *as* much warning as was possible concerning the Dark Lord's treachery.

Sin reported that Rajani was doing very well and was even looking forward to striking a blow against Pygmalion and Fiddleback. I caught from him a protective attitude and just a hint of jealousy at my inquiry, but that was good. Rajani needed protection in what was likely to be a lethal environment, and Sin having an emotional stake in her survival meant he would take good care of her.

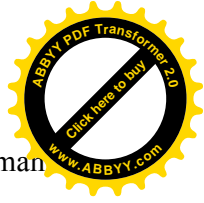
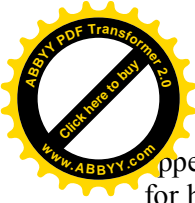
Everything looked perfect except for one detail: Vetha. I very much wanted to leave her behind in Phoenix when we went out. Her message to me had been very clear— despite what she wanted, she might betray me because of Fiddleback's perversity. I could not afford that because the operation designed to killed Pygmalion also had to neutralize Fiddleback. If she caught even unconscious clues about that course of events, she might pass them along and Fiddleback might balk at the last minute, leaving us in Pygmalion's dimension facing an army of Mickey clones.

A second reason for wanting to leave her behind was her shape. The soldiers with whom we were dealing were not seasoned extra-dimensional travelers. There was no

way to bring them up to speed and have them work with us under those conditions on such short notice. Because they were not stupid, they would realize she was not the sort of creature found on Earth, and that might cause problems when we did not need them.

On the other hand, of course, leaving Vetha behind would immediately arouse Fiddleback's suspicions. If he were wary—more so than usual—we would not get him. That concern overrode the others, resulting in an odd plan where we outfitted her in a ninja -like outfit that covered her from head to abdomen in black. While she still did not look natural, half-hidden in the shadows almost anyone could dismiss her as a hallucination.

As I pulled on my ANPBS-9 and adjusted the nightvision device so the monocular lens jutted from my face like a unicorn's hom, Vetha opened her mandibles and shook her head. "You are concerned by *my*



appearances, Coyote?" In response to my invitation to talk, she entered my suite and appropriated an ottoman for her abdomen.

I smiled at her. The nightvision goggles painted her in black with green highlights. While there was no hiding the light shining periodically from her eyes, the dark clothes did soften her outline and made her less recognizable. The low-light reflective tabs on her shoulders marked her as one of us, which meant friendly fire would not take her out.

"I only have a 70° arc of vision here, Vetha, so I'm not greatly concerned about how I look, but how what I look at looks. You, in this case, look fine. Just stick with Bat and Match and you should have no problems."

I had split my key personnel into three groups. Crowley and I made up one lead element, with Bat, Natch and Vetha comprising the other. I purposely put the two Dark Lord agents together so they could watch each other, and I left them with Bat because he generally put out enough in the way of emotion to blind almost any empathic

creature around.

Rajani, Sinclair, Hal Garrett, Mickey, Nero Loring and Jytte made up my operations team. Rajani, in addition to what she meant in terms of Fiddleback, could help Nero Loring see in Pygmalion's dimension. That was crucial to the plan, because Nero knew the control device he carried backward and forward. While Crowley, Jytte and Vetha had been briefed on how it worked and what had to be done to make it work—and Crowley and Vetha both carried the refurbished Powerbooks needed to drive the dimensional gate—I wanted Nero there to troubleshoot things on the fly.

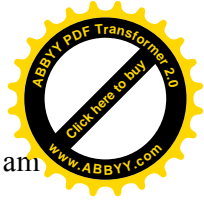
Hal and Rajani argued against bringing Mickey on the mission, but Crowley and I pressed for his inclusion and were able to make a case that brought Jytte and Sinclair over to our side. They had argued that what we would be doing would be far too violent for a 5-year-old child to take part in, much less witness. Crowley and I countered that if we kept Mickey out, he could come to regret not having done anything to avenge his father. We agreed that his role would be only defensive and give him the job of playing rough with anything that tried to get to the operations team.

We were all outfitted similarly to the mercenaries we had hired, with assault rifles, body armor and grenades. Those of us who had personal side arms wore them, with the Wildey Wolf taking its place beneath my left arm and the Kraits riding on my right hip and at the small of my back, respectively. All totaled, my equipment weighed as much as a small child, but distributed on my combat harness and belt, it did not seem that heavy and did not restrict my movement.

From the suite in the top of the Lorica tower, my people prepared to head up to the roof and into the Peregrine designated Kestrel-1. Before we departed, after trying on

our nightvision goggles and doing a radio check, I gave everyone an appreciative nod. "Look, we all know better than to think we'll all get through this unscathed. I hope we will—I pray we will—but I fear it won't be so. I think all of us have agreed that stopping Pygmalion and Fiddleback is vital, so we're willing to make the ultimate sacrifice if we are called upon to do so.

"I just want to let you know that your courage and effort over the past months is what has made me willing to risk life and limb. I was created a minion of a Dark Lord, but Coyote freed me from his service. In my



association with you, I have recaptured my humanity. Without it, I would not be here, and because of it, I am going to do what must be done to stop the evil of the Dark Lords."

I glanced at my watch and saw both the digital and analog portions reading midnight. "The Witching Hour. It's time."

Bat smiled and brandished his M1 6A2. "Let's go make something bleed."

With Lilith at the controls, Kestrel-1 headed off to the northwest, skirting City Center and cutting between the Digital Express and Build-more complexes on our shot out toward Mercury. I glanced at the Build-more citadel and saw lights burning in the offices at the top. I could easily imagine Watson Dodd there sweating over how he would implement my security selections in time for another test penetration later in the week.

Kestrel-2 and Joniak's bird, designated Merlin, joined up from the west. While the raid was well within the range of all three choppers, Lilith had made arrangements for all three aircraft to refuel and, if needed, recover themselves to a small private airport outside Kingman. If we had pushed it and had not refueled, we could have made the trip in two hours, but haste was not an issue, so it ended

up taking closer to three-and-a-half hours.

Once we were on our way up from Phoenix, Lilith radioed instructions to the Rangers, and they began their infiltration of the building site. Earlier in the day, they had gone up into the Mercury area and used old DOE access roads to bypass the town itself. With the three-hour lead time, we expected they would be able to penetrate the site and position themselves to take out any pockets of resistance the guards might create when things started to get hot. One group was to secure the approach to the base, preventing reinforcements from coming in, while the rest of the Rangers would move in and occupy the base.

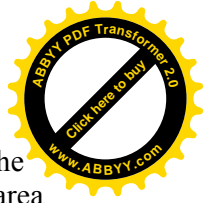
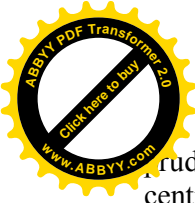
Lilith put Kestrel-1 through a single orbit over the site, but nothing looked unusual, so she shifted the wings to vertical and dropped straight down on the helipad. All our passengers dismounted, breaking into their teams and scattering to three corners of the pad. Kestrel-1 took off again, and its sister-ship came down, disgorging the mercenaries. They immediately established a perimeter, pronounced the area secure, and released their bird to fly Combat Air Patrol with Lilith's Peregrine.

Crowley and I ran to a stairway, ready to respond with the proper code words if challenged. We saw no guards, so we worked our way down into the center of the site unmolested. The stairway brought us down approximately 50 feet east of the Fair Lady electronics area of the upper floor, but enough of the drywall had been roughed in to actually channel us farther east before we could move north and come back in at it heading west. That was still in keeping with our plan, but might spoil our timing and, if Bat's team ran into similar delays in their approach from the north, we could have had a problem.

As I crept through the darkness, moving my head back and forth to give me a normal range of view because of the

nightvision goggles, I also let myself sense for emotions and life. Crowley proved black hole because, while I could see him as we moved forward and overlapped each other, I could sense nothing from him. In many ways, that was good because it left me free to actually seek out signs of life, but I still found it disturbing.

Relying on my empathic ability to sense others, I moved forward at speeds that were somewhat more than



udent, given the circumstances. Having once before visited the gateway core, I moved directly toward the central chamber when I got into the Fair Lady area. I sensed nothing and, in my first visual sweep of the area, noted nothing out of order. "Alpha in. Clear. ETA Beta."

"Beta, green minus five."

"Copy, Beta. Kestrel-1, phase one red minus one, phase two green." In keeping with military practice where radio signals might be intercepted, we had codes for numbers. Green indicated 10 and red five, which meant Bat felt he was five minutes out. In radioing the codes order to Lilith, I had her make the call to Warner at the dam to tell him that he was to do his bit in two stages, four and 10 minutes apart, respectively.

"Copy, Alpha."

I took another look at the area and saw something I had missed before in the core. A slender cable, no thicker than standard co-ax, hung down in the darkness. Except for when its slight swaying let the gentle green light from the gem rectangle paint it, it remained invisible. Looking more carefully, I also saw two small cubes, each about half the size of a shoebox, sitting on either side of the platform in the center of the core.

I keyed my radio. "Deuce, I have something odd in the core. I'm moving up to check."

Crowley double-clicked his radio in acknowledgment, but offered no comment. As I moved forward, I visually

scanned the chamber again. While the ANPBS-9 did a great job of letting me see in the dark, it forced me into a tunnelvision that could have proved disastrous. While I could sense the location of folks, I could not aim and shoot based on that feeling alone. I needed to keep my head moving to give me the normal cone of vision.

Things remained clear for a second, then I felt a presence in chamber. Exiting the gateway on the northern edge of the circular platform, I caught a glimpse of a profile I had seen before in what seemed an earlier lifetime. I started to swing my MP-7 toward him, but the bright flashlight he had taped to the barrel of his pump-action shotgun got to me first, and the ANPBS-9 went "green-out" on me.

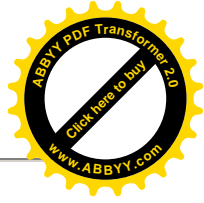
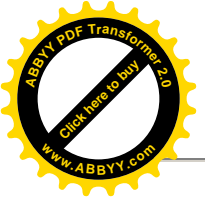
"Easier than spotlighting deer," Darius MacNeal laughed aloud. I could sense incredible arrogance from him, which did not strike me as unusual, but the confidence underlying it started to worry me. "Greetings, Mr. Loring, or Caine or whatever your name really is."

"Coyote," I heard Crowley whisper through the radio, "I'm back and not blind, but you are in my line of sight. You have to move if you want me to take him."

"I see you decided to do your own dirty work when the Aryans failed." I let the MP-7 dangle from the trigger-guard, then I set it on the ground. I sensed other people slipping through the gate behind him and on the platforms down below. "I never really thought of you as a hands-on kind of guy—except perhaps with women."

"A glib tongue won't stop deer slugs, Loring, and the Teflon-coating means your body armor won't stop them, either. You made a big mistake assuming I would not monitor Watson Dodd's fax traffic."

I flashed him a genuine smile. "Actually, I counted on it. I hoped you would take command of the security here, and I know that's not your forte." Still blinded by his light,



I shrugged. "If you want to surrender now, I'll let you live."

"Mo way, Loring. You underestimate me. Your two dozen commandos cannot take this base and secure it long enough to blow this area. I have twice as many people here ready to neutralize you."

"And I have a dozen dozen people throughout the site, Darius. The plans I faxed Dodd were incomplete."

More confidence surged through MacNeal. "So I assumed. That's why I've had engineers in the Lorica Citadel wiring it with explosives. Unless I give a check-code every 12 hours, they detonate it."

My jaw dropped open as I realized what he was saying. The destruction of the Lorica tower would kill countless people both in the citadel and in Eclipse when it fell. That he could even conceive of such a plan struck me as monstrous, and that realization snapped shut a couple of other connections in my brain. "You really do know for whom you built this place and what it was created for, don't you?"

"That's why it's called a joint venture."

Through his pride and laughter I sensed another individual enter the chamber from the north. I glanced over, moving my head less than two inches, but could see nothing because of the light. Then, suddenly, my vision cleared and I saw Vetha pinned in place by MacNeal's spotlight. As I dove to the left, rolled and came up with the Wolf in my hand, Darius got off his first shot. He jacked a second round into the chamber as I flipped the safety off on the gun and we each fired simultaneously.

My shot went in low, hitting him in the right thigh. The leg immediately went out from under him, dropping him down and whipping him around to his left. He bounced up once, then a burst of automatic fire from behind where Vetha had stood struck him in the chest and pitched his body back through the gateway into Pygmalion's dimen-

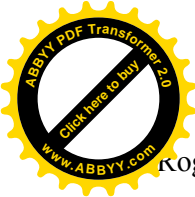
sion.

The other men in MacNeal's fire-team had been relying on his light for illumination, so when he went down the darkness closed in on them like a tidal wave. Crowley came out of the narrow corridor behind me and cleared the deck with a figure-8 ribbon of lead from the Mac-10 in his right hand. Two of the four men remained on the platform when they went down, while the others pitched off the edge and fell screaming into the void below.

Gunfire came up from the platform directly below us, but it could only lance up at a steep angle between the platform on our level and the walkway ringing the core. I freed a fragmentation grenade from my harness, pulled the pin, flipped the lever off then counted to two. "An egg is hot." I bowled it along the floor and it flew off into space on a gentle little arc. Its explosion filled the core with light for a moment, and shrapnel pinged off the guardrails surrounding the core, then as the thunder died, silence reclaimed the core.

"Kestrel-1, abandon CAP and head back to home base immediately. Begin an emergency evacuation of home base. Tell Scorpion that our tower has been rigged with explosives. I don't know where, I don't know all, but assume the tower is coming down. Sweat Watson Dodd— abduct his wife and child if you must—to get information. By dawn, shut down *all*, repeat *all*, communication links in and out of Build-more, period."

"Alpha, copy. Luck."



Roger, Kestrel-1, and more of it to you."

"Omega Leader, start your assault."

"Wilco, Alpha."

Holstering the pistol and staying low, I scrambled over to where Bat and Crowley crouched beside Vetha. Natch knelt on the floor and cradled the *MyrangeikkCs* head in her lap. One of the deer slugs had taken Vetha high in the

thorax while the other had hit much lower near the abdomen. Part of her clothes glistened with a luminescent green that I took as the goggle's way of painting her blood.

"She ran ahead," Bat offered in explanation.

"I know," I told him.

The light in Vetha's eyes moved listlessly and one of her fingers tapped nervously against the floor. She looked up at me, moving her mandibles apart. I nodded and patted her twitching hand, then the light went out of her eyes. Natch blinked away tears, and I saw her shoulders heave with a sob, then she gently laid Vetha's head on the floor and pulled the *MyrangeikkCs* hood up to hide her face.

As Bat and Match moved off and around toward the west, I turned to start back toward the east to recover my MP-7. Before I could move away from the body, Crowley grabbed my right arm and swung me around to face him. "What was that about?"

I stared at him blankly. "What?"

"You got her killed, and she knew it." He nodded toward Vetha's body. "Her finger. In Morse code she tapped out 'I not us happy.' Want to explain?"

"Yeah. She didn't want to surrender her freedom a second time." I sighed heavily. "She was afraid she would betray us to Fiddleback, against her will. This was her way of making sure it did not happen."

"You knew all this and did not tell anyone?"

I pulled off my nightvision goggles. "We all have our secrets. Meed to know, just like Ryuhito's location."

Crowley stiffened for a moment, but I still got nothing from him. Even so, I knew our relationship had changed at that point, probably irrevocably. I reached out and clapped him on his shoulders. "We can sort this out when we have eliminated all the Dark Lords, okay? When they're no longer a threat."

"When they're all gone." Crowley nodded solemnly,

speaking over the first distant echoes of gunfire from our advancing mercenaries. "Then we've got some things to thrash out, man-to-man."

"Man-to-man." I nodded and keyed my radio. "Delta, come into the core. We've got work to do."



 Dark Conspiracy 3-33.jpg

Bat, Crowley and I mounted the ramps to the platform from the south, avoiding the mess made by the leaking bodies on the other side. Dropping to one knee, I saw that box on the platform was a painfully simple little device that coupled a motion detector with a wide-angle, infrared sensor that pinpointed us the second we entered the core. A wire trailed from it into the gate. "Sensor array with monitors in Pygmalion's dimension. They might know we're coming."

Crowley shook his head. "MacNeal's people might have known we were coming, but not Pygmalion. If he had, he would have sent his warriors over to clean us out."

"Point. Let's go." Remaining low, I darted through the gate and instantly found myself in Pygmalion's hot and incredibly bright dimension. Darius MacNeal stared up at me with dead eyes, his crumpled body nestled amid the legs of a card table with the security monitors on it. Looking up and away from his body, I squinted against the sun, but that did not prevent me from seeing four Build-more security men rounding a corner on a dead run toward my platform.

Shifting to the right to let the card table with the monitors on it shield me, I opened fire on the guards. Two

bullets blew the lead man back off the tower. A third punched another man's Adam's apple out through his spine. Bat opened on the other two with his M16, sending them spinning away off the azure tower.

"Radio check, nice shooting." Even though the monitors clearly worked, I wanted to be certain our radios would function in Pygmalion's dimension.

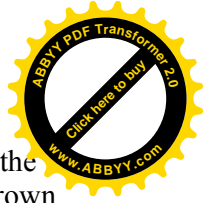
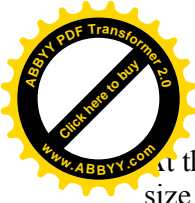
"Copy."

Leaving Bat and Crowley to secure the platform, I ducked back through the gate and waved the ops team through. "Clear, let's go."

Sin and Jytte came through first, followed by Nero and Rajani, with Hal, Natch and Mickey bringing up the rear. They followed Crowley and Bat down the northern ramp, and we quickly worked our way to the ground. We encountered no more resistance and saw no sign of alarm from the city below the tower, even though we knew the sounds of gunfire had to have carried an incredible distance through the clear air.

On the ground, we moved well away from the base of the crystalline tower. Nero Loring heaved the long, cylindrical case off his shoulder in Bat's direction. Loring grabbed a clear cable from the center of it, then pointed Bat toward the tower. "Hitch me in to the power grid."

Bat hefted the cannister and ran back toward one of the blue-crystal tower legs. He doled out the fiber-optic cable as he went, and I moved to help him. Working together—which meant he tolerated my presence during the operation—we played the line out quickly.



at the tower leg, Bat popped the caps off either end of the cylinder and produced two clear disks roughly the size and shape of hockey pucks. The fiber-optic cable hung from each of the disks like a tail. He peeled brown paper off one side of each of them and stuck the disks on either side of the pillar. He glanced back at Nero, and when the

old man gave both of us a thumb's-up, we trotted back to him.

Loring had plugged the end of that cable into a rectangular box. A gray cable ran from that to the back of the Powerbook, and Loring nodded. "I have a positive reading. When do we get our power boost?"

Hal looked at the analog stopwatch hanging from around his neck. "Seven-and-a-half minutes to full. Phase one in 30 seconds."

I glanced out toward the black city and shook my head. I imagined it a hive full of warriors like Mickey, and I sincerely wondered if we would survive kicking it. Given that our job was to kill the equivalent of the queen bee, I had sincere doubts about our chances. Then again, to fail was to die, so the only chance at survival had to be success.

"Phase one power going up now."

Crowley's shadowfonm pointed to the open circle of gemstones at the top of the tower. "I see him!"

As the phase one level of power kicked in through the grid, the whole structure began to glow like a neon tube. Within the blue light, I saw golden highlights in the stones that looked like the cross between printed circuitry and a capillary network in a living creature. The power seemed to start within the bottom of the tower and ascend up to where four very long posts held a crystal halo above the whole structure.

Descending through it, I saw the outline and then landing gear for Bronislaw Joniak's pride and joy. Outdated though it may have been, the AH-64 Apache descended through this proto-dimension's analog of the helipad's target circle as smoothly as if it were on an elevator. The 30mm chain-gun beneath its chin swiveled back and forth for a second, then the aircraft moved forward and swooped down toward the ground before

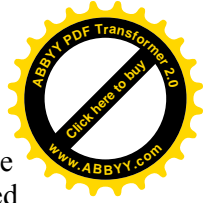
coming around to face us.

I held a hand up to shield my face from the dust being kicked up. On the right wing, I saw the normal load of eight Hellfire missiles, but on the other wing-stub I saw a huge metal drum held by a pair of cylinders that attached to the wing's two hardpoints. The drum rotated a half turn to the right and 10 feet of a fiber-optic cable ejected out the back.

"Merlin at your service. Cable deployment ready to begin."

"Roger, Merlin. Go!" I pointed him out toward the obsidian city, and he took off, the cylinder spinning wildly, ft spat out cable at a prodigious rate, leaving it to snake over the black sand surface. When Joniak had flown a sufficient distance away, the end of the cable stopped whipping around wildly. Hal ran over to the end, grabbed the cable and hauled it back toward Nero and his boxes.

Nero slipped the cable into place and locked the end down. "Secure. I have contact."



put by the edge of the city, the helicopter began its long, looping turn back toward us. It raced low over the terrain, darting forward and side to side like a dragonfly. The tail on the helicopter whipped around, pointed the craft's nose at us, then it came up and the chopper raced back toward our position.

On its back-trail I began to see movement. The whole city seemed to have awakened with pale and almost corpse-like creatures pouring out of the dark buildings. At that great a distance, I could not make out details, but I knew what I was looking at. Thousands and thousands of creatures like Mickey began to move inexorably toward us. I could see black patches on their bodies and knew that would be the carbon-fiber armor that Mickey had beneath his flesh. The automatons coming toward us were bald and, as nearly as I could make out, had a thumb, a forefinger and then no separation between or definition of

the other fingers on their hands—meaning Pygmalion had decided that a thumb for grasping and a finger for using a trigger was more than sufficient for his warriors.

Worse than their appearance, which might have been considered elegant and economical in another setting, I sensed an intense desire in them to provide pleasure for their master. I knew Pygmalion had created them, and their desire to make him happy was backed by a miserable fear of failure. A low level of anxiety built within the mob heading toward us, and it increased in tandem with a sense of expectation.

Joniak's Apache arrived back over us, and the drum spooled out another 40 feet of cable. The drum stopped spinning to the right, then rotated back and forth a couple of times before a cutting device severed the line. It dropped to the sand and the Apache brought itself up to an altitude of 100 feet before turning toward the city.

"Alpha, I have eight Hellfires. I can slow them down."

"Negative, Merlin. Nail the cable and we're all done for."

Bat ran over with the other end of the cable and Nero Loring secured it. "Locked down." He hit one button on the computer keyboard, then smiled. "On automatic."

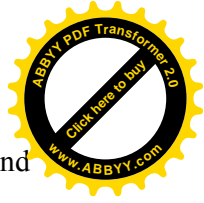
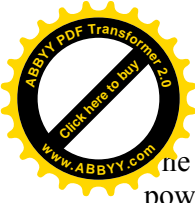
I smiled at him, then felt the mood of the creatures coming toward us change. I looked back and saw the vast majority of them had passed into the noose defined by the cable without molesting it. Their general level of anxiety dropped sharply for all of four seconds, then began a steep climb back up. I knew they were not smart enough to fear us, so that meant only one other possibility.

Pygmalion.

I had seen the diminutive Dark Lord in Japan, but he had not inspired fear in me at that time. In his own proto-dimension, however, the sight of him made my mouth go dry. Small and highly childlike, he walked through the air with a simple, almost casual gait that ate up tens of yards

at a step. His approach brought with it an intensity of emotion that mixed incredulity and annoyance into an acid that ate away at my self-confidence and even my sense of self.

He stopped before us, hovering beneath the Apache, but its downdraft had no effect on him. He smiled, almost graciously, and bowed his head in my direction. "You seek to return to me Mickey and Jytte. How kind." His head, which seemed too large for his body, wavered back and forth like that of a disappointed parent. "How incredibly stupid."



the Dark Lord's gaze swept over us, then he clucked to himself. "To think I was once like you, so puny and powerless. So imperfect."

"And you are perfect?" I laughed.

"I am." His head turned sharply toward Crowley. "And, no, that does not mean I am a perfect asshole. And, yes, I can read your mind, Crowley. I am a Dark Lord who was once human, so unraveling what you think is a complex cognitive network is but a moment's idle diversion for me."

Crowley's shadow body folded its arms across its chest. "I take it then that ripping women and children apart, then rebuilding them, is something more taxing."

Pygmalion laughed aloud, though it sounded forced to me. "I bestow perfection upon those who need it. Look at her, look at Jytte. When I found her she was nothing. She was more the battery running a plethora of machines than she was a human being."

The Dark Lord ran his hand through the air, and a dust-devil sprang up. It sucked dirt in, coloring the funnel black, then it condensed into a small cloud hovering in front of him. Like a magician attempting to show no invisible wires or hidden supports, the Dark Lord waved his hands above and below the cloud. He packed it tightly without touching

it, creating a glob of blackness that glistened like molten glass.

The black blob remained in the air and began to undergo changes without Pygmalion's mimed input. It slowly resolved itself into the form of an infant female with no legs and no arms, just feet and hands at her hips and shoulders, respectively. The left side of her face started out of proportion with the right, and that difference became exaggerated as the statuette aged. The homunculus' lopsided head tilted toward its right shoulder and features sharpened somewhat as its breasts grew full and its hair lengthened.

"This was you, Jytte. This is what you were when I found you, rescued you from your prison. You lived in a world of plastic and chrome, encased in a bubble in which you lived and slept. Your only human contact came from the praises your parents had digitized to be played back when you did something good. They were more proud of the new equipment that they could buy than they were of you, and their willingness to spare no expense for you marked them as saints among their friends."

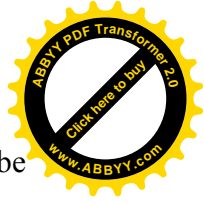
He pressed a hand to his own chest. "I took you away from all that. I gave you the arms and legs you had never known. I reshaped your face. I fixed all that was wrong inside. I made you the creature of your dreams. You know this is true."

I looked over at Jytte and saw her tremble. I sensed in her utter panic and shame, but somehow she remained where she was. She wanted to run, she wanted to deny all he was saying, but she knew she could not. He was telling the truth, but not to help her.

He wanted her to have the truth to destroy her so he could feed off her tortured soul.

Jytte's tear-streaked face jerked up a second before the barrel of her M-16. She snapped off a quick shot that

exploded the glass parody of humanity. "That is not what I am now."



Pygmalion looked at her with new respect. "No, no it is not." His grin became hideous. "But it could be again, my dear, oh so easily."

"I think not, Pygmalion." I covered him with my MP-7. "We like Jytte just the way she is."

The Dark Lord looked disappointed at me. "What? You're not going to tell me that it will be 'over your dead body' that I work on her again? Ah, you're the one Fiddleback trained, so I know better than to expect clichés from you. Mickey, destroy this one."

I shot a glance at Mickey, but he made no move toward me. "No."

Pygmalion's head rocked back. "What have you done to him? Alien witch, this was your doing, wasn't it?"

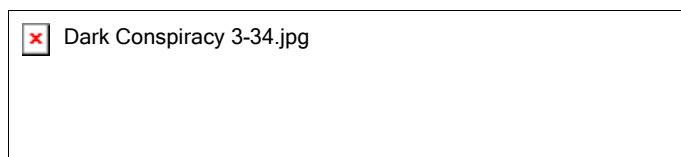
"My pleasure, Nicholas." Rajani reached out and took Mickey's left hand.

The Dark Lord's scowl grew rather heavy, and I could sense anger and outrage rising in him. "You are fools all, but brave fools. Imagine thinking that you and that ancient helicopter could somehow destroy me. I may once have been human, but no more. I am a Dark Lord."

"But still mortal, eh, Pygmalion?" I formed the picture of a cockroach being stamped into paste in my mind.

"If you could find a big enough shoe, yes," he laughed, "but none of you can kill me."

I saw Hal tap his stopwatch, and I smiled. "That's not why we're here, Pygmalion." I let my gun point toward the ground. "We just wanted ringside seats when the exterminator came to do the job."

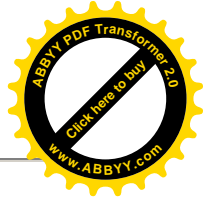
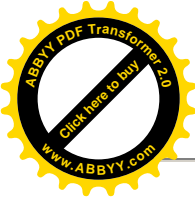


Somewhere in the depths of the Hoover Dam, Paul Warner hit a switch that sent every last watt of power produced by the giant turbines into the Mercury grid. I had a mental image of light bulbs blowing throughout the area, and a part of me even regretted the panic and terror among those left in the darkness. By the same token, I knew that what they felt now would seem like paradise if we failed.

The crystalline tower crackled with energy as the surge hit it. My flesh and scalp tingled as we used the structure of the gate tower to send power through from Earth to Pygmalion's private little domain. Even the diminutive Dark Lord turned to face the tower, his look of prideful awe etched in shades of blue on his face.

The gemstones turned a deep sapphire color and hummed. Gold and silver lightning shot through them, going around and around, bouncing from facet to flaw and on again, gamboling otterlike in the stones. The tower glowed so intensely that blue shadows fell over the land, and Pygmalion's mindless troops slowed their approach.

I could see from Pygmalion's face that the immense towering beauty enchanted him. He stared at it like a man watching the woman of his dreams come naked for him



and him alone. The tower was his link to Earth, the key to his conquest of his old home, and we had supplied it with power enough to enable him to move any and all the troops across it he wanted. We had completed his grand design for him.

He studied it lovingly, from top to bottom, then he noticed the twin golden threads running from the base to the knot of us. He watched the line as if it were a fuse slowly burning down on a keg of dynamite. His rapture changed to horror and, for the first time ever, I saw fear in the eyes of a Dark Lord.

"What have you done?!" he screamed, already too late to stop it.

A golden wall of energy shot straight up into the heavens from the circle of cable the Apache had laid down. As it reached the bowl of the sky, it spread out until its very edges melted seamlessly into the golden atmosphere. The sky within the cylinder twitched, as if a membrane upon which a rock had been dropped. It rebounded and held, then twitched again more violently.

It held a second time, but as it snapped back into a golden shell above us, I felt a hissed groan shake the proto-dimension. I looked at Pygmalion and saw his body tense as if his pain and concentration could reinforce his dimension's sanctity. A grin grew on his face, and I felt a sense of triumph from him, but neither lived very long.

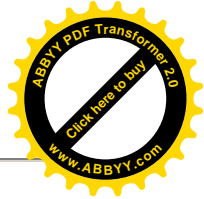
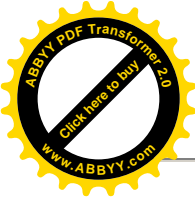
The third assault did not test the elasticity of the dimension's boundaries, but shattered it instead. The sky in the center of the cylinder cracked like an eggshell, and pieces of it fell inward. As they did so, they clung to the walls of the cylinder, and I saw its golden light grow brighter as the dimensional gate sucked in the energy Pygmalion had used to fortify his domain. Another piece fell inward, then two more disappeared into the dark void beyond the opening.

«/VO/» Pygmalion's mental scream of terror reached down into my soul and almost invoked pity for the little man hovering above me. For a second—a naked, raw, painful second—Pygmalion remembered what it was to be a human in the presence of one of the most powerful Dark Lords in infinity. His remembrance broke his concentration, and in that moment the top of the world popped off like a skull cap beneath a bone-saw in an autopsy.

Fiddleback hauled himself through into Pygmalion's dimension, all spiderlike and full of fury. He landed amid the dimensional gate's circle like an earthquake. The ground heaved hard enough to topple everyone from their feet, including those of Pygmalion's warriors who had not been crushed beneath Fiddleback's flat feet. The shock wave of his entry even buffeted Pygmalion and moved him back through the air.

As Pygmalion's warriors stood back up, they attacked Fiddleback and started scaling his legs as they might mount the outside of a skyscraper. The Dark Lord, barely mindful of their assaults, shook his lower limbs as a cat mightawetpaw. Pygmalion's warriors, flung off Fiddleback with incredible ease, sailed through the air and died dashed and smashed against the buildings that had once been their homes.

The warriors had stood out like aphids on a rose stem, all pale against the yellow-green of his exoskeleton. Though I had seen him before, both when he tried to enter Phoenix through the dimensional gate built there and in the dimensions where he gave us Vetha, I had never had a clear frame of reference to help size him. It was true that he had batted a Scorpion Security copter out of the air in Phoenix, but he had never actually made it all the way in, so I discovered I had denied the external evidence of his true size. Each of his feet could have crushed a four by four



square of residential homes, and were he to lie down, he could have bridged the two mile gap between City Center and the Lorica Citadel with ease.

Each footfall sending tremors through the world, Fiddleback advanced to the edge of the dimensional gate and beyond it. "My pet, you have zukzeeded. I have come."

I picked myself up and craned my neck back to see all of him. "Your turn."

The huge Dark Lord reached out with a forelimb, telescoping it out and spreading his three fingers like a net. Pygmalion appeared to be nothing more than a gnat to him, and proved just as elusive as he shot up and away. Fiddleback's fingers closed with a thunderclap, but his tiny foe eluded his grasp.

Fiddleback's mandibles spread apart and clicked back together as his head swiveled, and he followed Pygmalion's course back into the black city. Fiddlebacktumed quickly and incredibly gracefully for a creature of such mass, then reared up on his hind two motile legs and stamped down hard with the front pair.

The tremor shook the buildings of the city and started toppling them like the card houses they were. Slab after slab crashed into a companion, and roofs collapsed down on the whole lot. Dust swirled up into the air as the seismic tide washed the city away.hovels disintegrated like domino patterns, then covered themselves with a thick black plume of dust.

Fiddleback lunged in toward the city, then I saw something move within the dust. It shot up and out, a glassy black limb striking Fiddleback high and hard enough in the thorax to rock him backward. Fiddleback stumbled, and his hind two legs buckled like the legs of a stunned prizefighter. He stumbled, his abdomen touching the ground, and for a heartbeat he was vulnerable.

While powerful, Fiddleback was by no means invin-

cible, and especially not so in another Dark Lord's hideaway. Pygmalion's knowledge of the place and his familiarity with its quirks and special rules could have supplied him the edge to rid himself of Fiddleback. A quick, sharp, decisive blow with the weapon he had formed could have won Pygmalion the day and spelled doom for humanity.

Ultimately, though, Pygmalion's humanity proved his vulnerability. Had Pygmalion not succumbed to his vanity, he would have destroyed his former master. He could not resist the theatrics of having his weapon rise up out of the dark dustcloud enshrouding his capital. Likewise, he could not forsake the chance to batter, torture and punish his former master.

The weapon he built *was* magnificent and splendidly suited to what he wanted it to do. As he had done before with the dust of the earth, Pygmalion had used the broken obsidian of his city to create another homunculus. Cast in the form of Mickey and scaled to Fiddleback as Mickey would have been to a horse, the liquid stone warrior dropped into a martial arts fighting stance. Its mouth open for a scream, the statue danced forward with featherlight steps that mocked the fallen creature before it.

I keyed my radio. "Fire two, Mr. Joniak, at the stone man."

The Mickey statue landed a solid kick to Fiddleback's upper left shoulder. The stone foot crushed the exoskel-



on, driving carapace shards back into the Dark Lord's flesh. A cicada buzz of pain filled the proto-dimension, starting the tower to tremble like a tuning fork. Steaming black blood spurted from the wound, covering the statue, but neither stained it nor burned it.

Two Hellfire missiles streaked out from the Apache and rode flametongues all the way to the target. They impacted less than a two meters apart and within two

seconds of each other. Designed originally to make the Apache a deadly antitank war machine, their effect on a living-stone creature was nothing short of spectacular. Their high-explosive heads blew deep craters in the statue's broad chest, spitting sharp obsidian shards in all directions.

More importantly, the first rocket created one set of vibrations in the volcanic glass and the other sent a contrasting shock wave through its crystalline lattice. Where new and old vibrations met, cracks began to form. The statue wavered and looked as if it would fall, then it recovered and raised a fist to crush Fiddleback's skull.

Fiddleback struck hard, thrusting his upper right fore-limb out to stab into the statue's chest. His fingers closed into a knotty fist, but it seemed as if the blow did less damage than the sensation of indignation Fiddleback focused on the statue and pulsed out through his fist. The blow landed with a sharp crack, the fist withdrew, then shot out again to pulverize the statue.

The colossus exploded like hammerstruck glass. As fragments big and small rained down over the landscape, Fiddleback climbed up onto his feet and darted forward. The trio of whole forelimbs dug through the rubble like a dog pawing a trash midden, then I heard an exultant buzz of triumph punctuated by a desperate and terrible scream.

Fiddleback turned toward us, having plucked Pygmalion from the ruins of his giant warrior. I heard sound coming from between the fingers of Fiddleback's upraised hand. "He implorez you to help him, my pet. He zayz you are both human and must fight me."

Bat laughed aloud. "It's a bitch being puny and powerless."

I nodded. "And human, that's rough. Never know who you can trust."

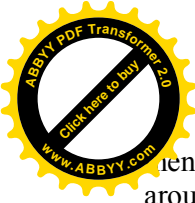
"True wordz, my pet, humanz cannot be truzted."

Fiddleback's fingers closed with wet scrunching sounds, then he smeared them clean on a piece of the statue's broken thigh. "Not truzted at all."

"Coyote, look out!"

I spun at the sound of Rajani's voice and pulled back, allowing myself to flop down on my back. Something man-sized and swathed in black faded into existence behind me. Because of its unusual shape, I almost thought Fiddleback had managed to resurrect Vetha to use her against me, but the little bit of flesh visible around the eyes was beige, not ivory, and the dark brown eyes were human.

What was not human rose above the creature like a snake and darted forward in a blur. Had I not been warned, the meter-long swordblade mounted at the end of the tail would have run me through spine to breastbone and



then some. As it whipped back in preparation for another strike, I thought I saw human features centered around the swordblade as if it were a nose.

I hit hard and heard something go crunch in the fall. I prayed it was not my radio and screamed into the microphone, "Code Eclipse, Merlin, code Eclipse." I heard the faint acknowledgement of my order as the scorpion-man towered over me and knew that even though it would kill me, I had stopped Fiddleback.

Before the tail could impale me, Mickey flew into the monster with a calculated recklessness that I'd never even seen in Bat. A flying snapkick caught the scorpion-man in the right flank, spilling it across the sand. It came up onto its feet in an instant, though its right arm did drop into place to protect its damaged ribs. The tip of the katana blade circled lazily as the scorpion-man moved in toward Mickey, then the tail struck.

I knew I could never have dodged that strike, even if I had been moving at the time it kicked off. Mickey did not

start his counter to it until the blade had already passed forward of the body and curled down in toward him. At that point, he simply leaned toward the scorpion-man, letting the blade pass within a hair's breadth of his head, yet I sensed no concern or urgency from him.

Mickey stiffened the fingers of his right hand into a spearhead and drove it up through the end of the retreating tail. I actually saw the hide on the upper end of the tail stretch, then burst as his hand sliced clean through it, opening a hand-width hole in it.

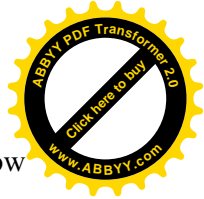
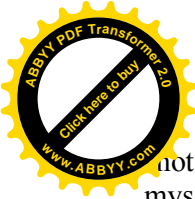
The eyes in the tail died as Mickey withdrew his bloody hand with a sucking *thivock* sound, but the eyes in the face registered the pain of the assault. That fact formed little more than a footnote to the fight, as Mickey pirouetted on his right foot, presenting the creature a tantalizing view of his back. As it began to lean toward him, its fists aiming for his spine, he completed the spin and contracted his right hand into a fist. He brought it up, around and down, hitting the scorpion-man on the top of the skull, flattening it with a muffled crump.

As fascinating as Pygmalion had found the glowing of his tower, so did Fiddleback look upon the destruction of his champion. He focused entirely on the battle between the scorpion-man and Mickey. The Dark Lord's emotions rollercoasted through the battle and finished somewhere close to begrudged respect for the minion who had rebelled and created his champion's undoing.

That distracted him enough for Bronislaw Joniak to bring the Apache around and unload the remaining Hellfire missiles. Had the Dark Lord not been in the city ruins, he might have been close enough to swat some or all of the missiles from the sky. As distant as he was, he could do nothing but watch impotently as the half-dozen missiles streaked in at their target and did to it what they had done to the statue, only more so.

I felt curiously detached as the missiles hit the glowing blue tower. Two exploded against the major support legs on the near side. The long crystalline supports shattered into a glittering hail and started the whole structure coming down. The rest of the missiles hit it at various points on up the structure, severing disks and blasting apart pillars.

I reflected for a second that those later missiles probably saved my life because, unlike the other people, I had not begun to run away from where we had been standing. Intellectually, I knew that the tower, with its legs



not out from it on our side, would likely fall right down on us. I should have been scared, but I could allow myself that luxury because I knew I would need it later. I knew as certainly as I knew respiration was necessary for life that the tower would not collapse on me, nor would it kill me.

That would have been too easy, too quick, too pleasant a way to die.

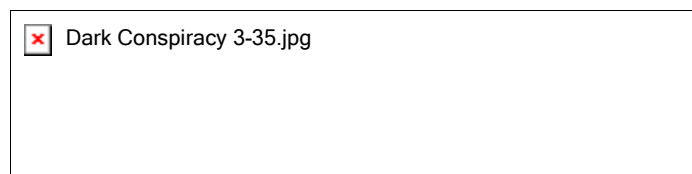
The crumbling tower released all its electrical and light energy into the sky. The golden cylinder vanished in an eyeblink, and the dome of the sky reappeared intact, though a curious bloody red stain shot through it. The freed electricity linked ground to sky with an argent lightning bolt, and the point where it touched the sky became an attractor for the blood.

Almost mechanically, I looked up at the Dark Lord that had created me. "You should have known better. I would never let you be in control of a live dimensional gate."

"I did, my pet." He raised himself up to his full height and St. Elmo's fire began to play over the horns, hooks and barbs on his exoskeleton. "I miscalculated. You are too dangerous to be allowed to live. I will kill you now."

"I'm the killer, remember, Fiddleback?" I laughed defiantly and ripped a hole into a nearby dimension. "I am the hunter, Fiddleback. Come kill me if you can because

now, my master, we play *my* game and *you* will lose." I slipped through and closed the rift before his frustrated scream could reach me, then I began running for my life.

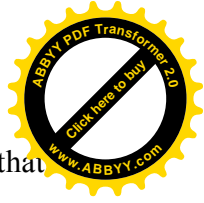


Someone less realistic than I would have put his running down to altruistic motives. He would have said he ran because he knew Fiddleback would pursue him to the exclusion of all others, thereby saving his friends back in Pygmalion's ruined domain. I knew that the first half of that idea was true, yet I could not guarantee he would not first destroy my comrades.

No, I ran because of sheer terror, at first. I knew it would take Fiddleback a microsecond to figure out what I had considered carefully since my return from the dead and my introduction to the Empress of Diamonds. The reason Fiddleback had required our aid to get him into Pygmalion's dimension was not because the other Dark Lord had hardened it against him, but because of the entropic barriers surrounding the pocket of proto-dimensions in which Pygmalion laired. By destroying the tower, I had managed to trap Fiddleback in an even smaller universe than the one in which he had previously roamed. Like a lobster blundering into a lobster pot, entry was easy for him, but escape would be impossible.

I knew that would fuel his rage and deepen his desire to tear me to bits. He could not allow me to live because I had successfully defied him on two occasions. On the first, in

Phoenix, I had prevented him from entering the richest prize a Dark Lord could know: Earth. And here,



Now, I had brought him a step closer, then tricked and trapped him. I had done to a Dark Lord things that could only be rewarded with a lingering and painful existence.

I ripshifted into a dimension where I appeared in the sky above a molten sulfur surface. The noxious fumes choked and blinded me, but I fought off panic and allowed myself to fall, plunging faster and faster toward the fiery landscape. For a second, I toyed with the idea of suicide—knowing this death would be more merciful than any my former master would grant me—then I sliced through dimensional walls and dove on in to a new proto-dimension.

A rush of hot air boosted me into the new dimension. As the gap closed behind me, I heard an agonized roar as Fiddleback tore his way into the world of burning sulfur. I visualized his limbs bobbing in the choppy black ocean like French fries on the boil, but I knew that would be too quick and easy a release from my troubles. Fiddleback would never die by accident, only through a deliberate act of execution.

I fell a dozen feet and opened my eyes just as I skidded and bounced across waxen hills and through a rivulet of hot wax. It coated me, and I whipped my sodden hair out of my eyes. That action proved enough to cool the wax, leaving my hair frozen in a wind-lashed position. I laughed aloud at the absurdity of it, then reached up into the sky and pulled myself up into a new dimension.

I could feel Fiddleback out there, searching for me. His bath in the sulfur doubtlessly caused him to become more cautious. I felt him lay back, shifting on through to yet another dimension, then using his power as a Dark Lord to seek me out. Pursuit was not in his nature, for he preferred to sit back and, like a spider in a web, wait until

prey came to him. He would analyze the dimensions in this entropic sphere, catalog them and start eliminating the ones that I would avoid. Gradually and carefully, he would isolate me and have me.

Of course, his search plan was predicated on his assumption that I desired surviving our encounter. Doubtlessly, it had begun to occur to him that I might not care about my life. I had, after all, already won in a way. I had gotten him to eliminate Pygmalion as a threat to Earth. More importantly, I had trapped him in an isolated niche. Once other Dark Lords learned of its existence and location, it would become a Pandora's Box that no one would open for fear of releasing Fiddleback,

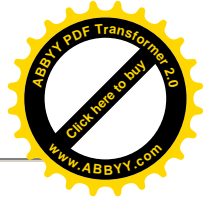
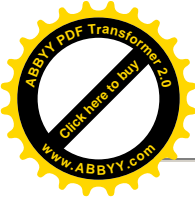
Pulling myself up into Turquoise through a hole in the ground that closed after I left it, I realized his assumption concerning me was both right and wrong. I did want to live in the same way that each and every living thing desired life. It was the key to maintaining the competitive edge. Without it, literally, I would have let myself swan dive into the sulfur sea and have been done with it.

On the other hand, I found death a comfortable companion. All my life I had been trained to kill, and I had accomplished my appointed tasks in Fiddleback's name with skill and daring. The only enemy who had ever even detected my existence had been able to stop me, but only after the fact of his own death. He gave as good as he got, killing my old identity and rebirthing me in his image. Then I died again, at the hands of the Aryans, but I survived that to become good enough to defy a Dark Lord.

I got the impression that the third time, death would not be so kind to me.

I didn't care, as long as I took Fiddleback with me.

Had Fiddleback been hot on my trail, I would have detoured through a very cold proto-dimension ahead and down a bit. With the leisure given me by his shift in tactics,



I cut a straight course through the dimensions to the one he had to have guessed I would run to. For someone desiring life, this would be a blessed sanctuary. He would know I had to go for it, and even as I approached it, I could feel him coming in after me.

1 phase shifted into Tityus' dimension, appearing on top of a stony hillock overlooking the valley where the Titan lay bound to his rock. The vultures, a bronze flock, covered his chest like a scale mail shirt. Their metal beaks flashed in the noontime sun and came away bloody while he screamed with the voices of men beyond reason because of pain.

"That iz the leazt I will do with you, my pet." Fiddleback matched the elegance of my phase shift with one of his own. His upper left arm still hung broken and useless from the shattered shoulder socket, and the lower arm on that side had been burned to a blackened stump past the first joint. Despite that damage, or perhaps because of it, he looked as horrifying as ever.

"The game is over, Fiddleback. You lose."

"Do I? How arrogant you are!"

"A chip off the old block." I leaped down off my perch and moved toward my right and out of the range of his working forelimbs. "I am the seed you planted and the fruit you nurtured. Mow comes to you the bitter harvest you deserve."

He stared down at me for a second, then I saw his head come up. He raised his forelimbs defensively and swept them through the air as if waving away a cloud of gnats. I sensed his frustration and annoyance spiking, but he had not even an inkling of his true danger.

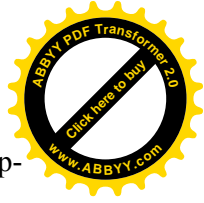
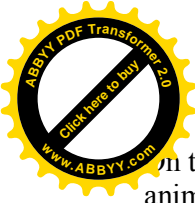
The bronze vultures, programmed simply to pick out and feed upon the largest creature in the dimension, abandoned their daily fare and sailed in at Fiddleback. His flailing arms batted some out of the air, crushing their

delicate mechanisms and scattering them across the landscape. Still others ducked beneath his arms or attacked his back and eyes. Over a dozen went immediately for the hole the statue had opened in his upper left shoulder.

A wave of anger rolled off Fiddleback, and I felt reality begin to warp around him as he started to phase shift. The warping stopped instantly, and reality snapped back into place. More vultures hit him as Fiddleback's right fore-limbs raked at the air to open a rip-cut to another dimension. His triple fingers scraped along something that might as well have been slicker than oily ice and harder than diamond, because he could get no grip and could not pierce the proto-dimension's flesh.

"*NOr* The Dark Lord looked down at me, his pulsar eyes locking the green pupils on me. "You do not want to be trapped with me, Coyote. Free me, and I give you your life."

I laughed aloud and watched the birds tear at him. They tore bloody black hunks from his flesh and flung them away from his body. They did not bother to feed, just greedily dug at him. They burrowed into his exoskeleton, and for each one he plucked from his body and crushed between fingers, a half-dozen more assaulted him.



in the ground, I saw gears rolling along with a directed purposefulness. It felt as if I were watching a stop-animation film, because the broken bits and pieces of birds gathered themselves up into piles that slowly resolved themselves into bigger and stronger vultures. Those metal raptors, some large enough to carry passengers or cargo back on Earth, slashed at Fiddleback with renewed vigor.

The sky above the Dark Lord glowed with the bronze colors of a sunset, yet the sun remained at its zenith. The birds descended in a great cloud and looked like an angry

swarm of bees. Their mechanical shrieks filled the world with an industrial cry of victory.

As I watched Fiddleback falter and go down, I saw something else happening to him. The gobbets of flesh unceremoniously stripped from him did not lie still on the ground. I saw them twitch, and all the sharply torn edges folded down into themselves until each of the pieces of skin became pouchlike. Each of these cocoons dried quickly and, as they did so, took on one of a rainbow of colors, from ivory to onyx.

Something struggled within the fleshy pods, then the pods themselves split along a dark seam. A frighteningly familiar head thrust itself through the opening, then an eight-legged creature dragged itself to freedom. As it crawled out of the opening, I noticed the far end of the cocoon was sucked on inside itself. Ultimately, it rolled on down and, insideout, sealed itself to form the *MyrangeikkCs* abdomen.

More and more of these cocoons transmogrified themselves into *MyrangeikkI* individuals. I looked back at Fiddleback's body and saw, through a swirling cyclone of vultures, where other *Myrangeicfcfcf* were popping free of the Dark Lord's flesh from a million boils, in a process akin to that which had birthed Vetha.

"It is as you expected it would be, isn't it?"

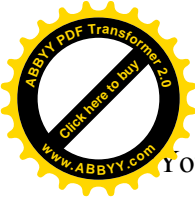
I turned to my right and nodded to the Empress of Diamonds. "Different mechanism, similar result." I pointed out at the herd of *Myrangeikkincw* working together to pull pods away from the carcass, quickly sorting them by color and other factors that escaped my notice. "I suppose I could have guessed, after having seen how Vetha had been reconstituted from Fiddleback, that the rebirth of his race might be possible."

Two of the ivory *Myrangeikki* came to me bearing a cocoon the size of a football and placed it in my hands. I

felt life stirring inside it. The outer surface went from a soft supple leather to the dry crispness of an autumn leaf. The seam drew itself along the dorsal surface like mercury in a thermometer climbing upward on a scorching day. The creature inside it stirred, then the pod split open and it began to emerge.

It grabbed on to my forearm with its mandibles to pull itself free of the cocoon. The grip did not feel that hard, yet I knew its lack of ferocity came not from a lack of intent to injure, but from a physical inability to generate that much power. Stunted forelimbs likewise struggled to free the *Myrangeikkihom* the cocoon, so I helped pulled the pod down and smoothed it as it closed to cover a misshapen abdomen.

Shifting my grip, I dumped the dwarf *Myrangeikkionto* its back with its soft thorax held firmly in my left hand. It opened its jaws, freeing my right arm, then I supported its abdomen and held it like a baby.



"You were my pet, Coyote," it buzzed, "and now they give me to you so I can be yours."

Fiddleback's head swiveled toward my companion as she slipped her diamond pendant from around her neck and fastened it around his. "Empress, I seized your hand in this when I could not depart. Well played. Will you salvage me, now?"

The Empress of Diamonds kissed the deformed *Myrangeikkion* the forehead and took him from my arms. "You are beyond even the salvation I offer." She laid him on the ground, then gestured at him. His limbs plucked ineffectually for a second at the diamond pendant, then he lay quiescent.

"Thus it ends," he buzzed.

As I watched, the diamond began to flow out along the silver strand in both directions. It hardened on the chain as if crystalizing from super-saturated solution, instantly

wreathing his throat in blue-white splendor. Then, as if the two diamond waves had hit and passed through each other at the clasp, the gems thickened as their momentum took them around again to race toward the pendant itself. There they shot through each other yet again, turning the necklace into a diamond collar.

As the opening around Fiddleback's neck began saw-toothed contractions, I searched his emotions for fear or anger. I found neither, but instead uncovered a mildly nostalgic sense of disappointment and a smugness that cut at me like a cold wind. He looked up at me when the growing diamond torus bit into his neck, and his mandibles parted ever so slightly.

»Thus it begins, my pet«

The doughnut became a disk and Fiddleback's head slid free of his body.

The Empress of Diamonds stood on Match's tiptoes and gave me a peck on the cheek. "I know, he seemed so benign, but he was that way when he started his climb."

I looked out at the other *Myrangeikki*. "There is no chance they will unite again?"

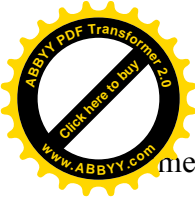
"Not without another synthesizer."

Synthesizer. I knew that was what I could become as a Dark Lord, yet I could not bring myself to even dream of pulling Fiddleback's people together and again subjecting them to the tortures they had endured while part of him. No, while I lived, while I breathed, they would be left alone here or in another dimension. They had endured enough.

The Empress took my right hand in her left, then swirled her right hand through the air. I saw reality begin to warp with her motion, as if she were stirring a liquid and distorting its reflection. "Come with me, Coyote. We must return to your friends and let them know of my victory."

"Your victory?"

She smiled in a most un-Natchlike way and, tugging me through to the dimension where Pygmalion died,



ended her statement with, "Our victory, my sweet, of course, our victory."

 Dark Conspiracy 3-36.jpg

Whatever it had been before, Pygmalion's dimension had weathered his demise not at all well. As the Empress of Diamonds brought me through, I sensed the life ebbing from the countless warriors Pygmalion had created and from the world that had hatched them. With his death came the warriors' death, and their despair washed over me like an icy rain. Bereft of its Dark Lord, yet still deceptively bright and warm, this proto-dimension had become nothing more than a place of death.

The strongest pocket of life surrounded my friends. They appeared surprised as the person they saw as Natch led me through a dimensional rift like a young girl dragging a reluctant suitor along on an idyllic spring walk. She let my hand drop from her grasp as she giggled and pirouetted. She smiled at Bat, then skipped and spun on toward where the tower had fallen.

As she headed off toward it, I walked over to where the others stood and sat in the shade provided by Bronislaw's Apache. Jytte and Rajani sat with Mickey, speaking to him in hushed tones, while Sinclair stood behind them and rested a hand gently on Rajani's shoulder. Bat sat off a bit, speaking in Polish with the dwarf, leaving Crowley, Hal and Nero Loring in a tight knot toward the middle of the

aircraft's shadow.

I forced myself to concentrate on the joyful smiles they gave me instead of the piquant misery of those automatons dying by degrees within the crushed city and on the sand outside it. Though trained as an assassin, I had no love for the ultimate benefactor of my work and did not want to be infected by it. I turned my back on them and returned the smiles of my friends with a genuine warmth.

"I'm very glad Fiddleback did not kill you before he came after me." I smiled at Mickey. "Thank you for saving my life."

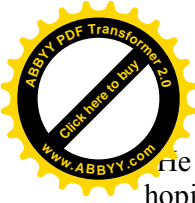
He nodded somewhat mechanically. "I don't like playing rough."

"I know, but if you had not, many more people would have been hurt." I sensed distress from Rajani, and I frowned. "It's not your fault, Rajani."

"It is, Coyote. When that *thing* came through, Mickey immediately oriented on it."

I smiled as my recollection of the scorpion-man brought with it identification of the face on the tail and the eyes on the body. "Of course, that was a combination of Arrigo El-Leichter and Colonel Nagashita. Mickey had been told to kill the both of them. He had imprinted on them."

"Yes, but just after I sensed the danger and warned you, I plucked a new template, the one that fit the new thing they had become, from Fiddleback's brain." She caressed Mickey's head. "I swapped it out for the templates he had imprinted on. I triggered him and now..." She shrugged helplessly.



He will understand, Rajani, and someday, in the future, he will thank you." I nodded to both her and Mickey, hoping that my prediction would, in fact, come true.

"If there is a future," Sinclair grunted.

"There will be: Fiddleback is dead." I undid the buckles holding my combat harness on and began to shrug out of

it. "I lured him to the dimension where I regenerated from my wounds. The vultures went after him there."

Sinclair frowned. "He left here in an awful hurry. Why didn't he just haul himself out of there."

I unfastened the web belt and tossed it on the ground, not caring any more if sand got into the holstered Krait's action. "A Dark Lord in a dimension with a similar aspect can block entry or exit, exactly as Pygmalion did here." Plucking the other Krait from its place at the small of my back, I lofted it over to where it dropped on top of its mate. "I had help."

Crowley nodded slowly at my words, then looked over at where Natch searched among the tower's fragments for something, then picked up a fist-sized diamond. "And she was it? Which one?"

I raised an eyebrow. "I would have thought it obvious to you, Damon. The Empress of Diamonds."

"Of course." He sketched a brief salute, then accepted the Wildey Wolf and shoulder holster from me. "How long have you known about her?"

I knew he really meant to ask why I had not told him about her, but I answered the question he had asked. "She and my predecessor had an alliance. That's how he, a man as blind in these proto-dimensions as Nero here, was able to know of and anticipate Fiddleback's foray into Phoenix. Her aspect is that of a salvager, so Coyote assumed she was less of a threat than Fiddleback."

The occultist's shadowed head nodded. "And now that Fiddleback is gone, she has much to salvage."

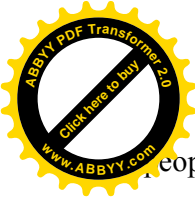
"Correct, Crowley." The Empress returned to my side with her prize. "I have much to salvage, much to do, but I am not ungrateful to you—all of you—for the part you played in my victory. In the new cosmology I create around myself, you will all be praised for your efforts on my behalf."

Hal frowned. "What's she talking about?"

I grinned wryly. "She is rather proud of her efforts, and well she should be because she played so many sides against the middle that the chances of her success were, at best, minimal. As Fiddleback said, 'Well played.'"

The Empress painted a falsely modest grin on Match's face. "You are too kind, Coyote."

"Am I? Using Natch as an agent to make contact with and keep tabs on Coyote was brilliant. Through her you were able to direct Coyote toward frustrating the efforts of your rivals to dabble in Earthly things. You even established the Reapers as your power base, but never let them get powerful enough to attract the attention of your rival Dark Lords. If one of them got ambitious, you let Coyote know about his operation and these good



people neatly trimmed your organization back for you."

I folded my arms across my chest. "Yes, now it all begins to come together for me. Mr. Leich was the Reaper who picked me up from the ambulance, which would have meant he was a creature in your direct service. I wondered what his connection was with Nery s Loring, and now I know you were it. The first night I saw her, she wore a large diamond ring. You had managed to turn her, which is how you learned enough of Fiddleback's plan to alert Coyote."

"Bravo, Coyote, you are very good." She gently rubbed Match's right hand across the surface of the diamond and in its wake left a finished, faceted gemstone. "Your predecessor chose well."

"But not well enough, you're thinking, I bet." I looked beyond her back at the scintillating mound of diamonds. "Let me think. Ah, because Pygmalion did not have a clue about how to create a dimensional gate—neither did Fiddleback or he would have long since made the dead one he had work again—you talked him into an alliance."

You salvaged part of a dimensional gate and worked it into a prototype model from which he built this tower. He accepted your alliance as one that would guarantee domination over the Earth and quite probably co-dominion over the dimensions. He even went so far to adorn the people he worked over with diamonds in your honor."

"Pygmalion's earlier experience with alien life forms made him especially susceptible to my blandishments, especially when he was first on the run from Fiddleback." The Empress shrugged effortlessly. "He proved very willing to help when I explained that I could not build beautiful things like he could."

Crowley shook his head. "He never realized that a salvager can only salvage that which has been created and destroyed."

"Which," I took over from him, "is why you needed not only a builder, but also someone capable of destroying Pygmalion and his toy. And that means, of course, your victory involves that pile of diamond dust."

The Empress of Diamonds nodded as she finished her reshaping of the diamond and held it up in the fingers of Match's left hand. "Very, very good. I might actually have underestimated you. You saw it—you a//saw it—the gold and silver pattern in the stones when the tower was energized. The easiest way for you to understand what happened is this: That pattern, and what the energy did to fix it in the gems, is roughly equivalent to a computer program and its being burned into a silicon-based chip. In this case, the program has been holographically locked into the diamonds in that mound and, when one of those gems is set into a piece of jewelry, I will have a direct link into the people wearing it."

She slowly rotated the gem, letting the sunlight spark and flash from the facets. "I got the idea from the faint feed I occasionally got from the Hope Diamond. It is an

exquisite stone, and the incredible pain associated with it is sweeter than any wine you can imagine. It occurred to me that humans everywhere revere and covet these diamonds. They keep them with them during times of happiness, and surrender them most reluctantly."



The Empress laughed aloud, then looked at Hal Garrett. "Think of it, Hal, think of the diamond you gave your wife when you asked her to marry you. Think of the worry she poured into it when you were injured in games. Think of the loneliness for which it became a symbol when you were away on road trips. Think of how it became a focus for pain and doubt and even her death agony when she knew that because of her marriage to you, she would die."

Hal held himself back, but his pain became a volcano in the emotional landscape of the dimension. I stepped between her and him. "You've made your point."

"I have, but you still do not grasp the depth of what this truly means. Imagine, just for a second, the volume of angst I will get just from decaying marriages. All the guilt and shame of cheating spouses will become mine. I will possess the heartache of the betrayed, and the grief of those who mourn a spouse's death."

She spun away from me, dancing like a little girl in love for the first time. "And if the gem is stolen, so much the better. A thief's fear, as the Hope Diamond will attest, is a nourishing nectar. If the gem is recovered and returned to the owner, so much the better. The paranoia and insecurity of someone who has lost keepsakes and gets them back surpasses even greed in its delicious intensity."

The Empress of Diamonds stopped and waved an idle hand toward the mountain of diamonds to her right. "Please, partake of them. Be my first worshippers. I will exalt you all. You will not want for pleasures and slaves. You will be first among the multitudes and my vanguard when jealous Dark *Lords* foolishly try to oppose me."

Bat stood up, his fists balled. "Why is it every Dark Lord thinks we would want to toady up to him or her?"

I snapped my fingers, and the Empress looked away from Bat and toward me. "If we refuse?"

"Then the honors I plan for you will have to be awarded posthumously because, collectively, you are a threat. In alliance with Fiddleback, you destroyed Pygmalion." She shined the diamond against the breast of her fatigues like an apple. "You helped me destroy Fiddleback and could, were I to let you live, link up with Baron Someday, Midas Longclaws or even Nimrod Nyet and cause me all manner of difficulty."

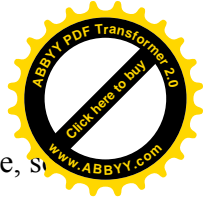
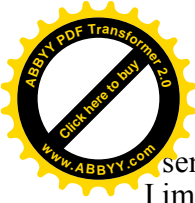
"That's it!" Bat started stalking across the sand at her with his fists raised and ready. "I promise this won't hurt."

"Bat, no!" I barked at him. It came as a warning, not a plea, and he knew I was not warning him about any danger she might pose. "She's mine."

The Empress shook her head when she looked at me. "Fiddleback trained you well. You are good, very good, at what you do, but, in this case, you are not good enough."

"I wasn't before, but I am now." I reached out and sucked in the misery of Pygmalion's dying warriors like a sponge soaking up water. I took their fear of death and blended it with their hopelessness and mewing appeals for a quick surcease of their pain. I savored the mixture and drank it in. It exploded like 200-proof alcohol in my stomach and spread a supernova warmth throughout my body.

I saw the expression on Match's face shift as the Empress realized what I had done. *«A bold move, Coyote. A desperate gamble, but one I respect This is a draw—I will take my booty and leave now»*



sensed her desire to flee and felt her starting to shift, but I shook my head. I did not want her to leave, so I imposed my will on the dimension. I knew a synthesizer

had to be close enough to a builder to let me armor this dimension, so I imagined it closing up in an armored ball, trapping her inside.

A new sun, a black sun, appeared in the sky eclipsing the original sun. Darkness leaked from the new sun in a jet corona and flooded the sky vault with blackness like ink spreading through water. The temperature dropped 60 degrees in a heartbeat, but my internal fire kept me more than warm. A cold wind sprang up at my back and frost appeared on the diamond Natch held.

"You cannot!" she protested.

"I have." I stared at Match's body, and in an instant I was beyond her being. My vision took me on in through her eyes and along her optic nerve. When I reached her brain, I pushed on farther still, narrowing my focus and running deeper than just the cellular level. I entered her cells and compressed myself until mitochondria passed through the protoplasm like dirigibles, and then farther until her DMA went from a tangled skein to a system of all the world's roads all woven together.

I duplicated myself a million billion times and spread through her like an infection. I moved through her faster than a shower of neutrinos and did even less damage than they might, always hunting. I was doing what Fiddleback had always demanded of me, searching out my elusive quarry in the most unexpected of places.

I found her, the Empress, huddled deep in cells scattered throughout Match's body. I concentrated and gathered my forces to surround the Empress' fragments, then I drove them before me. I could taste her fear as well, but I did not drink it in. I wanted nothing to taint me or distract me from my duty at hand.

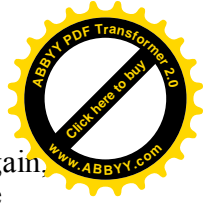
The Empress, like Fiddleback, felt more comfortable with indirect manipulation than direct confrontation. While she might have had the power to destroy me, she fled from

me, hoping to elude me through subterfuge, not realizing that she left a trail I could follow no matter how she tried to disguise it. She stank of death and, in that, I knew I had to pursue her because she was truly mine.

In her last-ditch attempt to escape me, she dove into the diamond Natch held. I shot past her and returned to my own body, reading her intention to form a warrior from diamonds akin to the obsidian one Pygmalion had created. Her plan formulated, she hesitated for just a second as she considered how she would salvage such a creature from her diamond mountain, and in that second I had her.

I snatched the diamond from Hatch's hand and held it up, locking my left hand around it tightly. I glanced at the gem to see if she took on any image in there, but I saw nothing. Without regret or a second thought, I snapped my fist closed and consigned her to oblivion.

Opening my fist, I let the diamond gravel spill to the ground. I searched it for any sign of her, but all I felt was her death. I pulled that into me and let it warm me for a moment. I had succeeded. I had destroyed her. I had become a Dark Lord, accepting a Dark Lord's power, but I had avoided its corruption. I had killed the Empress of Diamonds, and I knew I had ended the most grave threat to Earth that had ever existed.



I could hear my friends cheering around me, but something drew my attention back to Natch. Once again, I injected myself into her and shrank down until the double-helix of her DNA hung above me like the Milky Way in a clear, dark sky. I marveled at its stunning simplicity and how, with only four base pairs strung together in long chains, it was a blueprint for anything and everything Natch had been or would ever become.

I moved my consciousness along, swirling my way along the chromosome. Molecules of adenine linked with thymine and guanine with cytosine, unending, eternal, yet

in patterns that actually meant something. I realized as I sailed along, I was racing down the length of Chromosome 11, and I knew that it contained genes so vital for life function that without them, no creature could survive. At that point, I found myself slowing, almost unconsciously, and extending above and below me I saw the 1720 base pairs that made up the gene that produced beta-globulin—one of the four proteins that makes up hemoglobin and allows red blood cells to carry oxygen from the lungs to the body's cells.

As I studied it, I knew how important it was. I knew that adjustments to it, breaks in its code, if spread throughout the body, would prove fatal. I realized that, if I reached in and changed a thymine-adenine pair for the cytosine-guanine pair right there, I would have this cell halfway toward producing hemoglobin-M. And if I did it in the same spot on Match's other copy of Chromosome 11, the cell would produce that defective form of beta-globulin, as would all its descendants.

And if I did it in all the cells of her body, instantly she would suffer from *black mouth* and she would die. Or if I only did it in her ova, then did the same to Bat or any other suitor she took, the child would be born with *black mouth* and would die. She would mourn the child and try to create another to take its place, and death would claim it as well.

I realized that I wanted to make that substitution.

I realized much more.

Thus it begins, Fiddleback had told me as he died. He had not regretted his passing and had met it with a smug satisfaction that chilled me. He had long vowed that he would not repeat his mistake with Pygmalion in me, and he had blocked me from ever being able to accept the powers of a Dark Lord unless he approved. At the end, with that statement, he had.

I knew then why he had acquiesced and why I had been

able to prevent the Empress of Diamonds from fleeing this proto-dimension. I was not a synthesizer nor builder. The proto-dimension had lost the Dark Lord that had defined it and shaped it. He had died here, killing the proto-dimension and giving it the same aspect that Fiddleback had given me.

Death.

Fiddleback had decided never to be tricked and betrayed again. He had fashioned me as an assassin to actively pursue his enemies, but he had also fused into me something more sinister. He gave me an aspect that hungered for the death of others. I drew my strength from it; I was drawn to it and to causing it. Because death was inescapable and came to all things, there was nothing in reality that did not make me stronger.



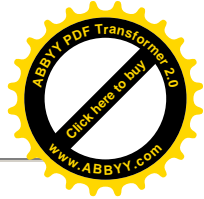
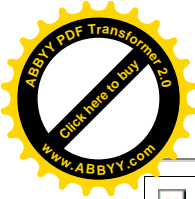
Once I accepted my powers and started to draw my sustenance from death, my course of action was preordained. It would be my place to cause death and luxuriate in it. I would destroy Fiddleback's enemies because their deaths would be strong and make me much more powerful. One after another, I would visit dimensions and leave them drained husks, devoid of life.

I would continue to do that until there was nothing left for me to kill, then I would cannibalize myself. Fiddleback, my creator and master, would have his final triumph— even over me, the person who had caused his death.

Without having done anything to Natch, I returned to my body. A thought plundered from Crowley trickled through my consciousness. «*IfCoyotecanreadmymind...*»

"I can't, Crowley, I can't," I lied as I turned toward him and the headshot from the pistol I had given him.

 Dark Conspiracy 3-37.jpg



 Dark Conspiracy 3-38.jpg

Jytte Ravel opened her eyes when Crowley let her hand slip from his grasp. She found herself in a deep valley on a red planet. Huge red stone walls towered above her, giving her a glimpse of a star-speckled river of darkness above. She felt neither warm nor cold, but found the place as arid as the Arizona desert in high summer.

She had been the last person to be brought to the site, but the others hung back. Mickey, tall and strong as ever, cradled a chubby, black-haired toddler in his arms. An old Native American, the child's grandfather moved his lips as if murmuring softly to the child. A couple of steps away, Ryuhito watched Mickey carefully, and between them stood a small, wizened man wearing the scarlet robes of a Tibetan monk. Though she could see them, and knew they could see her, they remained distant and separate as if in another dimension altogether.

"I thought you might want to see them off," Crowley said, nodding toward the other people, "and to see this."

The shadow man moved aside, and Jytte saw words had been carved deep into the red rock. "Tycho Caine," she read aloud, "Born to be immortal, he died embracing his humanity." She smiled and nodded to Crowley. "He would have liked that, a lot."

"I hope so. He made a tough choice."

"As did Coyote before him."

"True, quite true." Crowley turned and looked at the other five individuals in the valley. "With the training they will get in Kanggenpo, each of them will learn what he needs to know to someday become Coyote and make those difficult decisions."

He raised his hand and waved at them. They mirrored his motions, with Mickey helping Will's son Richard wave good-bye. Jytte waved back, feeling a lump rise in her throat as the monk led them off down the canyon and on up into air on an invisible walkway. As they moved away from her, color leached out of their images, and before long they were lost to sight against the starry night sky.

Jytte tucked a strand of blond hair behind her right ear. "Will they be able to learn enough in enough time to face off a threat from another Dark Lord?"

"Will's son, most likely yes. He will have the best chance, growing up in Kanggenpo and learning all that Lama Mong has to offer. Likewise, Mickey is young enough intellectually to benefit greatly from what the monastery has to offer." Crowley shrugged slightly. "Ryuhito might be another matter, but he has a good grounding and is willing to work hard. I think he was humbled by his performance as Pygmalion's minion, and he feels a great obligation to Will's son because of having been the reason the boy's father died."

She nodded, analyzing every word and finding that it tallied with her assessment of the situation. "What did his grandfather say when you told him that Ryuhito would not be coming back?"



Crowley scratched at his throat with his right hand, and the gold ring glinted as he did so. "The emperor was not pleased, because he does love his grandson, but he is happy the youth is neither dead nor the author of irrepa-

nable mayhem. To make amends, he is urging a number of the *zaibatsu* to invest in plants on the reservation east of Phoenix and in joint ventures with Lorica to provide jobs for the survivors of the battle for Turquoise."

"Good." Jytte folded her arms and tried to suppress the shiver working up her spine. "Do you think there is enough time for any of these plans to come to fruition? Sinclair and Rajani have decided to marry and adopt Mickey's sister, despite knowing the truth about the world. Nero Loring has resumed his leadership of Lorica, and his daughter is being brought along to replace him."

"I know, I know, and Bat has resumed his career as a pit fighter, Natch still lurks in Eclipse and Hal has thrown himself into the Sunburst Foundation." The shadow man nodded his head. "I think there's time. I hope so. As it is, the Dark Lords and Ladies are in something of an uproar right now. Four of their number died in battling related to Earth. As they don't know the details, they only know that where Dark Lords had been before there are now none. There are some major battles going on right now to snap up what is left of the Empress' domain and Fiddleback's holdings."

"On top of that, the remaining Dark Lords know all of the deceased were connected to and in opposition to Coyote, and they know Coyote is human, and that has them worried."

"How long before they figure out there is no Coyote?"

Crowley reached over and flicked some red dust from the first letter of Tycho Caine's name. "That's the key, isn't it? We need a Coyote to be out doing the things that Coyote does. As long as the Dark Lords think Coyote could kill them, they will be circumspect and tentative. They will not be as decisive as they might be, and their fellows will be poised to snap up their territory at the first sign of trouble."

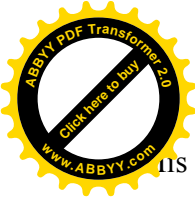
Jytte wet her lips with the tip of her tongue. "So, are you going to accept the job? By your own admission, it will be a time before even Ryuhito is ready to become Coyote."

Crowley sounded surprised by her question. "Me? Coyote? Mo, I don't think so. I already run under too many other names, and am known by creatures out there as an annoyance. They could never think I was Coyote."

"But you managed to kill Caine, and he was a Dark Lord at that point." Jytte watched him closely. "Until then, only a Dark Lord had been able to kill a Dark Lord. Is that what you are, Mr. Crowley, a Dark Lord?"

The living silhouette shook his head. "Mo, I'm no Dark Lord. I pulled the trigger on Coyote's Wildey Wolf, but I did not kill him. He could read my thoughts and he knew what I was going to do before I did it. He knew his aspect was death, and he decided to give himself up to it before he took us with him. A Dark Lord killed a Dark Lord in that death, as well."

"Mor am I Coyote material, Jytte. Mot at all." The occultist looked from the grave to her. "But you are."



his suggestion sent a jolt of self-doubt through her. "Me, Coyote? I could never..."

"Nonsense, Jytte. When Coyote went down, you took over the group and ran it. His predecessor had enough trust in your abilities to make you the only person in whom he confided concerning his plan to bring Caine into the fold." Crowley rested his hands on her shoulders. "When we returned from Pygmalion's dimension, you immediately went to work helping Lilith and Mero use the Lorica Citadel's computers to locate the last of the bombs placed by Darius MacNeal's men. You constantly pay forward the debt you owe to Coyote."

A million conflicting emotions and thoughts raced through her mind. She saw her life paraded before her mind's eye in a series of slides that had been shuffled

repeatedly. Scenes from her early days with Coyote predominated, showing his kind face and bringing with it a soundtrack filled with warm praise for her efforts. A few images from the times before Pygmalion took her and from during his work on her surfaced, but she fled past them. Finally, things melded together into the picture of the black silicate statue of her that Pygmalion had created and of her bullet shattering it.

I am not that helpless child, I am Jytte. She hesitated for a second, then nodded to herself. *I can be Coyote.*

"It won't be easy, you know." Crowley slipped his left arm over her shoulders. "You will have to learn how to walk through dimensions and a number of other tricks."

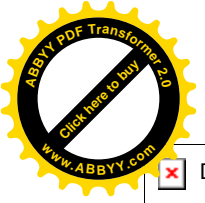
She arched an eyebrow at him. "Can't I just go to the monastery and learn with the rest?"

Crowley laughed. "Fraid not, Jytte. No women are allowed there. Still, I can instruct you in the disciplines you'll want to master. After that, well..."

"You'll still be willing to help out?" She looked at him expectantly. "You know, from time to time, as needed."

"It would be my pleasure, Ms. Ravel." The shadow man nodded solemnly.

"No need to be so formal, Damon. Jytte smiled and slipped her right hand through the crook of his left arm. "Why don't you just call me...Coyote?"



Dark Conspiracy 3-39.jpg