

The Haunted Earth -- Dean R. Koontz

(Version 2002.06.30)

Dedication:

A crazy story for Crazy Tillie Teeshirt

PART ONE: THE ALIEN GRAVEYARD

Chapter One

Count Slavek, having proposed a toast to his new friend's great beauty, tossed off the glassful of red wine. Then, smiling so broadly that he revealed his two gleaming fangs, he said, "Before long, my dear, we shall drink other toasts together, though not of wine."

Mrs. Renee Cuyler, dressed alluringly in a thigh-high skirt and a blouse slashed almost to her navel, smiled at the Count's thinly veiled promise of inhuman ecstasy and sipped her wine, which she, more decorously, had not swallowed in one thirsty gulp.

The Count put his glass down and walked to her, his cape flowing out behind like dark wings. He touched her lightly along her slim neck. A small sigh (from both of them) punctuated the caress.

"Pure Hokum," Jessie Blake whispered.

He had to whisper, for he was sitting in the closet, watching the Count and Mrs. Cuyler through a fisheye lens which he had installed in the door some hours earlier. Neither the Count nor Mrs. Cuyler knew he was in there, and they would both be acutely disturbed when they learned that he was watching. The important thing was not to let them know they were observed until the crucial, incriminating moment had arrived. So Jessie whispered to himself.

He had bribed the hotel desk clerk into admitting him to the expensive Blue Suite three hours before either Count Slavek or Renee Cuyler arrived for their none-too-private assignation. He had chosen, as his observation post, a stool in the only closet which looked out on the main drawing room of the suite. Though he knew events would rapidly progress to the bedroom, he suspected that Count Slavek, in his excitement, would choose to chew on Renee Cuyler's neck right here, in the drawing room, before moving to other stimulating but decidedly more mundane, sensual activities. Vampires were notoriously overeager, especially when, as in the Count's case, they had not made a convert in some weeks.

Mrs. Cuyler put down her own wine as the Count's hand pressed more insistently at her neck.

"Now?" she asked.

"Yes," he responded, throatily.

Jessie Blake, private investigator, got off his stool and put his hand on the inside knob of the closet door. Still bent over to peer through the tiny fisheye lens, he made ready to confront the Count the moment that toothy son of a bitch made a single legal error.

The Count gazed into Renee Cuyler's eyes in a manner intended to convey more than mortal longing.

To Jessie, who was getting a crick in his back, Slavek looked more as if he had suddenly gotten stomach cramps.

The woman hooked her fingers in the lapels of her already daring blouse and opened it wider, giving the Count a better approach to her jugular and incidentally revealing two full, round, brown-nippled breasts.

"You look ravishing," the Count said.

"Then ravish me," Mrs. Cuyler breathed.

What tripe! Jessie thought. At this crucial moment, he couldn't even risk a whisper.

"Of course," the Count said apologetically, "there are certain formalities we must perform, certain..."

"I understand," the woman said.

His voice losing none of its slick, warm charm, the Count said, "I am obligated, by the Kolchak-Bliss Decision of the United Nations Supreme Court for International Law, to inform you both of your rights and of your alternatives."

"I understand."

The Count licked his lips. In a sensually guttural voice, clearly too excited to take much more time with the legal formalities, he said, "At this time, you need not submit to the consummation of our pending relationship, and you may either leave or request the services of a licensed advisor on spiritual matters."

"I understand," she said. She pulled her blouse open even wider, giving the Count a good view of the normal pleasures that awaited him once the greater joy of the bite had passed.

"Do you wish to leave?" he asked.

"No."

"Do you wish the services of a spiritual counselor?"

"No, darling," she said.

For a moment, the Count seemed to have forgotten what came next in the litany engendered by the Kolchak-Bliss Decision, but then he went on, speaking quickly and softly so as not to break the mood: "Do you understand the nature of the proposal I've made?"

"Yes."

"Do you understand that I wish to initiate you into the World of the undead?" the Count asked.

"I do."

"Do you understand that your new life of damnation is eternal?"

"Yes, darling, yes," she said. "I want you to -- to bite me. Now!"

"Be patient, dearest," Slavek said. "Now, do you realize that there is no return from the life of the undead?"

"I understand, for Christ's sake!" Mrs. Cuyler moaned.

"Don't use that name!" the Count roared.

In the closet, Jessie Blake shook his head, saddened by this spectacle. Maybe he wouldn't even have to interfere, if things kept going like this. Another five minutes of questions-and-answers would bleed away most of the romantic element the Count had spent the early evening hours in building up. U.N. law certainly had made things tough for the likes of Slavek.

"I'm sorry," Renee Cuyler told her would-be lover-master.

The Count composed himself and, still with his fingertips resting on the pulse at her neck, he said, "You understand that my culture encourages a certain male chauvinism which you must accept as intimate terms of our blood contract?"

"Yes," she said.

"And you still wish to continue?"

"Of course!"

Jessie shook his head again. Mr. Cuyler was going to have his hands full restraining this wife of his, even if Blake did pull her out of the fire this time. Obviously, she had a vampire fixation, a need to be dominated and used in a physical as well as a sexual sense.

The Count hesitated on the brink of beginning the second and shorter section of the Kolchak-Bliss litany, the part dealing with the woman's

alternatives, and having hesitated he was lost. He tilted Renee's pretty head, sweeping back her long, dark hair. Baring his fangs in an unholy grin, he went, rather gracelessly, for her jugular.

Delighted that his estimation of Slavek had proven sound, Jessie twisted the doorknob and threw open the closet door, stepping into the drawing room with more than a little flair.

Count Slavek jerked at the noise, whirled away from the woman and, hissing through his pointed teeth like a broken steam valve, back-stepped with his arms out to his sides and his cape drawn up like giant wings ready for flight.

Jessie brandished his credentials and said, "Jessie Blake, private investigator. I'm working for Mr. Roger Cuyler and have been assigned to protect his wife from the influence of certain supernatural persons who have designs upon both her body and soul."

"Designs?" Slavek asked, incredulous.

Jessie turned to the woman. "If you'd be so kind as to close your blouse, Mrs. Cuyler, we can get out of this dump and -- "

"Designs?" Count Slavek insisted, moving forward. "This woman is no innocent victim! She's about the hottest little number I've seen in -- "

"Are you contesting my intervention?" Jessie asked.

He was six feet tall and weighed a hundred and eighty-five pounds, all of it bone and muscle. And though he couldn't harm a supernatural person without resorting to the accepted charms and spells, silver bullets and wooden stakes, he could sure as hell generate a stalemate out of which no one could gain anything.

Still, the Count said, "Of course, I contest! You have somehow secreted yourself in a privately rented hotel suite, against all the laws of individual -- "

"And you," Jessie said, "were in the process of biting a victim to whom you had not recited the entire pertinent information which the Kolchak-Bliss Decision obligates you to state in easily understood language."

Mrs. Cuyler began to cry.

Blake, undaunted, continued: "A mindscan, which you would have to undergo if I lodged this charge with the authorities, would prove my allegations and make you vulnerable to a number of unpleasant punishments."

"Damn you!" Slavek growled.

"No histrionics, please," Blake said.

The Count took a threatening step in the detective's direction. "If I were to make two converts here, then there would be no one to report me, would there? I'm sure Renee would help me to convert you." He grinned, his black eyes adance with light.

Blake removed a crucifix from his jacket and held it in one fist, where, with a human antagonist, he might have carried a fully loaded narcotic pin gun. "I'm not unprepared," he said.

Slavelj appeared to shrivel a bit and looked guiltily away from the crucifix. He said, "I was Jewish before I was a vampire. There's no reason for that device to thwart me."

"Yet it does," Blake said, smiling down at the plastic Christ-on-a-Cross which was in four different shades of glow-brite orange. His pin gun was the best model, an expensive piece of equipment. But he did not believe in toting around a hand-crafted crucifix when any old hunk of junk would do. He said, "Studies have been done which show that you people fear this only on a psychological level. Physically, it has no effect. Yet, because you get your power from the mythos of vampirism, and because the cross plays such a strong part in that mythos, you really would die if you came into contact with this - - if a spirit can be said to die."

As the detective spoke, Slavek began a strange transformation. His cape

appeared to mold closer to his body and to alter, by slow degrees, into a taut brown membrane. The Count's features changed, too, growing darker and less human. Already, he had begun to shrink, his clothes miraculously shrinking with him and dissolving into him as he strove to attain the form of a bat.

"That'll do you no good," Jessie said. "Even if you escape out the window, we know who you are. We can have you subpoenaed in twenty-four hours. Besides, Brutus can trail you wherever you go."

The Count hesitated in his metamorphosis. "Brutus?"

Blake motioned toward the closet where a powerful hound, four and a half feet high at the shoulders, strode out of the closet. Its head was massive, its snout long and crammed with sharp teeth. Its eyes were an unsettling shade of red with tiny, black pupils.

"A hell hound?" Slavek asked.

"Of course," Brutus said.

Mrs. Cuyler seemed shocked to hear a deep, masculine voice coming from the beast, but neither Count Slavek nor Jessie found it odd.

"Brutus can follow you into any little nether-world cul-de-sac you may intend to flee to," Blake said.

The Count nodded reluctantly and reversed his transformation, became more human again. "You work together, man and spirit?"

"Quite effectively," Brutus said.

He held his burly head low between his shoulders, as if he were prepared to leap after the Count if he should make the slightest move to escape.

"An unbeatable combination," Slavek said, admiringly. He sighed and walked to the sofa, sat down, crossed his legs, folded his pale hands in his lap, and said, "What do you want of me?"

"You've got to hear my client's ultimatum, and then you can leave."

"I'm listening," Slavek said.

He had begun to buff his nails on the hem of his cape.

Mrs. Cuyler, bewildered, still stood in the center of the room, crying, her small hands fisted at her sides as if the tears would soon turn to screams of rage.

Jessie said, "You've been caught in an illegally executed bite, and you will remain susceptible to prosecution for seven years. Unless you want Mr. Roger Cuyler -- my client and this lady's husband -- to initiate that prosecution, you will henceforth have nothing whatsoever to do with Mrs. Cuyler. You will neither contact her in person, by telephone, by viewphone or by messenger. Neither will you employ supernatural methods of communication where this lady is concerned."

Slavek looked longingly at the leggy young woman and finally nodded. "I accept these conditions, naturally."

"Be off, then," Jessie said.

At the door of the suite, Slavek turned back to them and said, "I think it was much better when we kept to ourselves, when you people didn't even know, for sure, that we existed."

"Progress," Blake said, with a shrug.

"I mean," Slavek said, "there's much less risk of a stake through the heart nowadays -- now that we understand each other -- but the romanticism is gone. Blake, they've taken away the thrill!"

"Take it up with city hall," Brutus said. He wasn't in the best of moods today.

"It's seven years now since my land of people entered real commerce with your kind -- and things get worse every day. I don't think we'll ever like it the way it is now." Slavek had taken on the brooding tone that so many middle-European bloodsuckers adopted when in a musing mood.

"The maseni have learned to live with their supernatural brothers -- and vice versa," Blake reminded Slavek.

"But they're different," the Count insisted. "They're alien to begin with. It was a natural thing for them to establish contact with their supernatural world. But they forced this on Earth; it isn't a natural condition here."

"I hope not," Blake said. "If relations between the flesh and the spirit worlds, here on Earth, become as easy as they are on the maseni home world, I'll be out of a job."

"You exploit other people's problems," Slavek said.

"Solve other people's problems," Blake corrected.

Grimacing to express his distaste, Count Slavek left the suite in a swirl of black cloth.

At the same moment, Renee Cuyler's tears changed abruptly into anger, as he had expected they would. The woman ran at him, screaming, clawing with her well-manicured nails, kicking, biting, slapping.

Jessie pushed her away and, when he could not settle her with words, settled her with three narcotics pins in the abdomen. She slumped down on the thick carpet and went to sleep. She snored.

"Jesus, what a bore!" Brutus growled. He had no compunctions about using the Lord's name, in vain or otherwise, though Blake had never heard him use it otherwise. He padded to the sofa, jumped onto it, curled up with his big, hairy paws hanging over the edge of the cushions. "It's one infidelity case after another, these days," he complained.

"Boring but safe," Blake said. He went to the vid-phone, punched out the number of their office and waited for Helena to answer it.

"Hell Hound Investigations," she said, almost five minutes later.

"You're a poor excuse for a secretary," Blake said. She blinked her long-lashed, blue eyes, pushed a strand of honey yellow hair away from her face. "Yeah, but I'm stacked," she said.

He could see her swelling bosom in the vidphone screen, and he could not argue with her. He said, "Okay," and he sat down, a bit overwhelmed by mammary memories. "We've got Renee Cuyler safe and sound. I want you to call her husband and send him over here." He gave her the address of the hotel, and the suite number.

"Congratulations," she said, smiling. She had ripe lips and very white teeth. She should have made commercials for unnatural sex acts, Blake thought. "Oh," she said, "you've received four calls this morning from a potential client."

"Who?"

"Galiotor Fils," she said.

"A maseni?"

"With that name, what else?" she asked.

"What's he want?"

"He'll only talk to you."

Blake thought amoment. "I'll be back in the office in an hour and a half, if you get to Roger Cuyler right away. If this Galiotor Fils can be there, I'll talk to him."

"Right, chief," she said.

He winced and didn't have a chance to reply before she snapped off, her perfect face and better bosom fading from the screen.

"Looks like you got your wish -- for something interesting to happen," Blake told the hell hound.

Brutus climbed off the couch and shook his head, his ears slapping against his skull, and he said, "Did I hear right? A maseni for a customer?"

"You heard right."

The hound said, "That's a first. What problem could a maseni have that his own people couldn't solve, that he'd need a human detective for?"

"We'll know in an hour or so," Blake said. "Let's get our equipment out

of the closet and ready to go, before Mr. Cuyler gets here to collect his wife."

## Chapter Two

With a six-inch tentacle as thick as a pencil, which passed for his forefinger, the maseni tapped the glass front of Blake's battery calendar. He looked hard at the detective, his deep-set yellow eyes intense, his lipless mouth expressing obvious disapproval, and he said, "Your calendar ran down three days ago, sir. The date is not October 3, 2000, but October 6, 2000."

"Only four days short of the tenth anniversary of the initial maseni landing on Earth," Blake said, leaning back in his shape-changing chair and staring across the desk at the alien.

Galiotor Fils blinked, surprised. "True enough, sir. But I fail to see what that has to do with your inefficiency."

"And I fail to see what my calendar has to do with your visit to my office, Mr. Galiotor." Watching the alien, Blake could almost understand why the right-wing Pure Earthers were so rabidly anti-maseni. Galiot or Fils was not the most pleasant sight: nearly seven feet tall, as were most of his kind, dressed in amber robes that matched the color of his eyes, he looked like something made of wax drippings -- yellow skin with a glistening look to it, lumpy and yet graceful, with a ballooning forehead, those deep-set yellow eyes, the squashed nose, the lipless slash of a mouth, hands composed of those thin tentacles instead of fingers...

Galiotor Fils said, "If you're inefficient in your daily office routine, perhaps your work as an investigator would be equally sloppy."

"Did you just choose my name from the phone book, or did I come recommended?" Blake asked.

"Oh," Galiotor said, "you came recommended, sir. Highly recommended." He nodded his bulbous head, as if agreeing with what he said, but the effect was that of a puppet being jerked on strings.

"Then I suggest we get on with the business at hand. If you will just tell us your situation, what you would like us to do for you, we can -- "

The maseni interrupted. "Excuse me, but must this animal remain in the room, sir?" He pointed an undulating tentacle-finger at Brutus, who had curled up on the only other easy chair in the room, only a half dozen feet from Galiotor Fils, himself.

"Him?" Blake asked. "Of course he has to stay. He's my partner in Hell Hound Investigations. In fact, it's from him we get our name."

"This is an intelligent creature?" the maseni asked.

"How would you like a couple dozen canine incisors in your ass?" Brutus inquired of the alien, his voice like gravel sliding down a sheet of tin.

Galiotor Fils shifted uneasily in his seat. "I see," he said. "One of your supernatural brethren."

"Exactly," Blake said.

"Your myths contain some very strange creatures," Galiotor Fils said. "Of all the races we've met, of all those we've introduced to their supernatural world-mates, I don't think I've ever seen a collection so colorful -- "

"You're pretty colorful yourself," Brutus said. He had raised his big head from his paws. "In fact, you're downright disgusting."

The maseni made a throat clearing sound like a cat wailing in hunger. "Yes," he said, "I suppose it's all a matter of perspective."

Brutus lowered his head to his paws again.

Jessie, aware that the maseni was still uneasy about Brutus, decided that a reassuring little speech, now, would save them time later. Until he was

put at ease, Galiotor Fils was going to be a difficult client. A difficult potential client. At the moment, Jessie didn't think they would take the case; both he and Brutus were well-off enough to be choosy, and they were both in need of something to stir the blood, something exciting. Galiotor Fils did not seem to be the type to change their luck. Still, on the off chance that he might be what they were looking for, Jessie decided not to send him away at once but to try to placate him, if possible.

"Mr. Galiotor," he said, "I assure you that you have nothing to fear from my friend, Brutus."

"Nothing," Brutus grumbled.

Jessie said, "Two thousand years ago, Brutus was a man much like myself, a man who had sinned and who, upon death, went straightaway to Hell. There, he was changed into the hound you see before you, and he was given certain duties to perform within the hierarchy of the nether world."

"Interesting duties," Brutus said, grinning widely, almost slavering. Galiotor Fils shifted uneasily in his chair.

"Brutus's duties were so interesting, by his way of thinking, that he chose to continue them even after he had spent enough time in Hell to redeem himself."

"Five hundred years," Brutus said.

"At the end of five hundred years, having served his time, Brutus could have opted for either permanent death or reincarnation. He rejected both and simply remained a hell hound."

Brutus still grinned wickedly. "It was delightful."

"After a second five hundred years, ten centuries after his death, Brutus had forgotten his old persona. He could not recall who he had been when he was a man, or what he had done."

"Just as well," the hound said.

Jessie said, "After fifteen hundred years, he was weary of his duties in Hell, and he began to roam the Earth, seeking the unique and the titillating, anything short of the reincarnation which was his due."

"It'd be a drag to be human again," Brutus said. Galiotor Fils looked from the man to the hound, back and forth, as if watching a tennis match.

Jessie said, "Nine years ago, a year after you people first made contact with Earth, I quit my job as a narcotics agent with Interpol, and I advertised for a supernatural partner to go halves in the establishment of a detective agency. Brutus answered the ad."

"And we've been busy every since," the hound said. He chuckled, deep in his throat. "You people caused more trouble than a thousand detectives can handle."

Galiotor Fils shifted uneasily in his chair, laced his twelve tentacle-fingers together, unlaced them, blinked his amber eyes and said, "I hope you aren't -- well, prejudiced against the maseni race. I am aware that some of you people feel you would have been far better off -- "

"No, no," Blake said. "You misunderstand my colleague's meaning. We are glad you came to Earth; we thrive on the chaos. Ordinary detectives, those who work on cases involving only human beings, make very little money, but those of us specializing in human-alien and human-supernatural cases do well. Quite well."

"I see," the maseni said.

"Not everything, you don't," Jessie said. "Mr. Galiotor, my pleasure with your people's arrival on Earth is not strictly financial in nature. You see, before that time, ten years ago, I was twenty-seven years old and bored to tears with nearly everything: my job with Interpol, food, liquor, books, films, getting up, going to bed... The only things I wasn't bored with were marijuana and women; I smoked the former and balled the latter, and I was an enthusiast of both. However, it was a shallow life. Then the maseni came, and

everything changed. Mind you, life would have been lively with one set of aliens to deal with -- but you brought two, yourselves and your supernatural brothers. And you introduced us to a third set of aliens that had been with us all along, our own supernatural brothers. In the following decade, I have not only earned considerable money, but I have suffered very damn few dull moments."

"Until recently," Brutus added.

"Yes," Blake said. "Until recently. Recently, it seems one case is like the last -- a wife trying to run off with a vampire; a husband ignoring his own wife but taking a contract with a succubus; banshees involved in real-estate swindles, trying to scream down the value of a house or tract of land; A ghoul interested in robbing graves unsanctioned by the government... Both Brutus and I need a change, and we're hoping, quite frankly, you're the one to give it to us."

"Well, it may be nothing, sir," the maseni said.

"Whatever it is," Blake said, "it's obviously unusual. So far as I know you're the first maseni ever to contact a human detective, for aid."

"Most likely," Galiotor Fils agreed. He looked at both man and hound, in turn, while he played six tentacles over his open mouth. At last, he dropped his hand to his lap and said, "I am most distraught, sir. My brood brother has died, and there has not been a proper ceremony."

Blake and Brutus exchanged a glance, and the detective rose from his chair to pace behind his desk. "Brood brother?" he asked. "That would mean another maseni, like yourself, born in the same brood hole on the home world, in the same familial mud as yourself?"

"Even more than that," the maseni said. "In this case, Tesserax was of the same Birthing as I, from the very same egg batch. We were the same age, by a hatching day, and we were close." Fat, yellow tears hung at the corners of the alien's eyes, trembling like liquid jewels, and the corners of his lipless mouth turned down.

"Tesserax? That was his name?"

"Galiotor Tesserax," the maseni said, nodding.

He was barely able to control his grief, but he held back the threatened tears and covered up the sorrow in the line of his mouth by raising a hand and playing six small tentacles there.

"How did he die?" Blake asked.

"I have asked the highest officials in the maseni diplomatic mission," Galiotor Fils said, "but I have been unable to get a good answer. Invariably, they tell me the same thing -- 'of natural causes' -- which is to tell me nothing at all. They commiserate with me in a false manner, saying what they do not feel, saying they knew him well and miss him too, saying they suffered much grief themselves... Lies. I see through that."

"What reason would they have to lie to you?" Jessie asked, pacing yet, not looking at Galiotor Fils, not able to look at him because of those yellow tears trembling on those thick, wiry lashes.

"I believe that they were somehow involved with his death," the alien said, his sorrow slowly turning to anger, the tone of his voice subtly different as he spoke.

"The maseni at the embassy?"

"Yes," Galiotor Fils said. "Tesserax worked there; indeed, he was the deputy chief of the embassy staff, the second-ranking maseni on Earth. He was of high position, respect, dignity, with a great future."

"No history of illness?"

"Nothing worse than an occasional tentacle infection," the maseni said, looking at his own hands. "He was a sexually unrestrained fellow, you see, and he often indulged in spur-of-the-moment -- ah, you'd call it 'petting' without first lubricating his tentacles against infection. Our tentacles, you see, are



by far the most delicate portions of our anatomies."

"How old was Tesseract?" Blake asked, looking at the maseni's twelve little tentacles from the corner of his eye.

"Eighty-six Earth years," Galiotor Fils said. "But since we are much longer-lived than you, I must translate that -- as, say, early middle age."

"Not quite old enough to just drop off," Blake said.

"Hardly," Galiotor Fils said.

Blake said, "But surely the men he worked with at the embassy were the cream of maseni society. Your diplomatic staffs aren't thugs, mugs, thieves or murderers, are they?"

"No, no!" Galiotor Fils said. His yellow face took on the subtle, greenish hue which indicated embarrassment. He was clearly upset that the detective could even suggest such a thing, as if it were not merely a slur on the diplomatic staff, but on the race itself, and on Galiotor Fils as well. "They are gentlemen of the first mud, I assure you, all intensively tested for psychological abnormalities. Their function is a very delicate one, after all: the introduction of maseni civilization, the establishment of trade and philosophical relations with inferior and superior and equal galactic races. They must be of sound mind."

Jessie returned to his desk and gripped the back of his shape-changing chair with both hands; it molded around his fingers. He said, "Then how can you suspect these people of murder?"

"I said I thought they were somehow involved in his murder, but I did not say they performed it."

"Call a spade a spade," Brutus growled.

Galiotor Fils looked at the hound and said, "What?"

"Make yourself clearer," Jessie suggested.

"I think my brood brother died in some unconventional manner, and that the embassy is trying to cover it up." The alien shifted in his chair, too big for it, and said, "Is that better?"

Blake chose not to answer that, but began pacing again. In a few moments, he said, "Thus far, you've given us no reason to believe the people at your embassy were lying to you. Certainly, you choose not to believe that he died of natural causes, but that seems to be only opinion. Mr. Galiotor, when one loses a loved one, grief sometimes makes the acceptance of reality too hard to bear, and fantasies of paranoid -- "

"There are a number of reasons why I suspect that I am not being told the truth about Tesseract's death," the maseni said, a bit angry.

"Name one," Brutus said.

"I am stationed on Earth for the purpose of sociological research, along with several hundred colleagues. A group of your scientists have been taken to our home world, in exchange for the privilege of unrestricted study here on Earth. Tesseract and I saw each other frequently. Everyone at the Los Angeles embassy knew I was here, who I was, how much I loved Tesseract. Yet, when he died, I was not notified until he was three weeks in the grave!"

"Bureaucratic red tape, paper errors, fumbling in high office," Blake said, by way of explanation.

"That's an institution peculiar to your own race," Galiotor Fils said. "We haven't 'red tape' in our own government."

"An honest oversight, then."

"I can't believe that all fifty of Tesseract's associates at the Los Angeles embassy could forget me. One, yes, or even a dozen. But certainly not all of them, sir."

"What else?" Brutus asked.

"Every time I try to make an appointment with the embassy doctor, who was supposed to have treated Tesseract, I get put off. He's always busy with patients or away or in surgery or something." Galiotor Fils wiped at his huge

eyes with both hands, tentacles wriggling, as if pulling off his weariness. "I attempted to learn something from the maseni supernaturals who come and go at the embassy, but I lost out there as well. They fed me the same line as the embassy officials, as if they'd studied the same script."

Jessie pulled out his shape-changing chair and sat down behind the desk again, waited until the chair stopped gurgling and was fitted firmly to him, then said, "You think that the maseni and the maseni supernaturals at the embassy are cooperating to hide something about your brood brother's death?"

"Yes. I know how strange that sounds. Though spirits can learn to live harmoniously with creatures of flesh and blood, and vice versa, they rarely present such a monolithic front on any particular topic."

"Interesting," Jessie said. "Conspiracy of a sort between the real and the spirit world."

"One thing," Brutus growled.

Galiotor Fils looked at the hound. "Yes?"

"I don't know much about maseni mythology," Brutus said. "When one of you dies, what happens to the 'soul'?"

"Any of a dozen different things," Galiotor Fils said. "Tesseract might have become a ghost, much like the sort that you people believe in. Or he might have been changed into a Great Tree, assigned to suffer the tortures of the sentient inanimate before recycling -- ah, this gets difficult to explain in terms you people would understand."

"It doesn't matter just now," Jessie said. "In short, Tesseract would have returned in some form, and you would have known about it."

"Exactly," the alien said. "Immediately upon learning of his death, I paid to have a constant call on the netherworld communications network, so that he would come to me first thing. He hasn't answered it. He would, if he could. Therefore -- "

"Perhaps he isn't dead," Jessie suggested.

"In my central heart, I hope that this is true," Galiotor Fils said, placing a hand across his abdomen to indicate the seat of his emotions. "However, I also fear that something even worse than death has happened to him."

"Like what?" Brutus asked.

The alien stood, suddenly, towering almost to the ceiling, unfolding out of the easy chair like a paper accordion coming to full length. He leaned over Blake's desk, his palms flat on the blotter, his twelve tentacles wriggling madly, and he said, "I am afraid, Mr. Blake, that Tesseract was buried without the proper ceremony, and that his soul -- his soul has been dissipated."

The last few words came out in a strangled gasp. Everyone was silent in the wake of this display, until Galiotor Fils could recover. His face had blanched, and his whole body had locked into a twisted, rigid stance.

At last, the alien said, "Forgive me for getting so emotional."

"That's okay," Blake said, not able to meet the creature's gaze. "Can you go on? Can you explain just what you meant -- when you said that Tesseract's soul may have been dissipated?"

Galiotor Fils grimaced, a horrible sight on that nearly featureless, yellow face. "Yes, of course. You see... Maseni mythology holds that, unless certain burial procedures are observed, the soul of the departed will simply disintegrate. He will never return in another form, will have no spiritual life. He will be, plainly, dead. Because this has long been a maseni belief, millennia old, it has come to be fact. As you know, the supernatural is at the mercy of human creation, just as humanity is at the mercy of the spirits' creations. It is a closed circle. God created us, yet we created God, sort of like your riddle: Which came first, the chicken or the egg?"

"Theoretically," Brutus said, "you've brought us to another impasse."

Galiotor Fils looked down at the hound and said, "How so?"

"You told us your embassy people weren't killers. Yet, if they purposefully denied Tesseract a proper burial ceremony, they killed his soul, if not his physical being."

The maseni sat down again, compressing himself into the seat that was too small for him, arranging his yellow robes, brushing at his face with both hands. "I've considered this obvious contradiction, before coming here."

"And you can explain it?" Jessie asked.

Galiotor Fils leaned away from the back of the chair. "The only reason for disposing of Tesseract, both physically and spiritually, would be to keep him from making public some secret which my government finds dangerous. By letting his soul dissipate, they silence him even after death, when he might normally have come back to expose them. If he held a secret of proper magnitude, perhaps the embassy people could be lead into such a heinous crime."

"Earlier, you said they were specially tested for psychological defects. Wouldn't the ability to kill be a defect?" Jessie asked.

Galiotor Fils looked down at the floor and did not speak for a long time. When he did finally have something to say, it came in a small voice, a child's voice, soft and distant: "I don't know what to think, anymore."

Brutus said, "Where is your brood brother buried?"

Galiotor looked up. "The maseni cemetery, outside of Los Angeles. Why do you ask?"

"It may be necessary to go there, during the course of the investigation," Brutus said.

"Then you'll take the case?"

"We'll take it," Jessie said.

The alien stood again, energized by elation, this time, and he said, "How can I express my gratitude?"

"Give us a fat retainer fee," Brutus said.

"Yeah," Jessie said. "That'll be a start, anyway."

### Chapter Three

Helena was nude when she reached out and answered the vidphone, her large breasts grazing the video pickup scanner for a brief moment before she leaned back. She glanced at the stunned face in the screen and, before the caller could recover, she handed the receiver to Jessie. "It's for you," she said. "Myer Hanlon's returning the call you placed to his robosecretary."

Jessie scrambled off the unmade day bed and slid into the shape-changing chair behind his desk. He was nude, too, and he shivered as the cool plastic nuzzled around, him. "It's after midnight, Myer. When I called your mechanical Girl Friday, I didn't think you'd get my message so soon."

Myer swallowed hard and said, "Since I've changed over from straight sleuthing to these supernatural cases, I've had to take on night hours, like you. So many of the people you deal with, in these things, only come out at night." He hesitated, craned his neck as if trying to see beyond Jessie, and he said, "Say, Jess..."

"Yeah?"

"Was that Helena?"

"It was."

"You know, I've only ever seen Helena over the phone -- and then only her face. I mean, I didn't know she was so... so... so..."

"Dynamite," Jessie said.

"Exactly!" Myer beamed. "Is she -- married?"

"She doesn't believe in marriage," Jessie said.

"Wonderful! Do you know if she's doing anything Friday?"

"Myer, you ought to know that Helena is an unabashed sexist. She can't seem to establish a normal relationship with a man, because she thinks of us as sex objects and nothing more."

"Great, great!" Myer said. "About Friday now -- "

Behind Jessie, Brutus howled long and low, and Helena cried out in what sounded like pleasure.

"Brutus, for God's sake, control yourself while I'm on the phone, would you?" Jessie asked.

Myer looked shocked. "You mean the three of you... That she lets Brutus... I mean, that she..."

"Like many modern women," Jessie patiently explained, "Helena has catholic tastes. She goes for flesh-and-blood lovers and for a few supernatural ones as well."

"But Brutus!" Myer said.

"Myer, let's get back to business," Jessie said, scratching his bare, hairless chest. "You got something for me?"

Hanlon looked at some notes on his desk top. "Not much," he said. Clearly, his mind was still on Helena.

"Tell me anyway."

"Well, you wanted to know if anyone had come to me about a missing maseni diplomat named Galiotor Tesseract, and you said you'd pay for the information. That right?"

"Twenty credits," Jessie said.

"I was thinking more like forty," Myer said.

"Go ahead and think forty. It's not worth more than twenty. Should I credit your accounts with twenty, then?"

Myer hesitated only a second. "Okay."

Jessie lifted the lid on the computerized banking keyboard set in the top of his desk, and he typed out Myer's name. "What's your account number?"

"It's 88-88-34-34567," Myer said.

Jessie typed that out next, then punched twenty credits worth of buying power to Hanlon's account, closed the lid and looked back at the vidphone screen. "Now, what have you got?"

"Well," Hanlon said, "nobody's been to me about this Tesseract fellow. However, I have been approached by a maseni named Pelinorie Kones and asked to locate his brood sister, Pelinorie Mesa. So it looks like there's more, than one missing diplomat."

"This missing woman -- she was in the L.A embassy, too?"

"Yes," Myer said. He was a short, heavy-set man who usually perspired quite a bit. Now, sitting there thinking of Helena, he was running with sweat, and he was steaming up his video pickup.

"How have you come on the case?"

"Less than nowhere," Hanlon said. "Every potential source of information clams up when I approach them. I've been threatened twice, and told to give up on the case or else."

"Are you giving up?"

"The threats were pretty detailed -- and awful," Hanlon said.

"Then you have given up."

"Let's just say I'm not putting my heart into it, anymore."

"When did this Pelinorie come to you?"

"A week ago," Myer said.

"And his sister had just disappeared?"

"A week before that, two weeks ago."

"Anything else for me, Myer?"

"Not that I can think of. Look, Jess, are you working on something similar to this Pelinorie thing?"

"Would you really like to know?" Jessie asked.

"Credit my account with forty units, and I'll tell you exactly what I've got going."

Myer scowled. "I don't want to know that much, but thanks just the same. But, Jess -- ?"

"What is it, Myer?"

"Would you ask Helena about Friday?"

"Speak for yourself, John."

Hanlon scowled again, the lines in his cheeks deeper, his lips pursed in a bow. "John?" he asked. "Who's John?"

"Never mind, Myer. I only meant you will have to speak to Helena herself. She's a very tough number, and she doesn't like oblique approaches."

"Maybe I'll call her tomorrow," Myer said. Jessie nodded and hung up.

When he turned around in his chair, he found Helena lying in the middle of the bed, a broad smile on her face, her hair in complete disarray. Brutus was curled up in one of the easy chairs, his big head on his paws. "I think we have a lead," Jessie told the hound. He explained what Hanlon had said. "If it were a single case of foul play, an isolated incident, it'd be hard to crack. But if other maseni, besides Tesserax, have disappeared, there's more of a chance of a leak in the embassy security."

"The bigger a secret, the harder it is to keep it a secret," Brutus agreed, snuffling like a horse to clear his black nostrils of a white mist which rose over him and hung in the air like thick smoke. "Excess ectoplasm," he explained.

Helena sat up in bed and said, "Speaking of excess ectoplasm, I want you to trim those claws."

Brutus examined his claws with his fierce, red eyes, and he said, "I need them."

"No, you don't, either," Helena said. "You can grow them or shrink them at will, so don't try to hand me a line like that. You're basically a sadist, Brutus. But I'm no masochist."

Brutus grinned broadly. "Well, now, I think I would disagree with that. I think you've got a little bit of -- "

"It's 1:30 in the morning," Jessie interrupted. "If we get moving, we can squeeze in a few hours work before quitting time."

"I think this is a case we can work on even after dawn," the hound said. "There's a strong flesh-and-blood element involved here, as well as a supernatural one."

"You're right," Jessie said.

"We going to see this Pelinorie Kones?" the hound asked.

"I think that'd be a dead end," the detective said. "We'd just be taking on another client."

"Well," Helena said, "if you aren't going to start out right now, you've got time for a little bit of day-bed exercise, haven't you?" She was grinning more wickedly than Brutus ever could.

"I suppose I do," Jessie said.

"I'll watch," the hell hound growled.

"Damn straight you will," Helena said. "At least until you do something about those claws."

## Chapter Four

When Jessie and Brutus arrived at the Four Worlds Cafe shortly before three o'clock in the morning, a group of Pure Earthers was holding a protest march in the street. There wasn't anything unusual in that: Pure Earthers were always holding some sort of demonstration in or around the Four Worlds. They were as much a part of the cafe as its maseni home world rainbow-stone front

and the four big palm trees that grew on its flat roof. Here, the flesh-and-blood and the supernatural creatures of two different planets met to imbibe, talk, and make contacts of all sorts. In all of L.A. no place rivalled the mixture of types that patronized the Four Worlds: maseni men and women, human men and women, vampires, werewolves, ghosts, banshees in their quieter moments, golemns, witches, ghouls able to control their more disgusting habits, and a wide variety of maseni supernatural beings. Of course, the crusaders, the fanatics like the Pure Earthers, zeroed in on the Four Worlds like greedy lawyers flocking to a fluttercar accident.

"You aren't going in that place, are you?" someone asked, grabbing Jessie's arm.

He looked down and saw a sweet, gray-haired old woman in a silk dress patterned with sunflowers. She belonged in the last century somewhere. He smiled and said, "I was, yes."

"Oh, but it's a horrible place," the old lady said.

"How do you know?" he asked, unable to resist hearing her whole line.

"Have you ever been inside?"

"I'd die first!" she said.

"It's actually a very respectable place."

"The foreigners go there."

"The maseni?" he asked.

'Them, yes, and others.'

Jessie removed her hand from his arm -- no easy task, since she clung like a leech -- and he patted it in a conciliatory manner. "I can assure you, mother, that the best people go there, too. Just the other night I spent half an hour talking to God; He was sitting at the table next to mine, the father -- not the son."

"I know, I know," the old lady moaned, quite distressed, clinging to the detective's hand as fiercely as she had clung to his sleeve a moment ago.

"I've seen the pictures in the newspapers and on the gossip pages. There He is, as big as you please, a hussy on His arm, drinking and watching that scandalous floor show... What's happening to morality these days? If even God is corrupted, what hope have we?"

"He hasn't been corrupted," Jessie explained. "Haven't you read the maseni books, or taken a hypno-course in the nature of man and myth? God is as much our creation as we are his. He's as much a victim of circumstances as we are."

"Tell the old bitch to get lost," Brutus said, from the detective's side, his red eyes glowing.

The old woman looked past Jessie, at the hound, and shuddered. "A beast of Hell," she said.

"Precisely," Brutus said. He showed lots of teeth.

"I see there's no use talking to you," the old woman told Jessie. "A man must contain at least the spark of righteousness if he's to hear and know the truth." She turned away from him, her rubber-soled shoes squeaking on the plastiwalk, and she caught up with the other Pure Earthers who had reached the end of the block and were turning back for another pass at the Four Worlds.

"You have this compulsion to talk with zanies," Brutus said. "We never encounter a batch of Pure Earthers that you pass by; you've always got to stop and have a few words with them."

"They fascinate me," Jessie said.

"Sometimes, I think you could be one of them, with a little nudge," the hell hound said, contemptuously.

Jessie ignored the hound's sneering remark. After fifteen hundred years in Hell, Brutus couldn't pass up a chance to sneer or be condescending; all those centuries of damnation had severely affected him. He said, "The Pure Earthers are borderline Shockies; if they'd been just a hair more upset by the

maseni landing and all that's come since, they'd be in one of the homes. I'll never have the chance to see any real Shockies, but I can get an idea what they must be like from studying the Pure Earthers."

"Why this interest in Shockies?" Brutus asked.

"You know why. My parents are Shockies."

"Oh, yeah," Brutus said. "I forgot." But he hadn't forgotten at all. He was just looking for something more to sneer about. "They went starkers when the maseni touched down, a couple of wide-eyed blubbers."

Jessie watched the approaching Pure Earthers. "That's right."

The first maseni interstellar ships had landed a decade ago, in the second week of October, 1990. Within a year, the population of Earth -- regardless of nationality, race, ethnic group, or education -- had been roughly divided into three types of reactions. First, there were those who were profoundly shocked by these developments, but who were able to cope and reorder the nature of their lives and the limits of their perceptions of the universe. These were about forty-five percent of the population. Another forty-five percent were simply unable to adjust. These were the Shockies. They were jolted by the realization that mankind was not the most intelligent species in existence, a fact scientists had predicted for years but which the Shockies had always rejected as "hokum" or "bunkum" or "crap," or "heresy" or "craziness". They were further jolted to discover -- thanks to the maseni -- that the supernatural world actually existed, that the denizens of nightmare were real. And they were crushed to discover that God -- Yahweh, Christ, Buddha, Satan, Mohammed, what have you -- was not quite the being they had always thought. Not only were their patriotic and racial convictions smashed, but so was their spiritual belief... Shockies behaved in one of three ways: uncontrolled rage that led to murder, bombing, rape and rampages of undirected violence; as they had always acted before, refusing to acknowledge that the maseni existed or that their world had changed at all, no matter how much that changed world impinged on their fantasy; or they simply became catatonic, staring off into another world, unable to speak, unable to feed themselves or control their own bodily functions. Cultural shock, severe, horrible. Space-program scientists had long theorized the extent of such a sickness if an alien race should ever be found, but none of them had realized how far-reaching the illness would be.

"Are you going to bleed for them forever?" Brutus asked. "Haven't you ever heard of 'survival of the fittest'? Did the Cro-Magnon man weep for the Neanderthal?"

"These were my parents," Blake said. "My mother and father. If they could have just accepted change, a little bit -- "

"Then they'd have been Pure Earthers," Brutus said. "Would you have been any happier with that?"

"I guess not."

The Pure Earthers, at first, had no name and operated under no central organization; that development had required five years in the making. But they were all alike, and they could function coherently as a group; the Pure Earth League was an inevitable product of the maseni landing. Those citizens who had not gone starkers but who were also unable to cope, about ten percent of the world population, agitated for an end of human-maseni relations and a return to the simpler life. They were, of course, doomed to extinction. Their own children, more accustomed to seeing maseni and supernaturals in the streets, were falling away from the older folks; succeeding generations would give fewer and fewer bodies to the Cause.

"Come on!" the hell hound urged, trotting up to the Four Worlds' main revolving door. "They're almost back again."

Jessie looked at the rag-tag mob of Pure Earthers, saw the old lady in the sunflower dress at a position in the front of the march, sighed and

followed Brutus into the Four Worlds.

A Shambler, one of the maseni supernaturals, was the current hostess at the Four Worlds Cafe. She greeted Jessie and Brutus when they entered the ornate foyer. Shambling up to them, her amorphous face pulsing through countless lumpy variations, she said, "Welcome to the Four Worlds. May I check your coat, sir?"

"I'll keep it, thank you," Jessie said, not bothering to shrug out of the tailored leather jacket. "You're new, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am," the Shambler said. "My name's Mabel, sir."

"Mabel?" Brutus asked.

"Well, not really Mabel," the Shambler admitted. "But my real maseni supernatural name is eighty-six characters long, and it really isn't suitable for human-maseni conversation."

"I can see that," Jessie said, watching the Shambler's face form and reform, a mottled brown-black mass of rotten pudding without eyes, nose or mouth, with nothing but countless, changing knobby protrusions.

"May I seat you, sir?" Mabel asked.

"We're here to meet Mr. Kanastorous," Jessie said.

"Ah, yes, the charming little demon," Mabel said, bowing a little at the "waist", her three hundred pounds rippling subtly like a mass of thick jelly seeking a shape more in harmony with gravity.

"That's him," Jessie said.

"Right this way, sir," Mabel said, shambling away across the mirrored foyer, a contrast with the elegance of rainbow-stone chandeliers, potted palms, star-glitter flooring and hand-carved maseni pillars. She led Jessie and Brutus to the door of the main club room and paused by her tip stand, waiting for Jessie to be generous.

He typed out MABEL on the bank computer keyboard and said, "What's your account number, Mabel?"

The Shambler appeared to be embarrassed by this financial transaction, and she said, almost demurely, "My number is MAS-55-46-29835, sir, and I thank you for your generosity."

Jessie typed out the number, ordered five credits to her account, then gave his thumbprint to the scanner plate, to finalize the tip. When he was finished, he said, "May I ask a personal question?"

Mabel shuddered slightly, her body rippling through another series of lumpy reformations, and she said, "What, sir?"

"How does a Shambler spend her credits? What does she buy?"

The Shambler relaxed, as if she had been expecting something far more personal than this and was relieved... "According to maseni myth," Mabel said, "a Shambler is a night prowler who comes after little children who have been behaving badly during the day. A Shambler moans at their windows." Mabel paused, hunched over and moaned loudly.

"I see," Jessie said.

"Or a Shambler tries to force in their bedroom doors. It hides in their closets and springs out at them. If they're out past dark, when they shouldn't be, a Shambler chases them home, snarling horribly behind them." She bent over again and snarled, ferociously.

Brutus snarled back.

Mabel stood again and sighed. "However, ever since we supernaturals and the flesh-and-blood maseni have opened ordinary relations -- centuries ago -- the law hasn't permitted us to indiscriminately terrorize children. Now, we have to conform to the monetary-service exchange system, like flesh-and-blood citizens. We have to advertise for parents who wouldn't mind having their children frightened now and again -- and we have to pay them for the privilege of moaning at their brat's window or chasing him along a darkened street, or



hiding in his closet to spring out at him."

"And you can't manage to give it up -- this terrorizing of the young?" Jessie asked.

"You know how it is," Mabel said, shrugging shapeless shoulders. "The myth of the Shambler guides the reality of the Shambler. The myths say our compulsion is to terrorize; therefore, we actually are compelled to do just that. Now, though, we have to get out and work, earn credits to pay for the satisfaction of this urge."

Remembering what Count Slavek had said earlier, Jessie asked, "Was it better, do you think, before people opened relations with the supernaturals, before they recognized your existence?"

"Definitely not," Mabel said. "Oh, I have problems now, sure, but I had worse problems back then. You see, I could pick and choose lads to terrorize - - but if one of those brats was a nut on ghost stories, he might know the proper chant or prayer to disintegrate me. With a few words, he could put an end to me for good; that was what the myths said, so it was true. Now, however, since the establishment of friendly relations between flesh-and-blooders and supernaturals, laws have been set up to keep such murderous material out of the hands of kids. Very few kids know those prayers anymore. And before you pay the parents for the right to scare their kids, you can demand and receive proof and guarantees, in pledge and contract form, that the brat doesn't know any chants that can hurt you. Oh, certainly, being a Shambler is more mundane now than it once was -- but it is also considerably safer."

"I see," Jessie said.

"Now, sir, may I escort you to Mr. Kanastorous' table?"

"Yes, please."

"Walk this way," Mabel said, shambling through the mirrored door into the club proper.

Unwittingly, she had given Jessie one of the hoariest lines he had ever heard, but he resisted trying to trudge like a Shambler. He and Brutus walked as they always walked, into the huge, circular night club, past the oval stage in the center of the room where a weird assortment of human and maseni supernaturals were playing bi-world music, between tables of colorful diners, to a back booth, in the shadows, where Mr. Kanastorous waited for them.

"My old friend, the gumshoe!" Kanastorous exclaimed, standing on his seat and reaching across the booth table to shake Jessie's hand.

"How are you, Zeke?" the detective asked, accepting the scaly, four-fingered mitt and pumping it up and down.

"Prosperous!" Zeke said, smiling, happy with himself, his horny lips parted to reveal a hundred tiny, razor-sharp teeth and a long, restless, green tongue. "Sin merchants have always been popular and wealthy. Now that sin is legal, we're more popular and wealthier than ever." He looked at Brutus as the hell hound clambered onto the booth bench beside Jessie and said, "How is my friend, the nightmare beast?"

"Thirsty," Brutus grumbled. "Can we get a drink in this dump?"

"Most assuredly!" Kanastorous said. He punched the intercom beside the booth and ordered their drinks. "This one on me," he said, typing on the keyboard under the intercom and pressing his hand to the scanner plate.

"Thank you, Zeke," Jessie said.

"He can afford it," Brutus said.

The demon turned to the hell hound and grinned. "Same old bastard you always were, huh, Brutus? I think you were the most cantankerous hell hound I ever worked with."

"You two were in Hell together?" Jessie asked.

"Of course," Kanastorous said. "Didn't you know?"

"I didn't, no."

"We worked together for -- what was it, fifty years?"

"An eternity," Brutus said.

"Fifty years," Kanastorous said, nodding his small, round, scaly head in agreement with himself. "We were on a project to corrupt the morals of teenage girls, I believe."

"A study group," Brutus said.

"Interesting work," Kanastorous said. "Sort of a think-tank operation with some first-hand field work, as well."

"Stimulating," Brutus agreed.

A Tibetan wolfwoman brought their drinks. She was nearly six feet tall, though she walked with a slight stoop, because of the nature of her haunches. Dressed only in her silver pelt, she was quite lovely with eight bare teats slightly rouged along her soft belly.

They sipped their drinks and watched her until she was out of sight among the tables.

"Well, this must be a strange case you're working on now, my private-op friend," the demon Kanastorous said, the first to regain his senses from the unintentional spell the wolf woman had. cast over them.

"It's unusual," Jessie admitted.

"Care to tell me about it?"

"No."

"Instead, why don't you tell us about this hot little number who's on her way here to talk to us?" Brutus suggested, raising his snout from his drink dish and looking across the table at the demon. Droplets of liquor hung in his bristly, gray muzzle fur, glistening like drops of dew.

Kanastorous reached for a pretzel from the bowl in the center of the table, plucked one up and promptly dropped it. "It's so awkward, not having a thumb," he said, apologetically. "I wish there were some way I could have a thumb, but the myths say a demon is four-fingered. And these long claws are no help either, so far as coordination is concerned."

"About the girl," Brutus said.

Kanastorous nodded, picked up the pretzel and took a bite of it, swallowed without chewing. "When you called me from your office a couple of hours ago," he said, "I knew one of my girls would be able to help you, for the right price, but I wasn't sure which one." Kanastorous managed about fifty succubi whom he rented out to horny, flesh-and-blood men and women. "Then I remembered Gayla."

"Pretty name," Jessie said.

"Gorgeous girl," Kanastorous said. "She's strictly a one-way succubus."

"One-way?" Jessie asked.

"You don't know about succubi?" the demon asked, finishing his pretzel and reaching for another. He dropped it.

"I've never required one," Jessie said.

"Well, a one-way succubus is one which can only be either male or female. As you may know, the majority of succubi can appear as voluptuous women when in bed with men, and as virile men when they are in bed with women. They transfer sperm from one human lover to another in an alternating and quite unholy manner. Occasionally, however, because myth requires it, you find a succubus that cannot change forms, that can be only one sex. Gayla is such a one; she can only be a woman."

"Has this some special importance, so far as we're concerned?" Jessie asked the demon.

"Yes," Kanastorous said. "When you called me, you said you wanted some supernatural creature with access to the maseni embassy compound, that you wanted an informer who could obtain certain restricted information -- not a sort restricted by law but by bureaucratic prerogative."

"That's right," Jessie said.

"Well, Gayla is under contract to Willard Aimes, a human attache to the maseni embassy in Los Angeles. She sleeps with him most every night. And because she is a one-way succubus, she is just perverse enough to double-cross him. You see, one-way succubi are, for some reason, perhaps because they feel inferior or inadequate, far more perverse than their two-way brothers. Or sisters. Or whatever."

Just as Kanastorous finished, a stunningly beautiful child-woman, in her mid-teens, stepped up and said, "Hi, Zeke!" She patted the demon on his scaly head and slid into the booth beside him, directly across from Brutus and Jessie. She was perhaps five-two without heels, and a hundred pounds. Her hair was red and plaited in two pigtails that hung to the middle of her back. Her face was childish, cherubic and sensuous all at once: full lips but braces on her teeth, round cheeks, enormous blue eyes and thick lashes but no make-up, a sprinkle of freckles on flawless, creamy skin... She wore a pair of tight yellow shorts with her name embroidered on each back pocket, and a thin, white tee-shirt against which her budding breasts pressed insistently. Her nipples were sharp little, teasing points that moved as the flesh beneath them bounced and jiggled.

"Arf, arf!" Brutus said, grinning.

Gayla giggled and said, "You're cute."

"Arf, arf," Brutus said, again.

Kanastorous introduced everybody, finished his drink in one gulp, dropped the plastic glass, excused himself, cursed his missing thumbs, and ordered a new round for everyone -- a malted milkshake for Gayla.

The wolfwoman brought the order, but no one paid much attention this time.

"Are you two going to take out a contract on me?" Gayla asked, smiling so all her braces showed.

"We might," Brutus said.

"And we might not," Jessie said. "Chiefly, we're interested in information."

Gayla lifted her milkshake and took a long, cold drink. When she put the glass down, she had a white ring around her mouth, which was the most obscene thing Jessie had ever looked at. "Information, you said?" She seemed oblivious of the milky circle.

"You're contracted to a man named Aimes," the detective said. "He works at the L.A. maseni embassy."

"Willard!" she said, giggling. "Oh, Willard is a naughty boy."

The detective sipped his drink.

"Arf, arf," Brutus said, grinning.

Gayla giggled again.

"Does Willard talk to you much, about his work?" Jessie asked.

"Oh, my, yes," Gayla said. "He puts his woolly head right here every night, and pours out all his troubles to his big sister Gayla." She patted her small, round breasts.

"Good, good," Jessie said. "Now, do you recall if he's mentioned a maseni named Tesserax any time within the last couple weeks?"

"Tesserax?" she asked, puckering her lips.

"Tesserax," Jessie said.

"The name's not familiar."

"They both work at the embassy -- Aimes and the maseni," Jessie said.

"Lately, there's been some trouble with this Tesserax. Are you sure Willard never mentioned him?"

She put a finger to her lips, in thought, discovered the ring of milk, wiped it off with the finger and licked her hand clean. "I'm sure he hasn't said anything about a maseni named Tesserax," she said at last.

"Do you think you could keep an ear open, in case he does?" Jessie

asked. "In fact, could you prod him about this Tesseract, subtly of course, and then report back to me on his reaction?"

She turned her head quickly and looked at the demon Kanastorous, her red pigtailed bouncing on her back. "Can I do that, Zeke?"

"If you're contracted to do it, and if you want to do it," Zeke said.

"Oh, I'd very much like to," she said. She looked at Jessie and grinned winningly. "It sounds like fun, spying on the embassy, snitching on old Willard. It appeals to me. I'm really sort of perverse."

"I've heard," Jessie said.

"How much you willing to pay?" Zeke asked.

Jessie said, "That depends on how soon she can get back to me with Aimes' reaction."

"I'm supposed to see him in a little while," Gayla said. "I can bring it up then, when he's in the right mood, and be back to you by dawn or a little after." A succubus could come and go in both darkness and daylight.

"That would be fine," Jessie said.

"How much?" Kanastorous asked again.

"A hundred credits?"

"Impossible. Five hundred as a minimum."

The detective looked at the hell hound and said, "Well?"

"I know this greasy little fiend," Brutus said. "We spent half a century together, corrupting virgins. He'll settle for the hundred, but he'll be pissed off. Give him a hundred and fifty to soothe him."

"A hundred and fifty," Jessie told the demon.

Kanastorous sighed, reached for his drink, knocked it over, grabbed for it and, in his clumsiness, knocked over Gayla's milkshake as well. As the succubus giggled and Kanastorous cursed his missing thumbs, a waitress mopped up the mess and brought them fresh drinks, with a warning to the demon to use both hands in lifting his glass.

"Where were we?" Kanastorous asked, warily lifting his glass to take a sip of his martini.

"A hundred and fifty credits," Jessie said.

"Five hundred," the demon insisted.

"You heard Brutus."

Kanastorous looked at the hound and made a face, his pointy teeth biting into his hard lips and drawing no blood. "It is a damnable thing to have to do business with old friends."

"A hundred and fifty credits," Brutus said.

"When I take my commission," Kanastorous said, "the girl is left with only a hundred and five credits -- and me with only forty-five."

"A hundred and fifty," Brutus insisted.

"I'm sure that Gayla, here, makes out quite well from Willard Aimes. And other contractees, I wouldn't doubt."

"She has eight contracts to fulfill," Kanastorous admitted, rather like a proud father.

Gayla giggled and drank more of her milkshake.

"Then it's settled at a hundred and fifty?"

"Okay," the demon said. "For you, my licensed snoop, a special price -- but the whole hundred and a half up front, now."

Jessie dialed for an open, public channel on the booth's computer keyboard, made the transaction.

"Well, I better be off to see Willard," Gayla said, finishing the last of her new milkshake, wiping at her mouth and getting up. She did a modified curtsy, her little breasts jiggling, and said, "I'll see you after dawn, Mr. Blake."

Then she was gone, pigtailed bouncing, tight little behind twitching.

"She isn't what I think of when I think of a succubus," Jessie said.

"Well, most of my girls are the voluptuous types," Kanastorous said. "But not all my customers have the same tastes."  
Brutus said, "Arf, arf!"

## Chapter Five

When they got to Blake's high-rise apartment in downtown L.A., it was nearly five o'clock in the morning, not much more than half an hour until sunrise, and little more than an hour or two before Gayla would drop by to report what she had learned from Willard Aimes. Jessie made breakfast, had a bloody mary to top it off, and decided to stay up until he got word from the succubus.

Seven o'clock came and passed.

Seven-thirty.

Eight o'clock.

"I wonder where she is?" he said to Brutus who was curled up in front of the fireplace, nose to tail.

"If Aimes is smart," the hound said, "she's in his bed."

Nine o'clock came.

"She should be here by now," Jessie said.

"Depends on how much stamina Aimes has," the hound said.

By nine-thirty, they were both aware that something must have gone wrong, or that Kanastorous was cheating them, somehow.

"Call the greasy little fiend and find out," Brutus said.

In his den, Jessie activated the nether-world telephone and typed out Kanastorous' home number. After a long pause, while the call wailed down the ethereal line, the demon answered.

"Where's Gayla?" Jessie asked.

Sheepishly, Kanastorous said, "I was about to call you about that."

"Are you trying to back out of your contract?" Jessie asked.

"Not at all!" the demon said. "It's much more complicated than that, my pistol-packing friend."

"How complicated?"

"I can't tell you now," Kanastorous said,

"When can you?"

"Dinner tonight?" the demon asked. "Same booth at the Four Worlds, say at six o'clock?"

"I'd like to know what's up. I'd like to know now."

"What good will it do you to know now instead of later?" the demon asked. "You're only going to bed for the rest of the day anyhow. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, but -- "

"Besides, this line is too public."

Grudgingly, Jessie said, "Okay, tonight at six, at the Four Worlds."

When he hung up and turned around, Brutus was standing in the doorway, scowling. "I sense very strong forces moving in the background," he growled. "Someone has made Kanastorous shut his mouth, and that's not easily done."

"We'll know tonight, at six," Jessie said.

"We'll know what Kanastorous wants us to know," the hound said. He padded away into the living room.

## Chapter Six

After seven hours of sound sleep, Jessie and Brutus (who had not slept at all and did not need to) returned to the Four Worlds Cafe, where a group of

Pure Earthers had just begun a sit-down demonstration before the big, revolving doors. There were about thirty of them, chained together, and Jessie recognized the old woman to whom he had spoken the night before. She was at the end of the line, one arm chained to a comrade, the other to a fire hydrant.

"I ought to go say hello to her," Jessie said.

"If you do, I'll use that fireplug she's chained to."

"You wouldn't," Jessie said, shocked. "Anyway, you couldn't. The hell hound myth indicates you can ingest whatever you want, but there isn't a word about elimination."

"Well, it would be a symbolic thing," the hound said. "I'd just let out a stream of ectoplasm."

"I think we better forget it," the detective said, stepping over the chained arms in front of the door and going inside.

In the mirrored foyer, a golden boy with huge wings and a halo rakishly over his head approached them and said, "Good evening, gentlemen. I am Robert, your host." He was wearing white robes and leather sandals, a very winning angel.

"What happened to Mabel?" Jessie asked.

"The Shambler?"

"Yes, her."

"Mabel comes on when it gets dark and goes home before dawn. She's a night beast, you know."

"I guess I knew, but I forgot," Jessie said, punching out a tip on the angel's stand and letting the scanner have his thumbprint. "How does she find time to terrorize children if she works during the night and hides from the sun during the day?"

"She's off on weekends," the angel said. "Saturday and Sunday nights, she terrorizes."

"I see," Jessie said.

"May I take your coat, sir?"

"I'll keep it, thank you. Just take us to Mr. Kanastorous. He ought to be here already."

"Yes, of course," the angel said. "That round-headed little -- "

"Demon," Brutus finished.

"Thank you," the angel said. "I've nothing against Mr. Kanastorous, or his kind, you understand. It's just that I find it hard to say that word and others like it." He opened the inner doors and took them into the main club room.

Because it was still light outside, some of the club's more exotic denizens, like Mabel, and vampires, and other beasts, had yet to leave their coffins for dinner. Though the club was half-filled, with maseni and humans and supernaturals, the spirits here now were rather plain. They passed a table of four big black men who were all wearing overalls and eating huge slices of watermelon. They laughed raucously and used phrases like "scrumptious good" and "lordy mama" and "dis a fancy sweet melon, all right." Jessie could see that all four of them hated the goddamned watermelon, but were compelled to gobble it up. They'd have to finish a slice apiece, spitting seeds across the room, before they could order what they really wanted. That was, after all, what the white-man-made myth said the "nigger" was supposed to do. At another table, a group of mythical Italians were suffering a similar problem. Three men (all dressed in baggy suits, vests, badly-knotted ties) and three women (in baggy, flowered dresses, slips showing, hair in greasy disarray, all wearing rosaries around their necks) were working on small plates of spaghetti, sauce running down their chins, laughing uproariously, speaking in heavily accented English, using phrases like "atsa good spaghet" and "you licka da sauce, or isa too tomatoey?" and "mama mia" and "atsa way to eat,

Vito, bambino!"

In some ways, Jessie thought, if you had to be a supernatural being, it was better to be a ghost, a hell hound, a demon, a vampire, a werewolf, a ghoul -- almost anything other than a mythical Wop or Nigger. Those poor sons of bitches had it rough.

"Ah, my friend the shamus!" Zeke Kanastorous cried, when the angel brought Jessie to the table at last.

"Hello, Zeke."

"Sit down, sit down. We'll order drinks and dinner, from the intercom, and then we can chat."

They were served their drinks by a lumbering zombie whose eyes were pure white, containing no pupils or irises. In a sepulchre voice, the creature said, "Your dinner will be served in fifteen minutes." Then it stomped away, lurching down the crooked aisles between the tables.

"They must be hard up for help," the demon said, clicking his long green tongue with distaste.

"Yeah," Jessie said. "Now what about Gayla?"

"And it better be good," Brutus added.

Nervously, Kanastorous explained. "She was with this Aimes character for several hours, and when he was in the right mood, she tried bringing him around to this maseni you're interested in, this Tesserax fellow. His reaction was immediate and antagonistic. He revealed that he had been given special emergency powers for the detention of human and supernatural civilians, and he ordered her to remain on his bed, not to dematerialize and go elsewhere. Then he got on the nether-world communications network, and he called someone."

"Who?"

"We can't say for sure. But it was someone high up in Satanic rule, someone who could give orders to a demon like myself or a succubus like Gayla. In a minute, Moloch materialized in Aimes' bedroom, in answer to the call."

"Moloch? Satan's secretary of state?" Brutus asked.

"The same," Kanastorous said. "He ordered Gayla to break her contract with me, and with other clients, and to report for special work as Satan's envoy in Japan."

"They've gotten her out of the scene, then, even though she didn't learn anything," Brutus said.

"Maybe they're afraid she did know something, from her association with Aimes, something he didn't even realize he'd told her," the demon said.

"Whatever their reasons for silencing Gayla," Jessie said, "they've proven there's something big brewing around Tesserax's disappearance."

"Maybe too big for you to handle," the demon said.

"Maybe," Blake said.

"What will your next step be?"

"I'll have to think about it," the detective said.

"You won't expect my fee back, will you, old gumshoe buddy?" the demon asked anxiously, leaning toward Blake, his martini glass cautiously clasped in both hands.

"You can keep it," Jessie said. "I may not have learned what I had hoped to learn from Gayla -- but the incident has taught me other things."

Their dinner arrived, along with a bottle of wine which Kanastorous was paying for, and they spoke no more of Tesserax or Gayla or the strange situation that Hell Hound Investigations had become involved with. Instead, they drank a second bottle of wine, which Jessie paid for, and they chatted about mutual acquaintances.

By the time they'd finished dessert, Jessie said, "I'm afraid I must be excused for a moment. I suffer from a condition of the bladder which you people don't have to contend with."

"By all means, go ahead," Kanastorous said, letting go of his glass with

one hand to wave airily toward the men's room door. His other hand slipped on the wet glass, and he dropped his wine into Brutus' lap.

"You clumsy little creep," Brutus growled.

"Now, now," Jessie said. "It'll be all gone by the time I get back. Zeke can't help that he's got only four fingers a hand."

"You don't even have fingers," Zeke told Brutus, petulantly.

As Jessie walked away from the table, the zombie was lumbering toward the scene of the accident, a dish towel draped over one arm.

"Don't be nasty with him," Jessie told the white-eyed monster. "He can't help it if he's not got any thumbs."

"He could drink out of a dish, like that friend of yours," the zombie said. "I'm not paid to be a nursemaid."

"He's a good tipper, though," Jessie said.

The zombie's expression remained grim, his voice deep and monotonous, but he said, "Well, I guess anyone can have an accident now and then." He went on, heavy-footed, for the table where Brutus was barking at the demon.

As Jessie entered the men's room, two of the mythical Italians were coming out. "Atsa nice-a toilet," the one Italian said.

The other said, "Clean. Clean as a baby's bottom, that place."

"Excuse me," Jessie said, sliding by them.

"Sure-a, sure-a," the one Italian said. He had sauce all over the front of his shirt and a strand of spaghetti on his lapel. Poor son-of-a-bitch.

In the men's room, Jessie found the place was as clean as the Italians had said it was, all white porcelain and plastic and polished glass, six stalls off to one side, eight urinals out in the open, half a dozen sinks. He walked to one of the urinals and was about to use it when one of the stall doors opened behind him and someone said, "Blake?"

"Yes?" he asked, turning.

Medusa stood there, in a toga, her eyes boring into his, her hair not hair at all but a furious tangle of writhing snakes.

"Uh -- " Jessie said.

"Not to worry," she said, moving toward him. "It's only temporary, darling, until we can get you out of the picture."

As he turned to stone under the Medusa's awful gaze, Jessie could think only two things: First, if he had not heard the legend of Medusa, didn't know the myth well, she would not have affected him this way -- for she only had the power to petrify those who were conversant with her story; second, he wondered what a woman was doing here in the men's room.

## Chapter Seven

In the office of Hell Hound Investigations, Helena and Brutus stood in the middle of Blake's private room and watched the company robot move the furniture against the walls. Soundlessly, it hoisted the desk, chairs, the day bed, and shoved them out of the way, then came back to stand dutifully in front of the hound, waiting for further instructions.

"Do you think this will work?" Helena asked.

"It'll work," Brutus told her. To the robot, he said, "That's all for now. Please retire to the waiting room -- far enough away so your audio receivers can't hear us."

The robot clanked out of the room, closing the door behind it.

"You don't trust him?" Helena asked.

Brutus said, "Anything a robot hears is stored in its microdot memories. It can be subpoenaed in court, and that might be disastrous."

"Is what we're doing illegal?" Helena asked.

"It may be, depending on how it develops," Brutus said. He looked up at



her and said, "You want to leave, too?"

"Oh, no!" she said. "I'd do anything to help get Blakesy back."

The hound tilted its head. "Blakesy?"

Helena smiled. "I sometimes call him that, in private, when it's just the two of us."

"Christ," Brutus said.

"I didn't know you could use words like that."

"They don't bother me," the hound said.

She clapped her hands together as if she were making a starting signal, and she said, "Where do we begin?"

"I had the robot put all the stuff out for you," Brutus said, crossing the room to a black, enameled tray filled with instruments. "First, I want you to fit a piece of chalk to that string compass and draw a big circle in the middle of the floor."

"How big?" Helena asked, picking up the tool and the chalk, biting her full lips prettily as she tried to slip the white stick into the proper clamp.

"A three foot radius ought to do it," the hound said.

She got on her hands and knees, her skirt riding up behind, and she crawled around the room, outlining the circle. "There!" she said, when she was done, beaming as if she'd created a work of art.

"Now, draw a smaller circle," Brutus said. "A foot and a half diameter, due north of the circle you just finished."

"I don't see how this will get Jessie back," she said.

"You'll see," Brutus said.

She drew the second circle.

"You know what a pentagram is?" the hound asked.

"Sure."

"Draw a pentagram inside each circle, with the points touching the circle walls."

She needed a couple of minutes to do this, but when she was done, the pentagrams were tucked neatly inside the circles, never overlapping at any point, a detail Brutus had made sure of.

"Now," he told her, "light the seven black candles and the seven white."

She did this, while he directed the placement of each taper. Then she placed the leather-bound Bible in the center of the largest circle and went to turn out the lights, like he said.

"What now?" she asked, as the glittering, orange candlelight cast eerie shadows about the room.

Brutus' eyes shone a brighter red than ever, magnified both by the darkness and the flickering flames. "Come here and stand beside me in the largest circle, and don't step outside of it again until I tell you to."

When she was beside him, she said, "What in the hell are we doing, Brute?" He didn't like her nickname for him any more than he liked "Blakesy" for Blake, but he didn't say anything. If she got mad and walked out on him, he'd have to rely on the robot for anything that needed hands, and he trusted Helena to keep her mouth shut, in court, more than he did that mechanical dodo.

"We're calling forth a demon," he said.

"With magic?"

"That's right?"

"Chants and spells?"

"That's the sum of it, baby."

She frowned. "Why don't we just use the nether-world telephone?"

"Because that's legal," Brutus said. "And it doesn't give you any control over the demon; it only lets you talk to him."

"Who are we calling forth?" she asked.

"Zeke Kanastorous."

"That horrible little creep?"

"He's the one. He may know where they've taken Jessie."

"And you want to have control over him, so you can force him to tell you. Is that it?" she asked.

"Helena, you're a genius."

She stooped and ruffled his furry head, pressed his cold nose between her hefty breasts. "I like you, too, Brute. Okay, then, let's get on with it." She pulled away from him and sat down, cross-legged, like an Indian. "I'm going to enjoy watching that little creep suffer."

"So am I," Brutus said.

For a time, they were both silent, letting the night settle down, the air grow still, the ethereal vibrations quieten.

The walls of the room appeared to draw closer as they meditated, and the darkness between the fourteen points of sputtering candle flame grew even more intense.

"Remain perfectly still," Brutus said.

Helena didn't even nod in response.

Lowering his head, closing his fiery eyes, the hell hound began to chant in a low, monotonous voice, reciting the names of the places where human souls were said, sometimes, to rest in preparation for Judgment Day: Hell, Hades, The Pit, Satan's Antechamber, Limbo, Purgatory, The Black Grotto, and a hundred others. Next, he went through the names of the hundred most powerful demons in the Satanic hierarchy, from that list to a rigidly worded chant which he said in Latin.

Helena thought that the room was growing perceptively cooler, and she hugged herself for warmth, unconsciously shifting a bit closer to the hell hound.

"Kanastorous! Ezekial Kanastorous, answer me!" The hell hound's voice was a great, thundering command as he finished the chant and raised his head like a howling wolf.

In that same instant, before the echo of his cry had died away, the air inside the smaller circle, due north of them, seemed to shiver, to take on a vague phosphorescence.

"It's working!" Helena cried, slapping the hell hound on the back.

"Of course it is," Brutus said.

Then Kanastorous was there: four feet tall, scaly, somewhat green, flicking his chartreuse tongue and looking anxiously about, bewildered. He caught sight of Brutus and Helena beyond the candle flames that separated them, and he said, "What is going on here?"

"Just a little black magic," Brutus said.

Kanastorous looked confused, then angry. He started forward but came to an abrupt halt, as if he had run into an Invisible brick wall, when he tried to step beyond the chalk barrier that Helena had drawn. He looked down at his feet and said, "A pentagram?"

"Precisely," Brutus said.

"But this is illegal!"

"Illegal, perhaps, but effective," Brutus said.

"I'll see that you're given eternal rest for this!" the demon said, his face turning a darker green.

"You're in no position to threaten," Brutus said. "Your only choice is to be silent and answer only when spoken to."

"Forget that, dogface," the demon said. "I have my rights, and I know what I can -- "

The hell hound padded softly to the edge of the largest circle in which he and Helena were protected, and he blew out one of the seven black candles, leaving six black and seven white, disturbing the delicate balance between the spheres of magical influence.

Kanastorous jerked as if he had been struck by a whip, tottered back until his spurred heels came up against the chalk circle, then leaned forward, swaying dizzily.

"Is he in pain?" Helena asked.

"Some," Brutus admitted.

"Good," the woman said. "If he hurt Blakesy in any way, he deserves every bit of it."

"I'm an innocent pawn in all of this," Zeke Kanastorous moaned, staring across the remaining candles at the hound.

"Ah, you've recovered sufficiently to talk," Brutus said.

"You can't take your anger out on me. What could I do?" the demon asked. "How could I stop them?"

"Stop who?" Brutus asked. "Who has kidnapped Jessie Blake?"

"He hasn't been kidnapped," Kanastorous said. He was holding his round, green stomach as if it hurt.

"You mean he's been killed and disposed of?" Helena asked, tense, her neck stiff, her jaw tight and fierce.

"No, no!" Kanastorous said. "He's just been -- well, put on ice."

"Why?"

"To keep him out of the Tesseract affair."

"What is the Tesseract affair?" Brutus asked.

"Oh, how should I know?" Kanastorous cried, still clutching his round gut with both hands, doubled over, blinking stupidly. "Would you please light that candle again?"

"I'm out of matches," Brutus said.

"That's a lie."

Brutus did not reply.

"I'll have your supernatural neck for this!" the demon roared, his tongue flickering in and out, in and out like a snake that lived in his mouth.

"I doubt that. Now, let's get back to the matter at hand. You were trying to convince us that you know nothing whatsoever about this Tesseract business."

"But I really don't!" the demon wailed. "That's the truth, my old canine buddyboy, the bitter truth. I was approached by Mr. Willard Aimes and Mr. Holagosta Mur, the chief of the maseni embassy in Los Angeles; they solicited my aid in waylaying Mr. Blake."

"They didn't tell you why they wanted this done?"

"No, they didn't. I assumed that it had to do with the Tesseract affair, considering what they had already done to Gayla."

"She really was transferred to Japan?"

"Yes."

Brutus thought for a moment, then said, "Okay, I'll believe you, so far as the Tesseract business is concerned. I doubt they did tell you anything. But you must know what they've done to Jessie, since you helped to engineer it."

"My job was to get him into the bathroom," the demon said. "I arranged that by buying the first bottle of wine at dinner and by being sure that, beforehand, it was doctored with a bladder exciter."

"Who was waiting for him in the men's room?" Brutus asked.

Kanastorous hesitated, then said, "I don't know, Brutus. They didn't tell me about that; they only wanted me to be sure he went in there."

"You're lying."

"I swear I'm not!"

"A demon's word..."

"My part was to serve the doctored wine, which would not affect me or you, but which would send Jessie to the urinal."

The hound walked across the large circle again and blew out a second candle, watched as the demon jerked back and forth, clutched his head and

chest and stomach...

"I'm glad you did that," Helena said. "I was about to take the initiative myself."

Kanastorous went to his knees inside the smaller circle and, in a few minutes, had recovered sufficiently to speak, though he could not regain his feet. "This is despicable," he hissed. "This is the most barbaric thing I can imagine."

"Come, come, Zeke," Brutus said. "We worked together in Hell for fifty years, remember? I've seen you perform more barbaric acts a thousand times -- and usually on defenseless virgins."

"That was before the laws!" the demon groaned.

"Five black candles and seven white," Brutus said. "Now, if you don't tell me what I want to know inside the next minute, I'll blow out a third black taper." He paused for dramatic effect and said, "Who was waiting in the men's room for Jessie?"

"Medusa," Kanastorous said.

"Come again?" the hound growled.

"The woman who has snakes on her head, instead of hair, the one who can turn a man to stone with her gaze. She lives here in L.A. now. Haven't you heard of her?"

"I have!" Helena said. "She's the one with the awful taste in clothes -- and she always wears those mirrored sunglasses to keep from turning all her friends to stone."

"That's the woman," the demon said.

"She's always at some art show or concert," Helena said. "You see her picture in the papers and on television, usually on the arm of the maseni embassy big shots."

"Yes, yes," Kanastorous said, eager to please them. "The maseni are fascinated by those snakes she has for hair -- probably because the snakes are so similar to their own tentacles."

"This Medusa woman was waiting for Jessie in the men's room of the Four Worlds?" Brutus asked.

"She was, yes."

"And she turned him to stone?"

"Yes."

"Isn't that as good as killing him?"

"It was only a temporary transformation," Kanastorous said. "As I understand it, there are ways to bring him back to life."

"Well, when I went in that restroom," Brutus said, "there wasn't any statue that looked like Jessie. Where'd they take him?"

Kanastorous looked up beseechingly, not unlike a Christian in the act of prayer, gazing to the expectant heavens as he kneels. "You must believe that they didn't tell me."

Brutus shook his burly head slowly back and forth. "No, I don't have to believe anything of the sort."

"But they really didn't!"

The hound got off his haunches and moved slowly back to the row of candles. "What will it be like for you, Zeke, if I extinguish yet another of the black ones?"

"You wouldn't, my old hairy-muzzled friend." The demon grinned a sickeningly pleading grin.

Brutus sighed and leaned toward the nearest of the flames, sucking in new breath with which to blow it out

"I'll tell! I'll tell!" the demon cried.

"No tricks."

"No tricks," Kanastorous agreed.

"Where'd they take Jessie?"

"To Millennium City," the demon rasped.

"That new shopping mall over in West Los Angeles?" Helena asked, getting to her feet.

"That's right," Kanastorous said.

Brutus grunted. "Why take him there?"

"It had a perfect hiding place," the demon said.

"But those stores are open twenty-four hours a day," Helena said.

"They're robotically operated; they have customers at any hour. I don't see how they could have carted Jessie in there and hidden him."

"Millennium City is a fancy place," the demon said, still on his knees, black sweat on his scaly brow. "It has an art museum, a legitimate theater, fountain displays and a sculpture garden for the enlightenment of the patrons."

"So?" Brutus asked.

"They put Jessie in the sculpture garden, with the other statues. They intend to keep him there until the Tesserax crisis -- whatever it is -- passes."

## Chapter Eight

Millennium City was a 200-store shopping mall, most of it under a single roof, with indoor pedwalks, indoor and outdoor parks, fountains, convention facilities, hotels, more fountains, amusement centers, free theaters and museums, robot guides to help you find your way, a three hundred million credit wonder that had been completed only a year before. It was staffed exclusively by robots and was efficiently run, enormously profitable.

Only ten years earlier, it could never have been built -- and not only because maseni technology was required to construct it. Ten years ago, the city of Los Angeles simply would not have had the room, in the heart of its west side, to contain such a lavish, three-hundred-acre structure. Then, there had been too many people, too much crowding. Now, a decade after the maseni landing on Earth, the city was only half as populated as it had been. Forty-five percent of the city's people had gone starkers and ended up in homes for Shockies. Many of these, in the following ten years, either took their own lives or died from too long in a catatonic trance. For the most part, the Shockies were those who were already hopelessly at odds with their times; they were, in many cases, those who ignored the warnings of ecologists and continued to have large families, polluting the Earth with excess flesh. Removed from the mating cycle, they no longer contributed to the population boom. Those who adapted to the maseni and the other changes, tended to have no families, or small ones. As the Shockies died, the population dropped, and land became available. With the welfare rolls almost wiped out, and with vital services crying for good workers, everyone again had a job and everyone was more affluent than any time in the nation's history. There was not only room to build Millennium City, but also credits to spend there. Old office buildings were torn down, as were rows and rows of shabby houses where no one lived anymore. They razed factories that had once produced useless gadgets and flashy gewgaws, for none of these things were now in demand; society had suddenly become aware of its own power and of the true value of possessions. Millennium City not only provided services and products, but a place to feel at ease, a center for commerce which was, at the same time, a business establishment and a community meeting place.

On the south end of the Millennium City complex, there was a two-acre sculpture garden, containing abstract and realistic stone and metal work from all over the world, and from the maseni home world as well. It was here that Helena and Brutus came, at a quarter to twelve that night.

"How many statues are in here?" Helena asked.

"I'd say four or five hundred," Brutus replied. "That is, if you rule out the abstract ones which we can tell, at a glance, aren't Jessie."

A young couple passed them, strolling hand-in-hand; the boy was a normal human being, while the girl was a button-cute wood nymph no taller than four and a half feet.

Helena and the hound walked slowly down the main avenue before trying any of the looping side-streets. They passed statues of maseni kings, American Presidents and authors, a cavalry man on horseback, a black American liberator with a Molotov cocktail in his stone hand...

"Well have to try the smaller walkways," Brutus said.

They passed a statue of Artemis Frick, the first man to die on Mars; a statue of President Agnew, the first American President to resign from office over an embarrassing incident on the Pritchard Robot television talk show-but not the last to do so...

"Jessie!" Helena cried, stopping so suddenly that Brutus, looking at a statue of Snoopy across the way, almost walked into her.

"Where?"

She pointed at the next statue, opposite that of Snoopy. "It is him, isn't it?"

Brutus padded closer, his claws making a rattling noise on the flagstone path. "He looks a bit different in granite," the hound said, "but I'm sure that it is him, my dear."

Helena looked more closely at the life-size stone figure where it stood on a marble pedestal that made it tower over them. "My God, do you see what pose he's in?"

Brutus chuckled. "Well," he said, "he was at the urinal when Medusa surprised him, you know."

Helena walked up and rapped her knuckles on Jessie's thigh. "Really is stone," she said.

"The myth requires it."

She regarded Jessie from straight on, staring into his blank, granite eyes. "You think he's aware of his condition, where he is? Do you think he knows we're here?"

"We'll have to ask him when we get him changed back," the hell hound said, moving up beside her.

Helena had been carrying a book on mythology, one of the volumes published as a guide by the United Nations after the initial chaos the maseni brought with them to Earth. She thumbed it open, found a listing under MEDUSA, and said, "The Medusa is a world-wide mythical figure. According to various versions of the myth, there are eighteen ways to undo the damage of her gaze."

"Read 'em off," the hell hound said, gazing up at Jessie.

The detective stared out across the sculpture garden, his head held high, rather noble despite his pose.

Helena said, "Well, first of all, we can immerse him in the waters of the Ganges River."

"Even if we could get him out of this park without being taken for statue thieves," the hound said, "it would take too long to fly him to the Ganges and go through that bit. Something else."

"Paint him with the blood of newborn babies," Helena said, shivering.

"Ecchh," Brutus said. "What's next?"

"A virgin's kiss, against his stone lips," Helena said. She smiled. "Isn't that romantic?"

Brutus gave her a long look, from head to toe and back again. "A virgin's kiss? I suspect you better read number four."

The Millennium City sculpture garden was one of the open-air parks in the complex and, now, above them, the night sky split open with a flash of

jagged lightning, followed by a low peal of thunder. They both looked up, waiting for the rain. When it didn't come, Helena looked back at the book and said, "Number four -- the victim of the Medusa can be revived to flesh by the touch of someone who truly loves him."

"There we are," Brutus said, nodding his hairy head.

"Oh?"

"Touch him some more," the hound said.

"Me?"

"Don't you love him?"

"Oh, I love him a little bit, I suppose. I mean, he's awfully nice, and he's good looking. I like going to bed with him and I like working for him... But I couldn't honestly say that I truly love him. Not deep and everlasting and all of that. If the tables were turned, and if that were me up there on the pedestal, I don't think Jessie would pretend any differently about his own feelings."

"Well," the hell hound said, "you can't be sure. Maybe you love him just enough to make it work."

"I already touched him," Helena pointed out, "and nothing happened." Her golden hair had fallen across her face, and she pushed it behind her ears with her left hand.

"You didn't exactly touch him," Brutus corrected her. "You rapped on him."

"Same thing."

"A rap isn't the same as a touch," the hound persisted. "So why don't you try touching him. I mean, for Christ's sake, what have you got to lose?"

She looked up at the stone Jessie, down at the hell hound again, and she said, "Well, I guess it can't hurt anything..."

"Of course it can't."

"I'll just touch him."

"Go on," the hound urged.

Gingerly, Helena reached up and placed the palm of her hand on the statue's leg.

Nothing happened.

"Touch him with both hands," Brutus said.

"Why?"

"Look, Blue Eyes, maybe if you don't love him enough to bring him around with one hand, you love him enough to bring him around with both hands. You dig it?"

She touched the statue's leg with both hands.

Jessie was not returned to flesh.

"Well, what's number five in the book?" Brutus asked, wearily.

"Wait a minute?" Helena said, her bright eyes adance with some clever thought or other.

"What is it?"

She said, "Why don't you touch him, Brutus?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you."

"I don't truly love him!"

"Don't you love him a little?" she asked, kneeling down, taking the hound's head in both her hands.

"He's a man, and I was once a man," the hound said. "Or at least I think I was once a man."

She said, "What's that got to do with anything?"

"Well -- true love, the book said. That would be a woman who loved him."

"Doesn't a father love his son, and the son his father?"

He looked away from her face, found himself staring down her cleavage which was handsomely revealed in her low-cut sweater. But that wasn't what he

needed now. He looked up again and said, "Well, I'm not his son or his father, am I?"

Overhead, another shattering streak of lightning, as white as snow against the blue-black night, pierced a powder keg and brought a long roll of thunder across Millennium City like the volley of an ancient cannon, a battle in the clouds.

"It's going to rain, soon," Helena said. "Let's not waste any more time, Brutus. You jump right up there on that pedestal and touch him; see what may happen."

"This is silly."

"You've known him seven years longer than I have," she observed. "You must have strong feelings about him, after all that time."

"The book says one must truly love..."

She stood up and stamped her foot, a gesture which made her unconfined breasts bounce wildly up and down. "Brutus, if you don't do your part, if you don't jump up there this minute and touch Jessie, you can forget about me, you can forget about that day bed -- whether or not you shorten your claws!"

"But -- "

"And that's final."

More thunder; more lightning, a single fat droplet of rain...

"Very well," the hell hound said.

"Good boy," Helena said.

Brutus tensed and leaped, scrambled on the pedestal and stood beside the granite Jessie Blake. He looked down at Helena and said, "How should I touch him -- with a paw?"

"Try that."

He lifted one paw and brushed it sheepishly against the stone leg, yipped when the statue seemed to move.

"It's working, Brute!"

"Yeah," the hound said, amazed.

"Keep it up, Brute!"

The hound brushed the statue again, pushed his paw back and forth against the granite. Magically, the gray stone gradually began to fade away, to take on the color and texture of leather and cloth and flesh and hair, until Jessie Blake stood before them again, just as he had been earlier in the night before Me dusa had frozen him with her gaze.

Dramatically, at that moment, the biggest flash of lightning yet scored the sky, from horizon to horizon, and the clap of thunder was like a thousand cymbals meeting with force.

"Jessie, are you all right?" Helena asked, raising her hands to him, to help him down.

He worked his mouth, as if he were surprised to feel his lips moving, and he said, "Okay, but -- "

"Come down, darling," she said.

He ignored her offered hands and jumped down, with Brutus jumping close behind him.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

He rubbed the back of his neck. "I've got a vicious headache," he said. Then he seemed to remember Brutus, and he turned and bent down and scratched the hell hound behind the ears. "Thanks, partner."

Brutus looked bashfully at the ground. "Least I could do," he said. "We have a case to work on, and -- "

"Jessie, it was just awful what they did to you," Helena said.

"I know what they did," the detective assured her, grimly. "I was aware of my surroundings all the time, even though I had been turned to stone. I would like to hear how you two found me! I'd like to hear, that is, after I've found a men's room. I never did have a chance to use the one at the Four



Worlds."

## Chapter Nine

Zeke Kanastorous was still trapped in the small chalk circle in Jessie's inner office when the three got back from Millennium City just after one o'clock in the morning. Brutus had relighted the two previously extinguished black candles, to relieve the angry little creature of the worst of its pain, but Kanastorous was far from happy. He paced around and around in that tight circle, where only four steps were needed to make a full circuit, and he cast occasional glances at Jessie, Helena and the hell hound as they filed into the room. He was dotted with a black excretion, some form of ectoplasm, and his four-fingered hands were fisted at his sides.

"How you feeling, Zeke?" Jessie asked, moving into the main circle with Helena and Brutus at his back.

"You'll be sorry for this," the demon said. He stopped pacing and faced the detective, his shoulders hunched, his eyes blazing.

"What did I do?" Jessie asked.

"There is a law against black-magic crudities. It's no longer possible for some wise ass magician to summon up a demon whenever he wants. They punish that sort these days!"

"Do they punish kidnapppers?" Jessie asked.

"What's that mean?" Kanastorous snapped.

"I was kidnapped," Jessie said. "You were one of the conspirators who worked to snare me."

"A gross misrepresentation of the facts," the demon said, drawing himself up to his full, yet diminutive, height, his carapaced shoulders pulled back, his bony chest thrust out.

"Oh?"

"Yes, my Sam Spade friend. You see, I was working with the government under special orders from the Regent for the Western States." He gave the title as much prestige and awe, by his obsequious tone of voice, as some people had once given the names of God before the maseni had come and exposed God for what he was.

Jessie raised his eyebrows and said, "Well, well. The national government is interested in keeping the Galiotor Tesserax affair quiet"

"You better believe it, my hardnosed detective friend," Kanastorous said. "I've already explained to your hound, here, that I know nothing of the Tesserax business; I wasn't told of it. But I do k now the government's in a sweat to keep it hushed up. Therefore, if I have broken any laws, as you assert, I have done so with complete immunity from prosecution in any nether-world court of law."

"From their prosecution," Jessie amended.

"I fail to understand."

"You've no guarantee of immunity from my prosecution," Jessie said. He walked to the edge of the larger circle and pointed his index finger at the demon's squashed nose. "When I let you go tonight, you can follow one of two courses. One: you can run immediately to the authorities and tell them how you were illegally called up by ancient means, how your civil liberties were grievously violated; you can inform them that I have been rescued by my friends, and that I am loose again. Two: you can simply forget that all of this happened; you can let bygones be bygones; you can keep your head and let things go on as they have always gone before. If you choose the first course -  
- "

"They'll be on your tails in an hour," the demon said.

"And you will suffer mightily," Jessie said.

"I don't see how," Kanastorous said, though he watched the detective through heavy-lidded eyes.

"Even if an arrest order is issued at once, against Brutus and Helena and me, the coppers won't catch us all together or even quickly. At least one of us will have the time to perform the ceremony and summon you up again. And the next time, Kanastorous, we'll snuff out all seven of the black candles and give you eternal rest; you'll never have a conscious thought again, for all eternity; you'll drift, mindlessly, in the void."

"This is outrageous!" the demon wailed.

"But that's the way it will be."

"Throwback," the demon spat.

"You believe that we would carry out the threat?" Jessie asked.

"Any of you three?" Kanastorous asked. "Of course I believe it. You are a pack of savages."

"Then I trust you'll know how to act when we let you go."

"I'll mind my own business," the demon said. "What else can I do?"

"What else indeed?" the detective asked. He turned, picked up the open Bible and began to chant. In a few minutes, though all the chalk marks remained on the floor, Kanastorous had been dispatched.

As Brutus blew out all fourteen of the candles, both black and white, alternating from color to color as prescribed by ritual, Jessie crossed the room and turned on the ceiling lights, which stung both his and Helena's eyes. Brutus didn't notice. As if the lights had been a signal, the vidphone rang in the outer office.

"I'll see who it is," Helena said.

Jessie went to his desk, which was pushed up against the wall where the robot had left it, and he got a narcotic pin gun from the center drawer. He checked the clip to be sure that it was full, strapped the holster on under his jacket and slipped the weapon into its leather pouch. From the same drawer he took a plastic crucifix and a bottle of yellowish garlic oil, which he dropped in a coat pocket.

Brutus came back from blowing out the candles and said, "What's up? What do we do now?"

Before Jessie could answer, Helena stepped in from the front office and said, "It's Galiotor Fils, your favorite client"

The detective glanced around, looking for his extension, couldn't see where the company robot had put it when it was moving furniture, and went into the outer office to take the call. He sat down on the edge of Helena's desk, lifted the receiver and looked at Galiotor Fils' face in the vidscreen. "Yes, Mr. Galiotor?"

The sad, amber eyes stared back, and the lipless mouth was still turned down at the corners as the maseni said, "I was wondering if you'd made any progress in discovering what happened to my brood brother."

"We're working on it, Mr. Galiotor," Jessie said. "In fact, we've got a pretty hot lead right now."

"You have, sir?" The maseni brightened considerably at this bit of news, his mouth leveling out, his deep amber eyes taking on a glint of life, a crinkle at the corners.

"A very hot lead," Jessie repeated. "And I think that you were close to the truth, when you originally came to me," Jessie told him. "I think your embassy people, in Los Angeles, have indeed been involved in a cover-up of some sort."

"I knew it!" Galiotor Fils declared.

"They've tried to keep me from asking questions about Tesseract -- and they've gone to the point of violence to take me out of the picture."

"Good heavens!" Galiotor Fils said. Violence was not much a part of the maseni character.

"And they did have me out for a short time," Jessie admitted. "However, I intend to be more careful, now that I know how rough they're willing to play."

The maseni made a face and said, "What have these scoundrels been up to, Mr. Blake?"

"I can't take time to explain the situation to you now," Jessie said. "We have to move while that tip is hot."

"Well, yes, I see that," Galiotor Fils said. "But is there anything I can do to help?"

"Nothing at the moment," Jessie said. "But rest assured that we are going to be digging into this affair quite deeply in the next couple of hours. We are going to dig to the bottom of it."

"Good luck, then," the maseni said.

"I'll be getting back to you," Jessie said, hanging up.

"You have an absolutely fantastic knack for handling clients," Helena said. "It's a whole different side of you: sugar and syrup."

"Never mind clients now," Brutus said. "How are we going to dig to the bottom of the Tesserax affair in only a couple of hours?"

Jessie smiled. "We can start by tearing up his grave and finding what is at the bottom of it."

## Chapter Ten

Jessie decided they would go over the cemetery wall on a narrow alley beside the burial grounds, where there were no street lamps, and he sent Brutus through first, to check for sentries on the other side. The hell hound phased through the eight-foot-high stone wall, was gone a long moment, then melted back again.

"It's all clear," he told them.

"I wish we could walk through walls like you," Helena said.

Brutus chuckled. "It isn't easy, and I can't do it very often, but it is a handy talent to have, now and again. But if you're wicked enough, and if you die and go to Hell, maybe you'll be transformed into a hell hound, like me."

"Never mind," she said. "I'll just go over the top."

Jessie faced the wall, jumped, hooked his fingers over the top edge, muscled himself up, got a knee over, twisted around and looked down at the hound and the woman. He put a hand down as far as he could reach, and he said, "Come on, Helena."

Hesitantly, she approached, took his hand, planted her feet against the rain-wet stones and climbed laboriously up to join him.

In five minutes, the three of them were inside the alien graveyard, where most of the city's prominent people -- both maseni and human -- were either buried or to be buried when their time came.

Rain had fallen while they were in the office talking to Zeke Kanastorous and to Galiotor Fils, and now the earth smelled damp, and the newly fallen palm leaves were ripe, daubing a strange perfume on the cool, night air that barely circulated around them.

In the shallow light of the big moon -- almost a gibbous moon, Jessie thought -- which shone through a break in the cloud cover, they could see the twin hillocks of the graveyard, though not the small ravine that lay between them much like the fold of Helena's formidable cleavage. The mausoleum stood on the far hill, a square of white stone that seemed to grab the feeble moonlight, magnify and hold it. Human and maseni tombstones, set between well cultivated shrubs and fancy palm trees, dotted the hills and disappeared into the ravine now shrouded in impenetrable shadows spilled there like puddles of ink.

"We should have asked Galiotor Fils where his brood brother's grave was, exactly," Helena said. "I hadn't realized that, in ten short years, you could fill one of these places to this extent."

"People die regularly," Jessie said.

"And a number of vampires have rented plots," Brutus observed.

The graveyard was a ceremonial luxury that the city had been forced to do without for many years prior to the maseni landing. Since every foot of space, in those overpopulated days, was precious, none of it could be given over to the storage of corpses. Now, however, since the dead and dying Shockies, and all the potential children they never produced, were not cluttering up the place, maintenance of graveyards was again feasible. And popular. Despite the fact that there was no longer any religious bunkum that made burial a necessity, people wanted it done and paid well to have it done. It seemed, to some people, that burial carried with it a certain dignity, an undeniable status. Jessie didn't much care for it himself; he intended to be cremated and to have his ashes thrown into any convenient disposal chute or garbage can. A sentimentalist, he wasn't.

"Where do we begin?" Helena asked.

Jessie took a pair of flashlights from the satchel of tools he had brought along, handed one of them to the woman and kept the other for himself.

Brutus did not require any artificial aids to see well in the dark; when shadows pressed in, his eyes grew a deeper, smolder shade of red, and he went wherever he pleased, as if it were broad daylight.

"We should split up and take one row each, compare notes when we get to the end, then go on to three more rows," Jessie said. "The stones seem to be in relatively straight lines, for the most part, in harmony with the contour of the yard."

"Split up?" Helena asked.

"Why not?"

She had changed to jeans, a sweater and a thin wind-breaker; now, she pulled the jacket's nylon collar up around her neck. "We're in an alien graveyard at two o'clock in the morning, planning to dig up a corpse," she said. "That's why I don't want to split up."

"Be reasonable, Helena," Jessie said. "We can get done three times faster if -- "

"I'm being perfectly reasonable," she said. "I was more than reasonable in agreeing to come at all. I'm your Girl Friday, not your partner."

"You're not going to leave, are you?" Jessie asked. "Look, Helena, I need your help. Brutus has a powerful set of claws on him, but he can hardly help me dig open a grave. You're a big, strong girl, and you can take the shovel, at least a little bit, to give me some rest."

"If that's all I'm needed for," she said, "you could have brought the company robot."

"And have him store the whole illegal affair in his microdot memories? Besides, he'd have made a hell of a clanking racket coming over the wall."

"Well, if you need me so badly," Helena said, "you'll just have to give up the idea that I'm going to go off, in here, by myself and prowl around a bunch of tombstones."

"Look," Brutus said, "nothing can happen to you in here, Blue Eyes."

"Don't be condescending with me," Helena snapped. "I'm not fearful simply because I need to play any female role. I'm just being sensible. How can you know what sort of -- thing may be lurking about?" She studied the trees, the larger stones, anything that might be large enough to conceal a dangerous adversary.

Jessie said, "If you encounter a vampire, it has to read your bill of rights and question you according to the Kolchak-Bliss Decision, and it has to gain your explicit approval of the bite. Pretty much the same thing goes for a

werewolf. And most other creatures are required to provide you with a contract... In short, you aren't going to be attacked, ruthlessly, as you might have been in the old days."

Helena switched on her flashlight and pointed it at the nearest stone, played the beam quickly along a row of markers, the splash of yellow luminescence flitting here and there like an agitated specter moving with the currents of the night air.

All was still.

And quiet.

Not even a drying palm frond rattled in the gentle stir of air.

"I've made up my mind," she said.

The detective sighed and said, "Okay, Helena. Brutus will take one row by himself, while you and I look at the second."

"That's better," she said.

"Let's get going," the hound growled.

The moon went behind a dense expanse of clouds; both Jessie and the woman used their flashlights as they started down the avenue of monuments, reading the names.

"This one's blank," she said, pointing at the fourth stone. "Why would they put up a blank stone?"

"The plot's being rented by a vampire who likes his privacy," Jessie said. "Look. Stand back a minute."

When she stepped aside, Jessie searched the base of the tombstone until he found a switch, which he threw.

The sod in front of the stone lifted up, smoothly, silently, revealing a fancy metal coffin in an open grave. "When he goes inside there, during the day," the detective said, "he'll lock this outer door to keep any playful kids from letting the sunlight in on him."

Helena shuddered. "Close it, Jessie, please."

The detective pushed the switch back the other way and watched as the slab of hand-sewn sod moved into place once more, leaving a smooth expanse of wiry grass and no evidence at all of the hollow spot that lay directly underneath.

"I don't think it'd be a bad way of life, really," he said.

"You can't be serious."

"Well, it is eternal, barring a stake through the heart or an unexpected exposure to sunlight. And the whole vampire lifestyle is a sensuous one. It's better than some other things I can think of."

"For instance?"

"Well, I don't think I'd want to die and take the chance of coming back as a ghost, a spiritual gumshoe haunting the offices of Hell Hound for a couple of hundred years, moaning about all the cases I've hand led, sitting in my old chair... That would be pretty grim."

"I guess it would," she said.

"When I get near my time," Jessie said, "I'm not going to wait around to die and take my chances. I'm going to find me a cute little vampiress with a nice body, and I'm going to shack up with her for a few days, until I've been converted." He looked at Helena and said, "What about you? What are you going to do, if you've got warning that death is coming?"

"I haven't thought about it," Helena said.

"Oh, but you should!" Jessie said. "It's as important as preparing a will -- more important, actually."

"I suppose it is," she said. "I'll give it some thought."

Brutus came back from checking the first row of tombstones, and he stared hard at both Helena and Jessie, his red eyes unable to shield his vexation with them.

"Is this all the two of you have accomplished?" he growled, lowering his

burly head.

"Well -- "

"What have you been doing, screwing between the tombstones?"

"We got to talking," Jessie said.

"Well, we aren't here to talk," the hell hound said. "We're here to rob a goddamned grave," he snorted with disgust. A veil of ectoplasm exploded from his wet, black nostrils, rose over his head and floated away across the cemetery, slowly dissolving.

"I'm sorry," Helena said. "It was my fault."

"Let's get going," the hell hound said. "I'll finish this row while the two of you start on a third."

They worked their way slowly along the crest of the hillock, toward the deeply shadowed ravine, reading the names on the stones, few of which they had ever heard of, some of which -- in the cases when they were maseni -- they could not even pronounce.

The moon came out again for a short while, shedding cold light upon the yard. Then, before long, it was concealed again by clouds, thick and purple-black.

"I have the feeling we're being watched," Helena said, as they looked at the stones in the ninth row.

"Watched?"

"I don't see anyone," the woman said, "but I sure do feel as if -- "

Brutus, two rows of tombstones out in front of them, interrupted her with a long, mournful howl.

"He's found Tesserax's grave," Jessie said. "Come on!"

## Chapter Eleven

Jessie gave Helena a hand, pulled her out of the grave and hunkered down to help her brush the wet clumps of earth from her jeans, taking an especially long time to brush off her round little rump, though the seat of her pants was not anywhere so dirty as the knees or the cuffs or the hips.

"Well," he said, "that ought to be the last time that you'll have to spell me."

She sat down by the hole and dangled her legs over the edge, put her arm around the hell hound, who had been watching the two of them take turns in the open grave. She said, "I'm going to be the only well-stacked girl I know who has huge, muscular arms."

"You'll be able to scare away unwanted suitors with them," Jessie suggested. "Just flex your biceps a few times, and you'll terrorize any would-be rapist."

"It isn't funny," she said, feeling her biceps through her sweater and jacket, as if they might already have begun to swell.

Jessie jumped into the grave and picked up the collapsible shovel he had brought along in the tool satchel with the flashlights. "We're down to almost four feet," he said. "And that's about as deep as they bury them around here. So -- "

As he stamped the spade into the hard-packed earth, it rang against a large, metal object.

Helena picked up her flashlight and directed its strong beam down at the point of the shovel, revealing a long, twisting streak of silvery metal like a vein in the earth. The casket lid caught the light and shimmered with it, new and slightly burnished.

"Eureka," Brutus said. "The daring group of coffin prospectors has struck another lode."

"Thank God," Helena said, feeling her biceps.

Jessie set to work more industriously than before, clearing away the last couple of inches of earth, until he had the entire face of the casket revealed. It was a plain model, not what one expected the second-ranking embassy maseni to be laid to rest in, without curlicues or decorations. It was smooth, slightly raised, and very difficult to stand up on, as he was forced to do. Starting at the top, right corner, Jessie worked his way around the oblong box, cutting the dirt away from its lid so that they could open the thing when the time came. At a quarter past four in the morning, he tossed the shovel out of the hole, finished.

"Are we going to have to fill this back in again?" Helena wanted to know, her lips pouted, one hand gingerly testing her other biceps.

The detective said, "Well worry about that later."

"I'm worrying about it right now."

"There's a length of rope in the satchel," Jessie said. "Would you toss it down to me?"

"I'll get it," Brutus told the girl.

"You're a charmer."

The hound got up and walked over to the open satchel, peered inside, plucked out a coil of rope with his teeth, brought that to the open grave and dropped it on Jessie's head.

"Why didn't you warn me, for Christ's sake?" Blake asked, stooping to pick up the rope, rubbing his head with the other hand. "This is steel-link covered by nylon, you know; it isn't quite so light as a feather."

"Why weren't you looking up?" Brutus asked, sitting down beside Helena again.

Still rubbing his head, Jessie said, "I was looking at the twin locks on the casket lid. I thought I'd have to hammer them off, but it looks like they were never engaged."

"They put it down there unsealed?"

"Seems that way," Jessie said.

He uncoiled the line which Brutus had thrown on his head, tied one end of that to the coffin handle, threw the other end up to Helena, then scrambled out of the hole.

"Now," he told them, "I'll just pull the lid up so we can see inside that box. The raising lid's going to block my view, so why don't you two go around to the other side of the hole, where you can look straight in."

Helena got to her feet. "I don't like this," she said. "I didn't like it at the start, and I like it even less now. I'm sure we're being watched."

Jessie looked around the empty cemetery. "Impossible."

"I feel eyes on my neck."

"Just go around the other side and tell me whether Tesserax is laid out to rest in a normal manner."

When she and the hound were around on the other side of the grave, Jessie wiped perspiration out of his eyes, dried his hands on his trousers, then wrapped the rope around his wrists so he wouldn't lose hold of it. Putting his broad shoulders into it, he began to backstep across the yard toward the other aisle of stones, grunting to get himself in the mood, raising the coffin lid an inch at a time.

"Must weigh a couple of hundred pounds," he called to them. "You see anything in there, yet?"

Helena hunkered down and probed the grave with her flashlight beam, squinted prettily, either to see better or to register distaste.

"You'll have to get it open more, Jess," the hell hound said, looking along the beam of Helena's light.

Jessie's feet were slipping on the damp grass, and the job proved to be more difficult than he had originally supposed. Nevertheless, he gritted his teeth and continued to backstep.

Something in the hole creaked loudly.

"Uh -- what was that?" Jessie asked.

"I hope it was only an uncoiled hinge on the coffin lid," Helena said, her voice quavering.

"How far have I lifted it?"

"Four inches," Brutus said.

Jessie dug in his heels and began to walk faster, feeling the full weight of the lid coming into the rope.

"That's it, that's it," the hound called.

"See anything?"

"A few more inches," Helena said.

"A few more inches, and I'll have a hernia," the detective said. Nevertheless, he continued to back up.

"More, more," Brutus called, his long tail swishing back and forth like a metronome guiding the rhythm of the detective's effort. He had bent his front legs and brought his head level with the edge of the grave, as if he were beginning to catch a glimpse of the interior of the coffin.

"Now?" Jessie asked.

"You need some help?" Helena asked.

"No, no," Jessie said. "I'm doing okay."

Truthfully, he wasn't doing okay at all; his heart was thudding, and blood pounded like hammers at both temples. However, he felt he had to make Helena think it was a simple matter for him. Already, though she didn't know it, he felt himself to be in constant competition with her, to such a degree that he felt their male-female roles had become too equal. He had been born and raised in an era when women's liberation wasn't a movement, but an accepted part of society -- yet his home life had been at variance with much of modern thought. Neither his mother nor his father had held much truck with sexual equality or freedom, so it was perhaps understandable that he was sometimes worried about such things.

"That's far enough, Jessie," Helena called,

"What do you see?"

Neither the woman nor the hound answered, but they both continued to stare into the open hole.

Jessie began to sweat again. Clear droplets rolled across his face, tickled his cheeks, caught saltily in the corners of his mouth. "Is it that terrible?" he asked.

"Well, 'terrible' isn't quite the word for it," Helena said. "Something like -- oh, 'frustrating' or 'maddening' would do much better."

"Is the corpse mutilated beyond endurance?" Jessie asked. He had seen corpses mutilated beyond endurance before. "Does it look like the picture of Tesserax we got from Galiotor Fils?"

"No, the corpse isn't mutilated beyond endurance," Brutus said. "In fact, it isn't mutilated at all. In fact, there just isn't any corpse; they buried an empty casket."

"Oh," Jessie said.

"Christ," Brutus said, with feeling, "am I glad that I didn't do all that work for nothing."

"It wasn't for nothing," Jessie said.

"It wasn't?"

The detective let go of the rope and was instantly jerked off his feet as the coffin lid started to go shut. He slammed into the damp grass, face first, bit his lip, tasted blood, and looked up at the woman and the hound, bewildered.

"You had the end of the rope lashed around your wrists," Brutus said. "Remember?"

Jessie looked down at his hands and nodded, sat up and unwound the cord,



let it go again and listened as the empty coffin's lid fell shut with a soft whump, the rope rattling drily after it.

"You were saying this expedition was worthwhile," Brutus said.

Jessie crawled to the edge of the grave, opposite them, and he said, "That's right."

A flight of bats, perhaps twenty of them, rose out of the white mausoleum perched atop the second hillock in the graveyard. In an unexpected burst of moonlight, they screeched away, into darkness. The moon, which had only momentarily illuminated them, slid behind the storm clouds again, like a Spanish woman's face slyly shielded by a fan.

"But we didn't find anything," Helena protested.

"Oh, yes we did," Jessie said, "We found that there was no body in Tesserax's grave."

"That's the same thing."

Jessie got to his feet, brushing himself off, even though he really didn't feel like standing, yet. "No, it isn't the same thing," he said, with brotherly patience, wiping blood from his cracked lips.

"Then I'm no detective," she said.

The bats from the mausoleum streaked by overhead, squeaking furiously, their leathery wings flapping moistly.

Jessie picked up the shovel and began to take it apart as he talked, to repack it in the satchel. "I'm aware that you're not as quick in these matters as I am," he said. "No one would expect you to be; you've not had the experience I have." He was pleased that their roles were now returning to a moderated equilibrium that he could cope with; he no longer felt so damn foolish. "Don't you see, though... We've got enough evidence to go to Galiotor Fils, enough stuff for him to bring charges against the maseni embassy officials. From here on out, it's all up to the police and the courts. They'll find out what really happened to Tesserax, and why such an elaborate cover-up was done. All we have to do is get the facts to Galiotor Fils."

From the darkness behind Jessie, a familiar, rasping voice spoke: "However, in order to do that, Mr. Blake, you will first have to get out of this cemetery alive."

Jessie turned, bringing up his flashlight as Helena raised hers, pressing back the shadows where a dozen vampires stood not five yards away. Their eyes glittered brightly in the twin beams of the hand torches, and they were all smiling.

The fiend in charge of the group, the tallest and handsomest of the lot, was Count Slavek, the bloodsucker who had almost illegally bitten Renee Cuyler only a brief night or two ago.

"The bats we just heard -- " Jessie began.

"Us," Slavek said.

"Jessie?" Helena asked. "What are they going to do with us?"

"Nothing," the detective said. Slavek laughed.

Jessie said, "Unless you want to be converted to the life of the undead, a vampire can't touch you, Helena. That's the law."

"Ah," Slavek said, "but when all is said and done, the law is nothing but a piece of paper."

"Ignore that piece of paper, and see what happens to you," Jessie said. "An official stake straight through the heart, a quick conversion to a pile of lifeless ashes."

Slavek took a step forward; his comrades followed after him in a sussuration of flowing capes.

"Slavek, it isn't worth breaking the law over someone like Renee Cuyler, especially when I was right and you were wrong."

Slavek advanced another step.

The pale-faced bloodsuckers behind him spread out on both sides, in a

semi-circle. They all leered at Helena.

"This hasn't anything whatsoever to do with Renee Cuyler," Count Slavek said, "Oh, she was a tasty little piece, to be sure. But the world is just full of tasty little pieces -- like your Helena, for example, who is one of the tastiest little pieces I've ever seen, bar none." He grinned wickedly at her.

"Oh, fuck off," Helena said.

Slavek winced; male vampires were not accustomed, in their male chauvinistic society, to hearing such talk from women. He looked back at Jessie, trying to regain his composure, and he said, "I would not nurture any grudge because of Renee Cuyler. She was a little bit empty-headed, anyway. You understand, I prefer empty-headed wenches to your average smart-assed college girl... But I have my limits: a minimum IQ of 105 being the bottom of those limits; a top IQ of 120 being the other end. Anyway, Blake, this is no private vendetta."

"Then, what -- "

"I've been sent here to stop the three of you from messing around in the Tesseract affair. Your hell hound companion will be restrained through the talents of several sorcerers who have been watching you since you first entered the cemetery."

"I knew it!" Helena exclaimed.

"Meanwhile, both you and your lady friend will be -- ah, converted to the life of the undead," Slavek finished. "And may I say, I am going to enjoy munching on this gorgeous child's neck -- and, later, on other things which also appear delectable indeed."

"Jessie, stop them," Helena said, from the other side of the open grave. Jessie said, "Run!"

## Chapter Twelve

Blake had broken the collapsible shovel into two pieces, and now he used these to divert Count Slavek's attention. He threw the spade section at Slavek's face, then tossed the handle hard at his ankles. As the vampire put up his arms to ward off the blade, he stepped backwards and got his legs tangled hopelessly in the whirling handle. He cried out, stumbled clumsily to the side, fell onto his back, thoroughly confusing his fanged comrades.

Jessie turned as soon as he had thrown the second piece of shovel, not waiting to see what it would do. Without bothering to scoop up his flashlight, he leaped across the open grave, grabbed Helena's hand and started running -- not in any planned direction, just away.

Brutus ran ahead of them, taking enormous strides, leading them purposefully toward the main cemetery gate. He could have headed for one of the walls and phased right through, Jessie knew, but he had chosen to stay with them. Jessie remembered that it had been the hell hound's touch which had changed him from stone to flesh in the sculpture garden at Millennium City...

The sound of wings grew behind them.

"Faster!" Jessie shouted.

Helena gripped his hand more tightly and increased her pace to match his, issuing not a word of objection.

He looked at her as they entered an open aisle where there were no granite obstacles to beware of, and he saw that she was holding up quite well. She didn't seem terrified, merely frightened, biting her lip and straining to get all the speed she could out of her fine, long legs. Then he saw the flashlight that she carried in her other hand, and he realized it was proof of his own terror that he hadn't noticed, until now, that it was on and that the bright beam danced across the earth directly in front of them, pinpointing

their position for Slavek and his pack.

"Helena!" he shouted.

Still running, her breasts shoved out like twin ornaments on a new fluttercar, her yellow hair flying out behind her like a tailfin pennant, holding tightly to his hand, she glanced sideways at him.

"The flashlight!"

She didn't get what he meant.

"Throw the flashlight away!"

She held up the hand torch, slowing down and thereby forcing him to slow as well, looked wonderingly at the instrument for a moment, then realized what he meant. She pitched it away, to her right. The beam whirled crazily, a spinning yellow lance that shaved paper-thin wafers of darkness off the bulk of the night, then struck a large tombstone and shattered.

They picked up speed again, running as fast as they could, the grass treacherously damp under them.

Still, they could hear wings flapping behind them -- and the shrill cries of many tiny creatures: bats.

Ahead, Brutus slowed and came to a full stop, his long tail straight up in the air, his pointed ears thrust forward, the long hair down his neck and back bristling.

In a moment, they were up with him.

"What's the matter?" Jessie asked. His heart was pounding so loudly in his own ears that he could barely hear his voice.

"A sorcerer," the hell hound growled.

"Where?"

The hound pointed with his snout.

The magician was an old man, quite tall and thin as a rail, his long fingered hands raised before him as if he were about to cast a spell or a charm; his gray, frizzled beard fell nearly to his waist, ruffled by the night breeze. He stood directly before the main gates in a pool of unnatural, cobalt blue light that seemed to radiate from the man himself. He was dressed all in black robes decorated with crimson quarter-moons and silver stars. He also wore a peaked hat of the same fabric and design.

Brutus said, "He's a danger to both of us. He could cast a spell on the two of you... And he could dissipate my soul, if he wanted to, and if he didn't care about breaking the law." Clearly, the hell hound was recalling his own treatment of Zeke Kanastorous earlier in the day -- and perhaps regretting it just a little.

"Then we don't go out the main gate," Jessie said.

"We better go somewhere, and damn fast!" Helena said, pulling their attention back to the aisle down which they had just run. "Slavek will be on us in a minute."

It came sooner than that.

Behind them, screaming bats swooped out of the darkness, small, eager shadows that swelled rapidly, cancerously into huge-winged, semi-amorphous creatures that posed a more serious threat than they had in their tinier form. Their dark and wizened faces, once pinched and vicious, fleshed out, turned first yellow and then white, deathly white, like expanding balloons losing their deep color. Their claws changed into hands -- human hands with wicked nails that gleamed with reflected moonlight. Their scrawny legs lengthened, and the transformation into human form was completed.

A rush of cold fog rolled over them, as if drawn toward the vampires, and Helena stepped closer to the detective.

"This way!" Jessie cried.

He turned and ran toward the ravine, from which the fog had come, down between the two round hills on which the major portion of the maseni cemetery was built.

"But it's so dark down there!" Helena protested, running along beside him, her breath now making little white clouds before her.

"I know."

The fog was thicker now, and it got nearly impenetrable as they fled.

Brutus said, "And vampires see better than you two -- especially in the dark."

"I know," Jessie repeated.

Behind: shrill bats. The vampires had taken to the air again.

"But if we run far enough," Jessie said, "we'll find the back gate. They might not have guarded that."

"Wishful thinking," Brutus growled. But that was the extent of his sarcasm. He loped out ahead of them, down into the darkness and the cool mist that hung in there like a giant shroud among the stones.

### Chapter Thirteen

Tombstones loomed out of the fog, like rotten teeth chewing marshmallow candy. Jessie and Helena, still holding hands, weaved left and right to avoid the obstacles, staggering dangerously on the treacherous expanse of short, wet grass. They could no longer hear the shrill, inhuman cries of the vampire bats behind them, but that might be only because their own breathing was so labored that it effectively covered over all of the other night sounds.

At the bottom of the hill, as they dug in their heels to keep from plunging into a row of stones that sprang out of the fog immediately before them, Helena said, "Jessie, wait."

"What?"

"I have to rest."

"I thought you would," Brutus said. He appeared out of the syrupy, shifting mist in front of them, only his glowing red eyes visible like puddles of phosphorescent blood in the darkness. "I found some large markers over this way," the hound said. "They'll shelter you from any accidental aerial observation."

"You're a dear," Helena said.

"I know," the hound replied.

He turned and preceded them across the bottom of the ravine to a line of seven-foot stones and funereal statuary which threw even more intense shadows on the wall of night.

Helena went to the widest of the stones, which was cut deep with maseni letters, and leaned against it. She bent over and rubbed painfully at her thighs. "Not only am I going to have huge biceps from digging open that empty grave -- I'm going to have big, knotted, muscular legs from all of this goddamned running around."

"We'll love you anyway," Jessie said.

Brutus said, "I like husky women."

High above, out of sight, the night popped with an animal wail. It struck down on the mist-shrouded graveyard like a note from a precision-made, tiny, silver horn.

"Passed right over us," Brutus said.

"This time, yes," Jessie said. "But not for long."

Helena stood up and moved away from the alien headstone, one hand on each of her buttocks, as if she were holding them in place while she tried a few experimental steps. "I feel better, now," she said.

"Let's move, then, before -- "

From the darkness close at hand came a moaning sound, an agonized howling that made their flesh crawl. Deep, gravel-throated, it had not issued from a human being, but from some other sort of creature, surely as large as a man,

or larger.

"What was that?" Helena asked.

It was naggingly familiar, but Jessie finally said, "I don't know."

The moaning came again.

And with it came the sound of something shuffling along the grass, something quite large, barely able to lift its feet, brushing the dry, fallen palm fronds away in front of it.

"Let's get the hell out of here," Helena said. She hugged herself and shivered responsively as the beast cried out again.

Jessie didn't hug himself, but he did shiver, because he fancied that he heard, in the depths of that pitifully inhuman voice, a wet and cold and genuine agony, a despair that was limitless and, though inhuman, touched something in himself.

"This way," Brutus said.

The hound turned, his enormous tail flowing out behind him, and loped swiftly toward the second grave-spotted hillside, across the floor of the narrow ravine, disappearing into the inky, fog-smearred night, making not a sound, leaving them alone.

They had taken only two quick steps after him when something huge rose up on their left, beside Helena, a lighter darkness against the black curtain of the night. It shuffled out from between two of the high maseni tombstones, moaning loudly, a vicious cutting edge to its voice now, reaching for Helena with a pair of monstrous, cancerous-looking, misshapen hands.

She gasped and grabbed for Jessie, just as he grabbed for her.

The monster lumbered forward like a surging ameboid mass, out into the open, towering over them. At that moment, the storm clouds parted a bit and let through a brief stream of moonlight that illuminated the scene for a second or two before darkness rolled in as deep as ever.

The beast recoiled from the splash of light, then groaned and came at them again, backing them against another row of giant stones.

"Jessie, what is it?" Helena asked, breathlessly, her hands held out before her, palms flattened as if she were trying to push the beast away.

"Mabel?" Jessie asked.

Helena said, "What?"

"Mabel?" Jessie took one tentative step toward the thing, as Helena held desperately to his arm, trying to drag him back beside her.

The beast stopped, its mottled black-brown hulk shifting and changing, growing knobs and protrusions, then losing them as concavities took their places and other protrusions formed elsewhere on its hide, expanding and contracting like a sackful of lively eels.

"Is it you, Mabel?" Jessie asked, stepping closer, not quite so frightened as he had been moments ago.

The Shambler said, "I go by that name, yes. But I can't place who you might be, sir."

"I think I'm losing my mind," Helena said.

Jessie said, "Not at all. Mabel's a hostess at the Four Worlds, downtown."

"Hostess?" Helena asked.

"She's the night hostess. She has to hide during the day."

"I'd disintegrate, otherwise," Mabel said.

"Haven't you ever seen her at the Four Worlds?" Jessie asked.

"No," Helena said. "And I go every Saturday, usually."

"Mabel doesn't work weekends," Jessie said.

"I have weekends off, for the children," the Shambler agreed.

"Children?" Helena asked.

"She terrorizes them," Jessie said.

"Her own children?"

"No, no," Mabel said. "Just children in general -- anyone's children so long as they'll give me a contract."

"Mabel's a maseni supernatural," Jessie explained, as the Shambler gurgled and resettled. "According to her mythos, she terrorizes young children who have been bad."

"I see," Helena said. She put a finger to the corner of her mouth and shook her head and said, "No, I don't see. Look, we're not children -- "

Mabel sighed loudly and settled her great bulk. Her "legs" ceased to exist as her jellied flesh flowed into a gum-drop-shaped lump. "I know you're not. And believe me, I haven't had much fun here, tonight."

"What's going on here?" Brutus asked, stalking back to them from the second hill, his eyes a furious crimson. He looked at the Shambler and said, "How are you, Mabel?"

"Not good," the Shambler said.

"Why aren't you out terrorizing children?"

"That's what we asked her," Helena said.

"I was assigned to the graveyard tonight," Mabel said. She grew a big, bubbly head, then lost it as her body shifted, changed. "They came to me and told me my services were needed here, tonight, that I was to terrorize a couple of adults."

"They?"

"Some people who are pretty far up in the maseni supernatural hierarchy," Mabel said. "People who would know the chants that could destroy me. They didn't make any direct threats, but they strongly hinted that, if I did not cooperate, I'd find myself disintegrated."

"That's pretty low," Brutus growled.

Mabel throbbled with indignation; she pulsed and pounded with indignation. "Isn't that just the case; isn't that exactly how it is: pretty damn low?" She appeared to turn around so that she could look more directly at the detective, though she had no eyes with which to see and could probably have sensed him as well facing one way as the other. "I remember you now, sir," she said. "You came to the Four Worlds Cafe not more than a night or two ago, to have dinner with a demon -- Kanastorous, I believe. You gave me an especially generous tip."

A vampire bat swooped by, invisible in the darkness twenty feet overhead and slightly off to their right; it was identifiable by the sharp chatter it gave out for the benefit of its unholy mates who were searching elsewhere in the cemetery. It had missed them, now, as they stood in the shelter of the double row of canted maseni tombstones. It would soon swoop lower, search the denser shadows that even vampire eyes had trouble with; and then they would be caught.

"Look," Jessie said to the Shambler, "we haven't got long before Slavek and his friends will be onto us. In five minutes, we'll be surrounded by bloodsuckers, sorcerers and whatever else they have out tonight Maybe you can help us."

"How, sir?" the Shambler asked. "Believe me, I will help so long as I don't jeopardize myself. I'm not pleased with the law-breaking that's going on here tonight. And I don't want to alienate a good tipper, like yourself; I can't afford to if I'm going to take a few contracts, each week, to terrorize bad children. On the other hand, I don't want them to find out I've helped you in any way. I don't want to be disintegrated."

"That's perfectly understandable," Jessie said. "You don't have to become directly involved with us. Just provide me with a bit of information, and you can go away and pretend that you never ran into us at all."

Mabel considered this for a moment, forming and reforming her heavy body while she formed and re-formed her no doubt equally heavy thoughts, all the while gurgling gently in an infectious, syncopated rhythm. "What would you

like to know, sir?" she asked at last.

"What's the mystery behind this Galiotor Tesseract? What's going on here that would compel otherwise honest supernatural to break the laws as they're doing?"

Mabel sighed. "I haven't the vaguest idea, sir."

"You've heard of Tesseract?"

"Oh, yes!" the amorphous lump of dark ectoplasm said. "The rumor mill is grinding away at top speed. But it's all just that -- rumor, easily seen through. But you'll have to question the supernaturals higher up in the maseni nether-world hierarchy if you expect the truth. They strongarmed me into this, without telling me why."

"Okay," the detective said. "I didn't really expect that you'd know, but asking the question has become a habit. Let's get more practical. Can you tell me how well-guarded the rear gate is?"

"They have a sorcerer stationed there," the Shambler said. "Just as they have on the front gate."

"Then that's out," Brutus said.

"For all of us," Helena added. "Listen, couldn't we send Brutus out on his own, let him phase through the wall anywhere and get help. If -- "

"Another thing," the Shambler began.

"Yeah?" Jessie asked. He was aware that Mabel was about to throw cold water on Helena's suggestion -- aware, too, that Helena's suggestion was really the only good idea they had left.

"They must have been expecting you to raid the cemetery sooner or later, because they had guards posted. You managed to slip by them on your way in, but they spied you before you got that grave completely open. They called in the heavy artillery -- which includes a street-cleaning truck that's been circling the graveyard spraying holy water on the outside of the wall. No human supernatural is going to phase through that wall again until they're willing to let him through."

"Trapped," Brutus grunted.

"They can't have thought of everything!" Jessie said. He began to pace, his hands shoved deep in his pockets, kicking up clods of grass and dirt from the rounded mounds of the old graves.

"I'm afraid they have," the Shambler said. She had grown taller in the last minute, legs forming under her, arms sprouting out of the brown-black mass once more. "And I better get going before they catch me here with you and discover that I've gone over to the enemy."

"Thanks for your help, Mabel," Helena said.

"It was nothing."

Groaning, hunched forward, massive "shoulders" drawn up around her blocky "head," she shambled away into the darkness between the big stones, arms swinging at her sides, blobby hands nearly scraping the ground.

"What now?" Helena asked.

Jessie said, "If we try to get out of the graveyard, they'll locate us and put an end to us -- they'll disintegrate poor Brutus's soul, and -- "

" -- give us an unsanctioned bite in the neck," Helena finished, putting one slim hand against her jugular.

"Quite right," Jessie said. "On the other hand, if we just sit tight, they'll still locate us and put an end to us -- only they'll need a few extra minutes to finish the job." He paused for effect, and as he did the clouds cracked, bringing a thin wave of moonlight across the shadowed cemetery hills. The three of them stepped closer to the big maseni stones, to avoid the notice of aerial patrols. The detective said, "We've got to stay here, somewhere in the graveyard -- but give them the idea that we've gotten out despite all their defenses."

"How?" Helena asked, always the pragmatist.

"If we hide where they'd never think of looking for us," Jessie said, "their search will prove fruitless. An hour from now, they'll be convinced we got out, and they'll use the remaining hours of darkness to find us -- outside the walls of the cemetery. When their search has shifted away from here, then we will quietly sneak off the grounds."

"In theory," Helena said, "it's fine."

"In reality, it's a pile of crap," Brutus added.

"Exactly," Helena said.

"Criers of joy, angels of light," Jessie said.

"Where could we hide, in this place, that Slavek wouldn't think to look?" Helena asked.

"Well -- "

She said, "There's nothing to hide behind except tombstones."

"We could -- "

"And we can't expect to keep dodging them all night," she said.

Before she could interrupt again, Jessie said, "We could hide in there!" and he pointed up the second hill.

At the top of the dark rise, in a clearing where no tombstones had been erected, the white mausoleum was barely visible between the layers of fog that roiled across the brow like steam from a witch's pot. As the currents of mist shifted around it, obscuring some corners while revealing new ones, the place looked unreal, ethereal, part of some nightmare that a single blink of an eye could obliterate forever.

Helena said, "But that's where Slavek and the others came from, Jessie. It's their home, their grave."

"Some of them stay there, in daylight, yes."

The mausoleum's two windows were black, blank, like blind eyes staring down the slope at them. It was flanked by two tall palms whose fronds were in a sad, drooping condition. It looked much like the last outpost on the edge of the world. The straight, undecorated walls were forbidding, so stark and yet so shiny in the fading moonlight that they appeared to be carved from a block of ice.

"Won't Slavek and the others come back there, and catch us hiding out?" Helena asked.

"None of them will be back until dawn."

"You can't be sure."

Jessie said, "They're not going to rest until they know that we're no longer a threat to the Galiotor Tesseract case -- whatever the hell the Galiotor Tesseract case may be. That means they'll take advantage of every last minute of darkness to hunt us down. They won't be back to the mausoleum until dawn's approaching, and we'll be gone by then. We'll wait there just long enough for them to start looking beyond the graveyard, then we'll sneak out." She still had her hand up to her jugular.

"Don't worry," he said.

"I can't help it. I -- "

The mournful howl of a wolf echoed across the cemetery from the brow of the first hill, behind them. A ululating cry, it rode the rippling rivers of fog.

"A werewolf," Brutus said.

"Maybe one of several."

"I hate werewolves," Helena said. "They don't have any of your charm, Brute. And they slobber so much."

"If they've brought reinforcements," Jessie said, "we've got to move as fast as possible."

He wondered if they had also brought any mythical Italians or Blacks, and he shuddered at the thought of meeting one of them -- tomato sauce dripping from their chins or watermelon slices in hand -- here in the darkness



and the tombstones...

The wolf howled again.

Another answered it.

"Come on," Jessie said.

Brutus loped away, up the hill again.

"I'm coming," Helena said, casting one last apprehensive look at the mausoleum before the moon slid, once again, behind the dark storm clouds.

## Chapter Fourteen

The heavy mausoleum door -- pressed and painted into a fair imitation of weathered oak planking -- was closed but not locked. When Jessie turned the ornate knob, the latch snapped back, and the door squeaked inward a few inches. It barely fit the frame, and it scraped noisily across the concrete floor. The coarse sound rumbled past them, into the fog and, perhaps, into the keen ears of a werewolf lurking nearby.

"You first," Jessie whispered.

Brutus stepped across the raised threshold into the lightless chamber, his large, sharp-clawed paws making surprisingly little noise on the cold mausoleum floor.

Jessie and Helena, still holding hands, followed close behind him, unable to see anything at all, proceeding with caution, feeling their way hike two blind men.

"Can you see anything?" Jessie asked the hound.

"More than you. Seems deserted."

Outside, moonlight broke through the cloud cover again, throwing a ghostly luminescence behind them.

In sympathy, several werewolves raised their heads and howled at the low, rushing sky.

"Better close the door," Helena said.

The detective turned and pushed the heavy panel shut, until the latch snapped into place. The voices of the werewolves were more distant now, less threatening.

"It stinks in here," Helena said.

"Well, it is the home of about twenty of the living dead," Jessie said. "There's bound to be a little odor, a smidgin of corruption."

"A girl like me shouldn't have to work for someone who takes her places like this."

"If you'd like to resign -- "

"I mean, for God's sake, I'm stacked! I'm gorgeous! I thought that counted for something, even these days. But look at me, standing here in this stinking place, a step ahead of an illegal conversion into a vampire, hiding like a rat in a hole -- "

"And loving every minute of it," Jessie added. "You know it's not just your exorbitant salary or my tremendous sex techniques -- which you enjoy as a fringe benefit -- that keeps you on the job. You stay because there's more excitement in one day at Hell Hound Investigations than in a whole year anywhere else. You crave excitement, Helena."

"Yeah, well, right now I crave a little peace and quiet."

"Where better to find that than in a mausoleum?" he asked.

Gradually, their eyes began to adjust to the darkness. The moonlight coming through the two windows showed them the outlines of heavy caskets on cement pedestals, thrusting up all across the large room.

As their eyes adjusted, so did the hound's, and his sight remained constantly superior to theirs. He padded forward, between the coffins, and when he'd gone only a few steps, he growled, "We're not alone, after all."

As the hound spoke, lights came on: dim, yellow, casting eerie shadows, recessed in the dirty ceiling and shielded both by cobwebs and wire cages, not very bright but bright enough to make Jessie squint and raise one hand to ward off the glare.

"Who -- what is it?" Helena asked, also squinting as she backed into the closed mausoleum door.

"Ifs a dumpy, white-faced, sunken-eyed little man wearing badly wrinkled clothes," the hell hound said.

"What on earth is a dumpy, white-faced, sunken-eyed little man in a badly wrinkled suit doing here?" she asked. "He isn't a vampire, is he? He doesn't sound like a vampire from your description." She still held a hand over her eyes, squinting.

"No," Brutus said. "He doesn't have the style for one."

Jessie fumbled in his pocket and brought out the cheap, multi-colored, glowing crucifix. "He doesn't look like a bloodsucker, but we can't be too careful."

"I'm no vampire," the dumpy little man said. "My name's Whitlock. First name, William."

"What are you doing here?" Jessie asked.

"I live here."

"With Slavek and his crowd?"

"Yes," Willie Whitlock admitted.

"Why?"

The dumpy man smiled, leaned on the edge of an open coffin -- brass fittings on polished mahogany -- which separated him from them. There was a mad glint in his eye, either that or a speck of dust. "I'm a ghoul," Whitlock said, smiling. "I like living in a graveyard, with such quiet neighbors. Modern law, ever since the maseni arrived on Earth, doesn't permit me to actually exhume recently buried corpses and consume them as I once did, but I am allowed to live midst the glorious decay and the incredibly lovely putrefaction, which goes a long way toward taking the edge off my otherwise insatiable compulsion."

"Ecchh," Helena said.

"You might as well put away your cheap crucifix," Willie Whitlock said, rolling one jaundiced eye at the thing. "Such stuff won't harm a ghoul at all, as you must know. Besides, it is a rather tasteless, grotesque thing to have to look at, especially glowing so colorfully."

Reluctantly, Jessie lowered the plastic icon and tucked it into his jacket pocket.

Willie Whitlock licked his heavy lips and grinned sardonically as he leaned even further across the open coffin. He stared hard at them, grizzled and mean, his beard stubbly, his face seemed like a piece of crumpled paper. "You robbed a grave tonight, did you not?"

Jessie cleared his throat and said, "Not actually. There wasn't anything to rob; it was empty."

"Still and all, you did get to dig up the casket and pry open the lid, didn't you?"

"Yes, but -- "

"Tell me about it!" The ghoul's voice was a pleading, insistent whine, undignified yet commanding. His eyes glinted more madly than before. "It must have been beautiful -- a rewarding experience, indeed! Ah, if only I could have been at your side!"

"Actually, it was rather awful," Jessie said.

"Tell me, tell me!" Willie Whitlock cried, leaning so far over the open casket that he seemed in danger of falling right into it.

"You're a deranged, white faced, dirty little man," Helena said, in a voice dripping with scorn. "You are perfectly disgusting. And your suit is a

wrinkled mess."

Willie Whitlock jerked at each epithet, as if her words were physical blows against his head, and his face took on a grim expression. "Look here, lady, I am only what the damned myths say I am. A ghoul has to be deranged. And white-faced. And sunken-eyed, for that matter. You have noticed, I am sure, that I've a mad glint in my eye. Indeed, at times, it interferes with my sight. I don't want the damn glint, but I have it! And when you live midst glorious decay and incredibly lovely putrefaction, you can't help getting dirty." He looked down at his wrinkled clothes. "And this suit's a part of it, too. I take it to the cleaner's, one of those sonic-press places that does the job in two minutes, but it gets wrinkled again the instant that I put it back on." He looked at her, his expression uglier than ever, and said, "You think it's an easy life, you try it some time." Turning to Jessie, he said, "This woman you've got with you -- she's a real bitch. I'd never dig her up and eat her, even if the law allowed it; she'd give me heartburn, sure as hell."

"Degenerate!" Helena snapped, stepping quickly away from the mausoleum door, bringing her small hands up before her in tight little fists, as if she were prepared to cross that coffin-dotted, dust-filmed room and give Willie Whitlock the soundest beating of his life -- or of his non-life.

"That's the last straw!" the ghoul squealed. "Degenerate, am I? I was going to give you people a break, here. I was going to let you have a few more minutes of freedom while you told me all about digging up that grave. But that last insult just ruined everything for you!" He reached into the open coffin in front of him and lifted out a nether-world communications receiver. Before any of them realized quite what he was doing, the ghoul dialed a single number and said, into the receiver, "They're here, in the mausoleum. Call off the search."

"Stop him!" Jessie shouted.

The hell hound leaped, slid across the top of a black casket, leaped again from the end of it and landed on the ghoul, sent the small man crashing backwards into another coffin which fell from its pedestal with a roar that echoed about the room like thunder in a barrel. The nether-world communications receiver had fallen from the ghoul's hand, but the damage was done. The searchers knew where they were.

Outside, wolves howled maniacally.

Jessie imagined that he could hear the furious flapping of bat wings on the wet night air.

"Lock the door!" he shouted.

Helena whirled, groped around, found the lock and slipped it into place. She grabbed the doorknob in both hands, twisted it and yanked, just to be sure the lock worked. It did. But that really didn't mean too much, because Count Slavek and the others probably had keys...

Jessie reached the coffin where the nether-world receiver dangled on a lanky cord. He found there was also a regular telephone in that oblong box, resting on the mottled, water-spotted pink satin lining. That seemed odd. But he supposed that a ghoul living in a mausoleum with a couple of dozen vampires felt the need for contact with the outside world, once in a while...

"You can't win! You can't!" Willie Whitlock screamed. He was lying flat on his back, pinned under the hell hound who stood on his thighs and chest. Brutus snarled at the ghoul's outburst and snipped less than playfully at his neck.

"What are we going to do?" Helena asked, joining Jessie at the coffin full of telephones.

"Call the police," he said, dialing the emergency number.

"But what if the police are in on this?" she asked.

"I don't think they are. Flesh-and-blooders don't want us to find out what's behind the Tesserax disappearance -- but they aren't ready to kill us

to keep us quiet. Our only violent confrontation, so far, has been with the supernaturals."

Something struck the outside of the mausoleum door.

"They're here!" Helena said.

"L.A. Police Department," an efficient, cool voice answered on the other end of the line. "Sergeant Bode speaking."

"My name's Jessie Blake, and I'm a private investigator in the L.A. area. My secretary and I are trapped in the mausoleum of the maseni cemetery. We desperately need help."

"Locked yourself in?" the sergeant asked, perplexed.

"No, no. There are two dozen vampires outside trying to get in at us and execute an illegal bite."

"We haven't had a case of illegal bite in two years," the sergeant said. "And I've never heard of that many vampires getting together -- "

"Neither have I," Jessie said. "But they're out there all right."

Sergeant Bode hesitated, then asked, "What number are you calling from, please?"

Jessie knew better than to waste time arguing; he read off the number.

Something crashed heavily against the closed door, again, and a hundred shrill voices rose up beyond the mausoleum walls.

"Two dozen vampires?" Sergeant Bode asked.

"Or more."

"Anyone harmed yet? Need an ambulance -- or a priest?"

"Not yet," Jessie said. "But we will if you don't hurry!" He slammed down the phone, hard.

From beyond the imitation oak door, an inhuman voice cried: "Jessie Black, Jessie Black..."

"Jessie, the window!" Helena cried, pointing.

A shadow moved against the outside as some supernatural beast tried to peer in at them.

"Jessie Black... Jessie Black... Jessie Black..." The inhuman voice was moaning again, filled with an almost tangible evil, like an audible syrup.

"My name's not Black," Jessie shouted, cupping his hands around his mouth, to be sure his voice would carry through the thick door. "It's Jessie Blake, you idiots!"

Beyond the door, several voices rose in argument and consternation, gradually subsided. Then the haunting cry came again, hollow and far away, as if it echoed from the far shore of an infinitely wide sea... "Jessie Blake... Jessie Blake..."

"What do you want?" he asked.

"You can't escape us... Why don't you open the door and let us in, make it easy for everyone... ?"

"Never!"

"Be reasonable," the inhuman voice said. "What have you got to gain by being bullheaded in the face of such overwhelming opposition? Be sensible."

"You're a bunch of unprincipled hoodlums," Jessie said.

"If you force us to break in there, you can be certain we'll treat you twice as harshly as we otherwise might. And we will show no mercy at all for the lady."

Jessie felt like he was in a movie -- the one in which the prison rioters are locked in a cell block with the warden as their hostage and the governor pleading with them to give up and come out without their weapons.

"Have it your own way, then," the inhuman voice said at last. Whatever the creature was -- vampire, werewolf or something more strange than that -- it sounded hurt, as if it were about to start pouting over his rebuke. "Well just have to come in the hard way, Mr. Black."

"Blake!" he roared.

Before the voice could correct itself, the mausoleum windows to their right and toward the front of the building shattered explosively. Thousands of pieces of dirty glass showered into the ranks of opened coffins, and glass tinkled on the gray cement floor. Both Jessie and Helena were unhurt, for the windows were too far forward to break over them.

When the last of the glass had fallen, all was quiet as -- a tomb. For a brief moment. The quiet was broken, this time, by the sound of wings as bats flapped through the windows into the musty room, banging into the wooden frame and into each other, in their eagerness to attack.

Jessie grabbed for his luminescent crucifix, caught it in the lining of his jacket pocket, tore his coat getting it out, then dropped it. He felt like Zeke Kanastorous: no thumbs. He bent and picked the cross up again, just in time to face Count Slavek who had metamorphosed from a bat into a man. The Count had stepped forward, reaching for them, grinning a grin that was crammed full of fangs.

"Stop right where you are!" the detective ordered, brandishing his plastic weapon.

The bloodsucker saw the crucifix and recoiled from it in a flurry of satin-lined cape.

Jessie waved the cross again, to make his point.

Slavek hissed and held out one long-fingered, fish-belly-white hand, as if he thought his pointed finger would somehow destroy the hated object. Then he looked more closely at the crucifix and said, scornfully, "How crass. How cheap. How little-minded and tasteless."

Hugging Helena against his side, Jessie said, "Well, it only cost two credits in a relic shop, so you can't expect too much."

The other vampires formed into men, the little animal faces giving way to human countenances that looked no more innocent, no less terrifying. All eyes were on the detective and the girl; many pairs of saliva-wet fangs shone in the dim, yellow light. Bloodshot eyes were more in evidence than at the second morning of an Elks convention.

A werewolf leaped through the broken window, foam flying from its open mouth. It raised up onto its hind feet and clawed the air with manlike hands whose claws must have measured nearly six inches.

"You can't last much longer," Slavek said.

"Sure we can," Jessie said, clutching the crucifix so tightly he was afraid it might shatter in his hand. He couldn't loosen his grip, though; he hoped it was made of tempered plastic. "This little device I'm holding will keep you, and the werewolves, away from us."

"But it will mean nothing to the sorcerer," Slavek said. "He'll be here in a moment, to put a spell on you. When you're both mesmerized, he'll make you drop the cross. Then we'll move in."

The bloodsuckers murmured excitedly. Several of those watching Helena licked their pale lips with relish.

Even as Slavek finished speaking, the sorcerer levitated through the nearest broken window. He was lying in the air, flat on his back, his arms folded across his skinny chest. His black robes hung straight down from him. Oddly, his beard had risen straight up, and although the sorcerer was horizontal to the earth, the beard was vertical; it met his chin at a ninety-degree angle. The old man rotated slowly, until he was vertical himself, and his feet touched the floor. Now, his three-foot-long beard stuck straight out from his chin, horizontal to the earth, still perpendicular to the rest of him. He slapped at it with both hands, to no avail, then gripped it firmly and dragged it down until it hung straight. However, when he let go of it, it snapped up again, jutting out three feet in front of him.

"Excuse me," the old man said. "I always have problems with that spell. I'm afraid I've never mastered levitation as well as some." He turned his back

on everyone, huddled against himself and muttered some chant in a language that Jessie did not understand. When he turned around, his beard was hanging straight down, as it should be. "There," he said. "Now, we're ready to get on with it."

"Get this bastard off me!" Willie Whitlock said, as Brutus snapped at his pallid nose.

"I'm afraid the young couple is our first order of business," the sorcerer said. "Will you put down the crucifix, Mr. Blake?"

"No."

"Then I must make you put it down," the old man said. He raised his arms and began another chant.

"Look," Jessie said, "the Tesseract affair can't be so important that it's worth breaking the law over."

The sorcerer continued to mumble.

"You know you can't keep this atrocity hidden forever, don't you? You know that one day you will all be severely punished for what you're doing to us. Some of you might even have your souls dissipated. Think about that. No more bites after that, legal or illegal!"

The sorcerer chanted, unmoved.

"Jessie," Helena said, "I'm getting numb."

He felt his own feet turn into twin blocks of ice. As the chill rose swiftly above his knees, he said, "There's still plenty of time to reconsider this, gentlemen."

Slavek grinned fiercely and tested the points of his handsome fangs against the ball of his thumb. He seemed to feel they were sharp enough.

The chill was up to Jessie's hips.

"Brutus, can't you stop them from doing this?" the detective asked. "Can't you go for the sorcerer's throat?"

The hell hound said, "I'd love to. But I'd have to get off Willie to do that, and then he'd be up and after you; he'd knock the crucifix out of your hands anyway."

"Jessie, no!" Helena cried.

He knew exactly what had caused her terrified exclamation. The chill had reached his own shoulders. In a moment, it would travel down his arms, would affect the hand that now held the crucifix.

"Soon," Slavek said, clearly thinking of Renee Cuyler as he stared at Helena's breasts and then slowly upward to her slim neck.

The chill reached Jessie's hands.

He watched his fingers open.

The crucifix fell to the floor.

Screeching with delight, Slavek started forward.

"Stop where you are! Police!" The voice came from the broken windows, behind the vampires and the two werewolves.

Jessie looked up and saw uniformed men leaning into the room, holding long-snouted guns. They opened fire on everyone, attackers and victims alike. Some of the weapons were narcotic pin guns, these to affect the humans; others were garlic oil pistols that spat out droplets of fluid from which the maddened vampires withdrew like vipers from the mongoose. He saw Slavek leap across two rows of cof fins and flatten himself, in terror, against the far wall, and then he slumped forward into unconsciousness as the narcotic darts had their effect on him...

## Chapter Fifteen

The low, waffled ceiling was white, the walls a soft blue. The only furniture was the comfortable but narrow bed on which he lay. The room had no

windows and only the single door which was wide and padded to resist damage. It all had the look of a prison of some sort. The light source was a recessed panel in the ceiling, protected by a sheet of plexiglass. As Jessie sat up on the edge of the bed, he saw that the floor was the same pleasing shade of blue as the walls. It was every bit as clean and as spotlessly shiny as everything else in this place.

Standing, he felt slightly woozy and weak, as if he hadn't eaten in a day or so. Indeed, as he recalled the events which had led up to his incarceration, he realized that this might easily have been the case. How long had he slept, dreamlessly, in this room? If he had been hit by several narcotics darts from the police weapons, the cumulative effect could have kept him out for as much as twelve hours.

And what of Helena in all that time?

And Brutus...?

"You're awake, are you, Mr. Blake?" a voice asked, from behind the light fixture in the center of the ceiling.

He looked up, squinting at the soft glow. "Who's that?" he asked.

"Just the prison computer," the voice said. "One of my duties is to keep an eye on the inmates and welcome them when they wake."

"I'm in prison, then?"

"Oh, you needn't be so down-at-the-mouth, sir," the computer said. It sounded as if its voice tapes had been recorded by an old maid school teacher from Altoona. "You aren't in the prison proper, but in the protective-custody wing."

"I see. And the others?"

"They've been put in a special subterranean prison vault, in padlocked federal coffins with samples of their native soils to sustain them until the sun sets and they can be questioned."

"I didn't mean the vampires," Jessie said. "I'm not at all interested in them right now. But what about my secretary, Helena? And what about my business partner -- a hell hound named Brutus?"

"Oh, they're fine, sir, fine," the computer said. "They've been ready to meet with the proper officials for some time now; we've all been waiting for your revival."

"I could have been given drugs to counteract the narcotics. I could have awakened much earlier."

"Well," the computer said, "certain arrangements had to be made anyway, before anyone could talk to you. So it was just as well that you slept."

"What time is it?"

"Seven in the evening, sir."

"I slept the entire day away?"

"You did that, yes," the computer said.

"Then let's get on with this meeting that you've made 'special arrangements' for."

"Someone will be around shortly, sir, to speak with you. In the meantime, perhaps you would like to watch some entertaining Tri-Dimensional shows." A panel slid open in the left-hand wall, revealing a Tri-D set. When it popped on, the computer said, "There are no controls in the room with you -- in the past, some prisoners have broken them off either in anger or in an attempt to find something to use as a weapon -- but I'll tune in whatever you ask to see. Right now, the early evening Pritchard Robot Show is on. Would you like to watch that? Most everyone does."

Jessie looked away from the light fixture and stared at the padded door. "How long until I can see someone?"

"Only a few minutes, sir. A quarter of an hour."

"I demand a lawyer."

"But you aren't under arrest, sir. Therefore, we are under no obligation

to secure your counsel."

"I feel like I'm under arrest."

A tone of exasperation crept into the computer's voice. "No, sir, you are not, despite how you may feel. As I have already explained, you are in the protective-custody wing, not in the prison itself."

"What am I being protected from?" he wanted to know. He saw there was no handle on the inside of the door, no way to open it except from the hall beyond.

"Yourself," the computer said.

"I'm being protected from myself?"

"Yes, sir. It's felt that you've generated an enormous amount of violence these last two days, most of it directed against yourself, in the end."

"You have to let me out," Jessie insisted, pushing uselessly at the door. "How can you protect me from myself if I'm in here with me?"

The computer was silent.

"Well?"

When it spoke, it chose to change the subject. "Would you like to watch some of the Pritchard Robot Show, sir?"

Sighing, the detective turned and faced the Tri-D set, saw the world-famous features of Pritchard Robot, studio lights gleaming dully on the burnished, metallic head as the simulacrum leaned across his desk and pointed a ball-jointed, five-inch finger at his guest. "Who's he interviewing tonight?" Jessie asked.

"Right now, he's talking with God," the computer said. "From monitoring other cells and the reactions of the prisoners viewing the show, I'd say this is one of his most successful interviews."

Jessie sat down on the edge of his bed and stared morosely at the bright Tri-D screen. "Bring up the sound," he said.

"I know you'll enjoy it, sir," the computer said.

On the screen, Pritchard Robot looked at his guest with the same, flat, unchanging metallic expression he had been built with, and he said, "You do not purport to be the ultimate God, the all-powerful God, the number one world master, the big boy in the sky, the hot shot universe builder?"

The camera cut to a large, muscular man with rich white hair and an enormous, flowing beard. He was handsome in spite of his age, filled with an obvious vitality. "I've never claimed any such thing, as you must well be aware, Pritchard."

"Call me Mr. Robot, please," Pritchard said.

Oh boy, Jessie thought, it's one of those confrontations, is it? He felt sorry for God, but he leaned forward, anxious to see what Pritchard would do to the old goat.

"Tell me, Mr. God, is it not true that you are both the god of the Jews and Christians alike?"

"I'm only a third of the Christian pantheon," God said, obviously stung by the interviewer's personal rebuke.

"But you do serve a purpose in both theologies?" The harsh, yet winning, voice of Pritchard Robot brooked no debate.

"Yes," God said.

"How is it possible to be both a god of wrath and a god of mercy?"

"Now wait just a minute," God said.

"Aren't you deceiving either the Jews or the Christers?" Pritchard Robot wanted to know.

"It was human beings who wrote the Bible, flesh-and-blooders who said these things. They're the ones who created the conflict, not me. I was an innocent party." The old man brushed at his beard. "I had no say in what I was to be, as you know."



"Did you also have no say in the atrocities you forced mankind to suffer for so many centuries?" Pritchard Robot asked, his voice rising. "Are you going to try to tell me, and my vast audience, that you were forced to bring the Great Flood to the Earth?"

"Well, no," God said, subdued. "But once they'd created me as a god of wrath, I was forced to live up to the billing."

"Don't you think -- won't you admit, Mr. God -- that you more than lived up to your mythical role? Didn't you use that role in a most cynical and ruthless fashion, use it to excuse the most vicious, sadistic acts ever recorded in the annals of the written word? Didn't you go overboard, Mr. God, in fulfilling your myth role? Didn't you willfully and demonically desecrate the Earth? Didn't you perpetrate these crude and malicious atrocities solely because you excited and gratified your own sick mind?" Pritchard Robot was smoking around the ears by the time he had delivered this sharp accusation.

"You're exaggerating and being totally unfair," God said. "As I said before, I'm only one of many gods. Others have had to live up to their myth requirements. My requirements were harder than most, that's all."

Pritchard Robot said, "Then you think the Great Flood was not an overreaction to the requirements of your myth role?"

"I think it was within bounds." God shifted in his chair, putting his robes in place. "I was then only a wrathful god, and I needed to punish mankind to fulfill my role."

"Punish mankind," Pritchard Robot said.

"Yes."

"For what sins?"

"Orgies. Disrespect for parents. A rise in the overall crime rate, an increase in warfare."

"And your idea of punishment, of teaching mankind a lesson, was to wipe out the entire race except for one single family -- the Noahs?"

"At the time, it seemed proper," God said, running a finger around his ecclesiastical collar.

Pritchard Robot said, "Tell me, Mr. God, are there no orgies in Heaven?"

"Well, occasionally, as you can read in the Bible..." He coughed and wiped perspiration off his face. "Well, after all, some of those angels are as stacked as..."

"And are you not, yourself, responsible for the rape of a woman, one whose last name is unfortunately lost to history, a woman we shall call Mary of Nazareth?"

"Well, rape is a strong word," God said.

"Did she not have a child by you? And was this child not conceived out of wedlock? And did you not, later, even forsake this child? And when you made Mary of Nazareth with this child, did you not come to her at night while she was quite alone and defenseless, and threaten her with your godly position and your almighty power -- which is nowhere near so almighty as was once thought?"

"Well..." God said, weakly.

"And having done all of this," Pritchard Robot said, "you have the unmitigated gall to sit there and say you reasonably punished humanity with the Great Flood. For things you had done yourself!"

"Uh -- " God said.

"We must break now, for a commercial," Pritchard Robot said. "When we return, we'll be talking with our second guest for the evening, a mythical creature we all enjoy when he has time to be on the show: the Honest Politician. Now, for this word from -- "

The Tri-D picture clicked into two dimensions then suddenly darkened altogether as the panel concealing the screen slid into place and locked, all this command by remote control.

In that same old-maid-school-teacher-from-Altoona voice, the prison

computer said, "I'm sorry to have to interrupt the Pritchard Robot Show, sir, but you have an official visitor. I thought that should have preference."

Jessie turned away from the featureless blue wall where the Tri-D screen had been and got quickly to his feet as the padded door swung outward and a maseni bureaucrat, dressed in flame-orange robes and a black necklace, swayed into the cell.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, Mr. Blake."

There was something naggingly familiar about the alien, though Jessie could not place just what it was. When he couldn't identify it, he dismissed the thought and said, "I'd like to see my secretary, Helena, and my partner, to be sure they're okay."

"Oh, they're fine," the maseni said, patting the air with one long-tentacled hand. "There were no illegal bites or unauthorized disintegrations last night."

"Still, I'd like to see them."

"Of course you would," the maseni said, bowing slightly from the waist, his head nearly brushing the ceiling when he stood erect again. "Your secretary has been awake for some three hours now, and she has expressed similar desires. And your Mr. Brutus has been in a foul mood ever since you were rescued last night, demanding this and that, refusing to understand that it was best for you to sleep off the drug -- to give us time for certain special arrangements -- "

"I've heard about these special arrangements before," Jessie said, "from the prison computer. Just what were you rushing around about while I was unconscious?"

"For one thing," the lanky alien said, "I had to be spaced back from the home world, by an express ship, so that I could make a number of explanations."

"Explanations?"

"Yes," the maseni said. He extended a six-tentacled hand and said, "I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Blake. My name is Galiotor Tesseract."

## Chapter Sixteen

"But you're dead!" Helena said, when Jessie introduced her to Galiotor Tesseract some ten minutes later.

"That was merely a convenient lie," the maseni said, smiling, blinking his beady yellow eyes.

"But how -- "

"Before we get into all of that, shall we sit down and make ourselves more comfortable?" He extended a hand toward the shape-changing chairs which were arranged around the conference table in the warden's private consultation room. "I've taken the liberty of ordering drinks, all around, to take the edge off this meeting," the maseni said, nodding nervously at each of them.

The consultation room door slid open, and a robot clanked in, carrying a tray containing three liquors, two mixers, four glasses, swizzle sticks and orange slices. It bent awkwardly at its waist joint and put the tray down, turned the glasses over and said, "Be there will, sir, more anything?"

"That's all, thank you," Tesseract said.

"Please excuse my adjunct," the prison computer said, from its speaker in the ceiling. "With my budget slashed, I have to make do with damaged mechanicals."

"You, sir, thank," the robot said to Tesseract, turned and clanked out of the room again.

The maseni took their orders, mixed their drinks and saw that everyone was relatively content. He added a splash of bourbon to Brutus' dish when the

hell hound complained that his drink was far too weak, and poured himself four ounces of Scotch and four ounces of vodka in the same glass, stirred them together without benefit of ice or mixer. He held this awful concoction tightly in his left hand and never took a single sip of it. That was just as well, Jessie thought, even though he did not know much about the flexibility or temperament of the maseni digestive system.

"First of all," Tesseract began, "I must apologize for the way you three have been treated. My brood brother Fils should never have come to you in the first place. And once you were involved, you should have been contacted by the proper officials and informed of the falsity of my death certificate. You should never have been treated in the criminal manner you were. I am sorry, sir."

"I accept your apology," Helena said, sipping her drink.

Brutus raised his head from his bourbon and snorted to blow droplets of reddish-brown liquid from his muzzle. "I don't accept," he said.

"Well, I do," Jessie said. "But I'm not satisfied with just an apology. I thought we were going to get some explanations."

"Yes, sir, straight away," the alien said. "You see, six or seven weeks ago, a major crisis arose on the home world. This crisis was of a nature that demanded it be kept quiet. When the home world officials felt a few of the ranking embassy people here could help solve that problem, we were called away from L.A., secretly, and our absences explained by phony death certificates."

"Was Pelinorie Mesa another maseni called home?" Jessie asked, remembering the brief conversation he'd had with chubby little Myer Hanlon, whom he'd used in the beginning of the case.

Tesseract was nonplussed. He fluttered six gray tentacles across his gaping mouth to conceal his surprise. He didn't manage too well. "Then you know about the others?"

"Some of them," Jessie lied, trying to make his meager fund of data seem like a comprehensive knowledge.

"You're quite a talented man," the alien said.

"Let's cut the crap," Brutus said. He was still in a foul mood, even though he had been reunited with Jessie and Helena and had a big dish of bourbon and soda in front of him. "What was the nature of this crisis of yours?"

"I was getting to that," Tesseract said. He cleared his throat (it sounded like two cats were fighting under the table). Then he said, "On the home world, we have encountered a new species of supernatural -- a creature which does not fit into our own mythology or the mythologies of any of the races we've come into contact with. Furthermore, our sociologists tell us that there has been no new mass superstition to account for the rise of this being."

"What's it like?" Jessie asked.

"We're not sure," Tesseract said. "Thus far, no one has seen it and lived to tell the story."

"You mean it has killed maseni citizens?" Helena asked.

"That's the situation," Tesseract said, looking glumly down at his untouched glass of Scotch and vodka. "Not only has it killed maseni flesh-and-blooders, but it has ruthlessly dissipated the ethereal essences of a number of our supernaturals as well."

"But isn't that impossible?" Jessie asked. "A supernatural can't really hurt another supernatural."

"We'd always thought that to be true, sir. Except, of course, for the sorcerers and their mythical equivalents. But this beast is no sorcerer. This creature smashes entire villages and leaves footprints as large as the bottoms of oil drums."

"Have attempts been made to track it down?" Helena asked.

"Yes," Tesserax said. "And traps have been set time and again. But it always strikes where least expected, leaves no survivors, and disappears. We've followed its prints a short way, but they always gradually fade out, until the trail is gone."

"This is all rather horrible," Jessie admitted. "But why have you gone to such pains to keep it secret?"

"If word had gotten out that we were having trouble with a murderous supernatural, after all we've told your people about how flesh-and-blooders can learn to live in harmony with supernaturals, your Pure Earthers would have had a field day. Maseni-human relations would have been set back nearly a decade by the hubbub."

Jessie nodded. "True enough. But Slavek and his crowd went to extremes to keep us from -- "

"Oh, sir, you must not suppose that they were a part of the official plan to put a security blanket over this affair. They were acting on their own, all without the consent or even the knowledge of elected flesh-and-blood authority."

Jessie finished his drink, twisted the glass in a tight circle on the wet tabletop. "But what have the supernaturals got to lose, from this, that would force them to such extreme measures?"

"That's a question we've been asking ourselves, Mr. Blake," the alien said, rising from his chair, still holding his glass as he paced back and forth across the room, his head dangerously close to the low ceiling. "Every effort we've made, on the home world, to discover the nature and origins of this new beast has been opposed by our own supernaturals. And, here on Earth, both maseni and human-born supernaturals conspired to keep the secret from you. Obviously, they know more of this than we do, but they will not speak of it."

"You've got yourself a dandy little mystery there," Helena said. She had finished her drink and was sucking on the orange slice that had been on the side of the glass.

"That's it exactly," Tesserax said. "A mystery. That's why we decided to tell you the situation -- and invite the three of you to come to the home world and investigate it."

Jessie raised his eyebrows. "Hunt down this murderous beast that tramples villages?"

"It will be dangerous," Tesserax conceded. "But we will pay well."

Brutus said, "How well?"

"Five hundred credits a day."

"That's a flat fee, for all of us?"

Tesserax clearly did not enjoy talking with the hell hound. He raised a hand to his mouth and cleared his throat -- cats screaming -- and said, "We thought that would be a fair -- "

"Make it five hundred a day, including travel days, for each of us," Brutus growled. "Then maybe we'll consider it."

The alien looked at Jessie and said, "Does this... hound speak for you, Mr. Blake?"

"He makes good sense, yes."

Tesserax considered this and finally said, "Very well, then. Five hundred a day, for each of you -- fifteen hundred a day in all." He returned to his chair and folded up in it. "I assume the prison computer has recorded all of this."

"Yes, Mr. Tesserax, I have," the computer said, sweetly.

Tesserax rolled his amber eyes toward Jessie and said, "Will a print-out be sufficient contract for you?"

"It'll do," Jessie said.

"Did you hear that?" Tesserax asked the ceiling.

The computer said, "I'll send an adjunct around with two print-outs in a minute, Mr. Tesseract."

"Thank you."

"It's nothing, sir," the computer said.

Jessie looked at the speaker behind the ceiling light and said, "Do you mind telling me whose voice was used to make your tapes?"

The prison computer said, "My tapes, which were provided as part of the overall computer package by Big Brother Building Systems Company, contain two hundred tapes with every sound that the human voice can produce, in addition to nearly two hundred thousand words in three Earth languages. My tapes were recorded by Miss Tessie Alice Armbruster, a retired school teacher from Holidaysburg, Pennsylvania, on July 9, 1987. The same woman made supplementary tapes for my system -- in addition to supplementary tapes on the maseni languages which were fed to me earlier -- on August 3, 1994 and again on November 1, 1999. Miss Armbruster's voice was employed because psychologists working with the Big Brother Building Systems Company felt that it had a range and modulation pattern that combined a lovable motherliness with an undeniable disciplinarian tone."

Jessie said, "Is Holidaysburg near Altoona?"

"Yes, sir, it is a suburb of the larger city," the prison computer replied,

"You're amazing!" Tesseract said. "Simply amazing."

The door opened. One of the computer's adjuncts tripped on the door sill as it entered the room, crashed flat on its face like a comedian taking a pratfall in some abominable old movie. Somthing shattered, and it made a gruesome, internal grinding sound.

"If they slash my budget any further, I won't be responsible for what happens to the prison," Tessie Alice Armbruster said.

The robot clambered to its feet and staggered forward a couple of steps until it got its balance. It said, "Me please gentlemen excuse."

"Never mind that," Tesseract said, impatiently, snapping all six of his right-hand tentacles rapidly, making a noise like popcorn popping. "Just bring me those papers,, will you?"

"Sir, yes," the adjunct said. But it just stood there.

"Well?" Tesseract asked.

"Knee joint my bent is some, sir," the robot said, mournfully. It made an obvious effort and broke the temporary paralysis, tottered hesitantly forward toward the alien. "Are you here, sir," it said, handing him the crumpled pile of print-outs. "Thought drop them would I."

"But you didn't."

The robot was very self-satisfied. "No, sir. Held them did tight I and fool no make myself of."

"Very good," Tesseract said, sorting the print-outs into two groups.

The robot suddenly coughed and fell into the table, knocked the bottles of liquor over and frightened Helena. It slid slowly to the floor, like a drunkard passing out, landed on its backside and fell backwards, its metal skull thumping the blue tiles.

"When appropriations time comes around," Tessie Alice Armbruster said, "I'm going to call all of you as witnesses."

Tesseract slid a complete set of print-outs across the table to Jessie. "There you are. Five hundred a day, apiece."

"It looks in order," Jessie said.

They got out of their shape-changing chairs, and Jessie came around the table to shake hands with the maseni official. "I think you'll see that your money was well spent with us, Mr. Galiotor."

"I sincerely hope you're right," Galiotor Tesseract said. "Not only for the sake of the maseni treasury, but for the sake of all the beast's potential

victims and for the sake of future maseni-Earth relations." He let go of Jessie's hand as if he found contact with bone-jointed fingers less than pleasant. "You'll leave on the starship Poogai tomorrow morning."

"And good sir to you, luck!" the robot said, staring up at them from the floor, waving one five-fingered metal hand.

## PART TWO: THE BEAST AT MIDNIGHT

### Chapter Seventeen

Riding the escalator down the Poogai's long debarking tube into the largest terminal on the maseni home world, Tesserax said, "Oh, dear! I forgot to warn you about the Protector."

Jessie said, "Who?"

Tesserax slapped the top of his hairless, bulbous head and said, "Oh, damnation and thunderpunt! I really should have remembered it. It's all quite traumatic if you aren't expecting it -- and even if you are." He looked anxiously ahead at the rapidly approaching terminal entrance, and he said, "Now don't be alarmed, sir, when it charges at you with all those sharpened teeth and claws."

"Teeth and claws?" Helena said.

"Teeth and claws?" Jessie said, clutching Helena's arm and wondering if they should turn around and fight the traffic the whole way to the top of the moving stairs.

"Protector?" Brutus asked. "What's the matter with this toothy son of a bitch, anyhow?"

"The Protectors are one of our more colorful racial myths," the alien said. "There's one of them at every space port. You see, in the early days of maseni space travel -- "

But the steps had run out, and they were forced through the door by a crush of other Poogai passengers on the escalator behind them. They walked into the arrivals hall before Tesserax could tell them anything more.

The arrivals hall was a masterpiece of aesthetic engineering, fully five hundred feet on a side, the walls cut by enormous windows shaped like the windows in an Earth cathedral and soaring from the floor to a point just a few feet short of the lofty ceiling, some hundred feet overhead. Thick, transparent pillars supported the massive, luminescent arches which held up the domed ceiling. All of this was more than mere supportive architecture. The windows, just like cathedral windows, were made of thousands of bits of colored glass cemented together to form abstract patterns which cast eerie images across the great, white floor. The transparent pillars and the luminescent white arches high over them were carved with hundreds of small figures, maseni flesh-and-blooders as well as maseni supernaturals: one great, panoramic, twisting, twining bas-relief that took the breath away and made one think the pillars were moving, the arches shimmering and twisting with the strivings of thousands of little living beings...

"The Protector -- " Jessie began, not having forgotten the warning about teeth and claws despite the beauty that had taken his breath away.

However, before he could finish what he had been about to ask Tesserax, a huge, dark-winged monstrosity, which had been perched on one of the high arches, leapt away from its glowing white rafter and dropped toward them like a stone, screaming at the top of its voice, like an aircraft plunging toward file earth...

"Good God!" Jessie said, having forgotten altogether that Pritchard Robot had proven God was no good. He stepped backward into the passengers who

were crowding into the terminal behind him.

"Never fear," Tesserax said. "It's a terrifying experience, but the thing won't harm you."

The beast was fully as large as an elephant, but much meaner looking, craggier than any pachyderm, with a great head much like that of an enraged lion and a mouth that took up half of its fluttercar-sized skull. With one bite, it could devour all of them, with nothing left sticking between its gravestone teeth. Its eyes were a pair of dinnerplate red discs without any pupil delineation, and they appeared to be focused directly on Jessie and Helena. The monster's wings flapped open, to slightly break its fall, though it still plummeted at them too fast for comfort. In the last second before it would be on them, it extended two telephone-pole legs tipped with talons as long as pitchfork tines and as thick as fat winter icicles. And then --

-- it slammed into an invisible barrier five feet above their heads, flopped around as if in its death throes.

"The Protector," Tesserax said.

They were directly beneath the beast as it regained its senses, and now it turned its red eyes straight upon them, looking even meaner from this vantage point. It began to claw at the barrier with its big talons; it hissed at them, showing row on row of razored teeth and a tongue tipped with what appeared to be a steel barb.

The other passengers from the Poogai passed them, with hardly a glance at the thunder monster apparently lying on thin air only a few feet overhead.

"In the early days of maseni space travel," Tesserax continued, peering into the vicious red eyes glaring down at them, "our people encountered a murderous alien race somewhat superior to our own. A galactic war ensued, and we were nearly defeated. The enemy, a race much like your mythical centaurs but far more violent, drove us to our home world and then landed here to claim complete victory and to exterminate our people. Strangely, however, none of these aliens could remain on the surface of our home world for more than a few minutes; they died in the most terrible agony. At first, it was thought that some bacterium or some trace gas in the home world atmosphere was extremely toxic to these invaders. But when they donned space suits and used special tanked air from their own world, they still crumpled up and died when they set foot on our soil. Only one of them lasted long at all, and he managed to hold on for eight long hours, raving about horrendous steel claws that were ripping up his insides -- and great mad, red eyes staring relentlessly down at him, dark wings, many teeth... Nothing more than the lunatic rantings of a creature driven mad by pain. However, over the thousands of years since then, the myth of the Protectors has grown and been nourished by the simpler people. Grown and nourished, in fact, until, now, we really have them."

The Protector screamed and clawed the invisible shield more furiously than ever.

"But what was the real cause of those alien's deaths?" Jessie asked.

"We never have learned that," Tesserax said. "Currently, the most popular theory is that the solar and gravitational fields of our home world were in some way peculiarly deadly to this single alien race. As you've seen, many other races come and go, and are not bothered by the invisible killer. Something in the physiology of those centaurs made them highly susceptible to our geography, perhaps."

"They lost the war, in the end?" Brutus asked.

"Of course," Tesserax said. "We exterminated them."

The Protector stood on its four powerful legs and began to jump up and down on the invisible shield, screaming, spitting, flailing at the air with its barbed tongue.

"Does he attack everyone who comes to your world?" the detective asked, watching for a crack in a barrier he couldn't see to begin with.

"Well, it doesn't have much choice," Tesseract said. "It has to fulfill its mythical role, after all. It must attempt to destroy any alien which sets foot on maseni soil, since the myth doesn't specify that it should attack only hostile aliens. There are three hundred Protectors, one in every spaceport on the planet, relentlessly bashing their brains out on these power shields that we've had to erect to contain them."

"Don't they ever learn that it's no use? Don't they understand that the barrier's there all the time?" Helena asked.

"Oh, I suppose they learned that scores of years ago. But they can't help themselves. The myth says attack: they attack."

"Poor dears," Helena said.

"Dumb sons of bitches," Brutus said.

Tesseract said, "Oh, I wouldn't feel any pity for them. The myth doesn't specify any intelligence in a Protector, merely an ability to spot and destroy an alien. They really can't think; they're rather mindless constructs. No need to be sorry for their lot." He looked away from the monster overhead and said, "Shall we go through customs and get out of here, so it can go back to its roost? It's not harmful, but it does make a fearful screeching sound that gets on the nerves of the terminal employees."

Five minutes later, having passed through customs without opening their luggage, they boarded a fluttercar limousine which was waiting for them outside the terminal. The passenger compartment of the car consisted of two extremely comfortable bench seats which faced each other across a good two yards of leg room. Tesseract and the hell hound sat at opposite ends of the front-facing bench, while Jessie and Helena sat close together on the rear-facing seat.

A maseni robot, efficient and well maintained, loaded their bags into the spacious trunk, slipped into the driver's niche where a front seat would have been in a manually steered vehicle, and connected itself to the control leads which dangled from the instrumentless dashboard: acceleration, brakes, steering, turn signals, and systems monitors. He pulled them away into a heavy flow of traffic and quickly accelerated above two hundred miles an hour...

"We're all very pleased that you've chosen to participate, my friend," the maseni said. "We believe that your refreshingly alien viewpoint may tear this case wide open."

Jessie said, "Where are we going -- into those mountains?" He indicated a range of snow-capped peaks that flanked the rushing fluttercar, needling the leaden sky a great distance west of them, beyond the flat grass plains that now lay all around.

"That's correct, my friend," Tesseract said. He was speaking in his own language now; and whereas his form of address in English was "sir", now it had become "my friend" in translation. Jessie, Brutus and Helena had all taken speed-teach hypno lessons in the maseni tongue on the way from Earth and, in two short days, had absorbed enough to speak it well. "Those mountains are among the highest on our world and are called the Gilorelamans, which is an Old Tongue word that means 'Home of the Gods'."

"That's where the beast has been marauding?" Helena asked. She leaned toward the window and stared at the rugged slopes, and she thought that was just the sort of place for some invisible gargantuan to play havoc with an unsuspecting populace. The mountains looked remote, more alien than anything she had yet seen on this world though, in actual fact, they did not look that much different from mountain ranges back on Earth.

"Yes, up there, my friend," Tesseract said. "The beast has slaughtered nearly five hundred flesh-and-blooders and more than four hundred maseni supernaturals, all residents of the Gilorelamans."

The robot chauffeur made several turns onto smaller freeways and, in time, took them close to the foothills that lay around the greater peaks. They



started the climb on a two-lane road that was closely framed by black-boled, white-leaved trees that swayed in the wind like fragile dancers, now and then bending to canopy the road with a frothy lace of snowy leaves.

They were more than an hour into the foothills when a car passed them doing quite a bit more than their sedate hundred miles an hour. It forced them toward the burm, horn blaring, then whipped over a rise and was out of sight.

"You have highway crazies here, too," Jessie said.

When they topped the hill over which the car had gone, they found that it had turned and was barreling back at them, on the wrong side of the highway.

The robot wheeled the car into the other lane.

The unknown driver countered, turned back to his proper lane and came at them at full speed.

"He'll kill us all!" Helena cried.

The robot jerked their limousine violently back into their own lane and narrowly avoided a collision.

As the other car flashed by, Jessie thought he saw a middle-aged, bald, red-faced man looking over at them and laughing. "Was that an Earthman?" he asked Galiotor Tesseract.

"I think -- " the maseni began.

The red-faced man in the car roared past them again, slued back and forth on the road in front of them, disappeared over another hillock.

"It was a human being," Helena said. "Is that how our scientists behave when they come here to study maseni society?"

When they crested the next rise, the stranger, as before, had turned and was roaring back at them, blowing his horn and weaving from side to side of the narrow road.

"I can't watch," Helena said.

"I wish I had a dish of bourbon," the hell hound moaned. The stranger weaved past them, somehow avoiding a collision, was gone, his horn fading, gradually, until they could no longer hear it at all.

"I think that wasn't a real Earthman," Tesseract said. "I believe that was one of our more recent myth figures."

"You maseni have a myth figure that looks like an Earthman?" Jessie asked, watching pebbly gray lids slide down and lift off the deepset yellow eyes.

"Yes, my friend," Tesseract said. He fluffed his orange robes. " We maseni are incapable of becoming intoxicated, as you may know. Indeed, your own race is somewhat unique in that respect, compared to all the races we have thus far encountered. Certainly, we have drugs that make us -- as you might say 'high'. But we are always in command of our senses, perfectly rational and able to exercise as good judgment as before taking drugs. It fascinates our people that your race can become so mindlessly drunk. The fact that tens of thousands are killed every year on your highways by drunken drivers has sparked the imagination of the maseni people. A Drunken Driver is a rather mysterious, inexplicable creature to us. And, in the past few years, a new myth has arisen to explain accidents on our own highways."

"The myth of the Drunken Driver?" Jessie asked, not quite able to get that one down.

"Yes," Tesseract said. "Enough superstitious people have taken up belief in the marauding Drunken Driver who haunts our home world highways that, in fact, he has come to exist. Fortunately, though he's a recent supernatural, laws have been passed to keep him from killing anyone. He may only careen around, frightening people -- as you just saw."

For a while, everyone was silent, digesting this. Then the detective said, "I didn't realize that diplomatic and social relations between our two races could give rise to new superstitions."

"Oh, yes, my friend. It's surprising there are no new Earth-born myths based on things your people have picked up from our culture."

Jessie said, "Is it possible that this marauding behemoth in the mountains is such a new myth?"

Tesseract shook his large head. "It's unlikely. We've run computer depth studies of new trends in maseni society, and we found nothing that could account for this murderous mountain giant."

"Still..."

"I don't want to cloud your fresh perspective," the maseni said. "But I truly believe you'd be wasting time in following up that possibility."

The black-boled, white-leafed trees grew thicker at the sides of the road, and the hills grew steeper and the clouds gradually came down like heavy blankets onto a bed. They drove on toward Gilorelamans Inn, an ancient hotel on the slopes of the high peaks, which would serve as their base of operations until the case was closed.

## Chapter Eighteen

Gilorelamans Inn lay on the lush green lower slopes of the largest peak in the whole range, Piotimkin. It was as far down the rocky mountain as it could get without moving into the foothills, but the view from its grounds was staggering, no matter which direction one looked. Behind were the snow forests and then the bare granite cliffs and finally, high above, the snowfields themselves. On the other three sides one could view vast panoramas of lower lands: hills, hillocks, sparse woods, plains and robot-tended fields.

The inn was pleasing to the eye. It was made from the wood of the conifers which had replaced the black-boled trees as the land rose and the temperature dropped. Its roof had three peaks and two steep valleys between and was shingled with slabs of wood stained black by sap and tar. The windows were deepset and flanked by wooden shutters, reflecting the late afternoon sun and the moving clouds that raced across the sky. Not a single daub of paint marred the inn's natural beauty.

The two-lane road fed directly into the inn's drive, and their robot chauffeur brought them right around the spouting fountain to the front door, which was fully ten feet high and six wide, graced by a shining coppery knob and knocker, each so large it seemed a man would need two hands to grasp them.

"It's lovely," Helena said. "It must be very old."

"The whole place is a mythical establishment," Tesseract said. "It dates back centuries. And because it is mythical, it remains constant, unweathered, untouched by decay."

As they got out of their limousine, the big front door of the rustic inn swung outward with a great deal of groaning and creaking, successfully attracting everyone's attention. A maseni in black robes came out to greet them. He glided forth, his tentacle hands folded against his chest in such a manner that he suggested a mandarin emperor of another Earth age. He bowed to them, twice to Helena, and said, "Welcome to Gilorelamans Inn."

"Thank you," Helena said.

The mandarin said, "My name is Tooner Hogar, and I am pleased to serve you. Have you your own service robot, or shall I summon someone to retrieve your baggage?"

"We have our own mechanical," Tesseract said.

"Very well," Hogar said. "When you are ready, please come straight to the desk inside. I'll be waiting."

He bowed again. And glided inside.

"I don't like that one," Brutus said.

"He was sweet," Helena disagreed.

"He was slick, that's all," the hound growled.

"Slick, indeed," Tesserax said. "Tooner Hogar is also known, in maseni mythology, as Hogar the Poisoner."

"Poisoner?" Jessie asked.

"Poisoner of Gods," Tesserax elaborated.

"I thought he looked too slick," Brutus said.

"Tell us more," Helena said, as their robot began to lift their suitcases from the limousine trunk.

"According to the earliest maseni myths, these mountains are the homes of all our gods. And this particular inn, overseen by Tooner Hogar -- Hogar the Poisoner -- is the prime meeting place of the gods. Here, the Great Ones can gather to make deals, strike bargains -- or merely celebrate some godly holiday. The inn is neutral ground, where one god is powerless to lift his hand against another."

"But Hogar is not so powerless?" Jessie asked.

"You catch on fast," Tesserax said.

"I've dealt with so many punks, in my time," the detective said, "that I'm usually able to see through them."

Tesserax said, "According to the old myths, though the gods could not directly harm each other while in the inn, they often hired Hogar to do their dirty work. Hogar preferred to kill with any of a hundred exotic poisons. Many gods passed away forever, under Hogar's hand. Others who were hardier died only temporarily and rose to live again."

The robot had taken a collapsible power cart from the trunk and had loaded all their luggage on its flat bed.

"We'll get our rooms, now," Tesserax said. "But be warned: do not eat or drink anything which has been prepared by Tooner Hogar."

"Surely the law doesn't permit him to poison any more," Helena said.

"You're right," the maseni said. "He may only poison those gods who are powerful enough to rise and live again. But, by law, he is allowed to slip certain irritants to others, in place of the poisons he once dispensed. For example, he might offer you an apple which, though not poisoned, is spiked with nausea-inducers or potent laxatives. The law restrains him, but it does not, of course, utterly refuse his urges."

"But what will we eat?" Jessie asked.

"Our robot has brought along cooking facilities and supplies," Tesserax said. "For the duration of our stay here, we will consume only what he has prepared for us." Tesserax extended an arm toward the open door of the hotel and said, "My friends, shall we go in?"

The lobby of the Gilorelamans Inn was large, as were most maseni rooms, at least two hundred feet long and a hundred and fifty wide, yet the place had a cozy atmosphere. This was achieved, for the most part, by the use of the dark, naturally stained wood which constituted the walls and the parquet ceiling. The floor was covered with a thick maroon carpet, and the sofas and easy chairs which filled the lounging areas were a matching wine color. Natural wood pillars thrust up toward the roof thirty feet overhead, and crystal chandeliers lighted the room well enough for one to read but not so well that there was the kind of dazzling glare one associated with modern Earth hotels.

When the maseni built an inn for the gods, in their myths, they expressed a bit of taste.

They crossed the room to the desk, where Tooner Hogar waited for them, smiling and nodding, his hands still folded against his chest, his tentacles intertwined.

"We are so pleased to have these distinguished Earth-men visit us at the Gilorelamans Inn," Hogar said. He pushed two things across the counter to them, a register book and a dish of mints. "Would you each sign in, please?"

And do take some complimentary candies."

Jessie signed the book but avoided the mints.

"No candies?" Hogar asked, smiling gently, amber eyes glittering.

"Well, actually -- no, thank you," the detective said.

"Miss?" Hogar said, offering her the dish.

She refused, picked up the pen and signed both Brutus's and her own name to the register. When she looked up, she saw that Hogar seemed to be hurt by her rejection of the candies and, being Helena, she said, "Well, you see, I just had dinner, and I haven't any room for anything else just now."

Hogar frowned and stared more closely at the mints. "They aren't dusty, are they? Sometimes, in an old mythical place like this, the dust settles. If I don't keep changing the mints every day they get all grimy."

"It isn't that," Helena said. "The mints are fine. As I said, I've already eaten -- "

"Here, then," the alien innkeeper said, shoving the dish into her hands. "You take them and have them later on, in your room, compliments of the house." He smiled at her: greasily.

"I couldn't -- "

"I insist," the maseni myth figure said.

"Thank you," she said. She took the mints, holding the dish as if it were a time bomb.

Tesseract signed the register and got their room keys. "No need to send a porter with us," he told Hogar. "We have our own mechanical to get the bags, and well find the room ourselves."

They followed the robot as it wheeled the luggage cart to the elevators which, Tesseract explained, were physical additions to the myth structure, since no elevators had existed when the Gilorelamans Inn was first imagined.

The second floor ambience was much like that of the first floor, though the carpeting here was a deep, cool green. Jessie, Helena and the hell hound had a two-bedroom suite at the far end of the long, main corridor, while Tesseract's room was right next door. The drawing room of the suite was exquisite, with golden tapestries and heavy velvet-like draperies, comfortable furniture, an indoor fountain where three maseni myth figures spouted water onto one another's heads. Like all maseni rooms, this was a large one, far larger than they required, with a fourteen-foot ceiling of alternating squares of dark and light wood in a stunning parquet. The bedrooms were identical, spacious, and lavishly appointed.

"I think I like this place!" Helena said, flopping down on a bed that was ten feet long and seven wide.

Tesseract showed them where the baths were. "These, too, are additions, realities intrude on the original make-believe. But what good are myths if they aren't useful? And how useful would a hotel be, these days, without bathrooms?"

"True enough," Jessie said.

As they stepped out of the third bath and back into the drawing room, a knock sounded on the door.

"Come in," Tesseract said.

Tooner Hogar entered, bearing a wicker basket full of fruit, all wrapped in plastic. "Compliments of the house," he said, smiling slickly and handing the basket to Jessie.

"I -- uh -- well, thank you," the detective said.

"Try one of those," the innkeeper said, pointing to a large red fruit that looked like a combination between an Earth apple and an Earth raspberry, purple and nubbly.

"Well, maybe later," Jessie said.

"Perhaps the lady would like something," Hogar said, as Helena came out of the bedroom to see what was going on.

"What might I like?" she asked, stepping closer to see.

Hogar reached out and tore the sheet of plastic wrap from the gift basket and, bowing slightly toward Helena, he said, "Some home world fruit, dear lady. This is a marvelous collection. I believe you will find each piece delicious, fresh and clean."

"I don't know if I should eat any alien -- "

"Oh," Hogar said, "you will find our home world fruit perfectly compatible with your digestive system. Haven't you eaten any imports, back on your own world?"

Helena said, "No, I -- "

Hogar plucked the raspberry-apple from the basket, rubbed it against one sleeve to polish it, and held it toward her. "Here. Eat, eat! There is nothing to be afraid of!"

Before she could find some new way to refuse the poisoner's gift, their conversation was interrupted by a booming laugh so loud it shook the walls and hurt their ears. Immediately following this came a crashing sound that slammed through the hotel like an explosion in its foundations.

"What in the world -- " Helena began.

"It's Pearlamon and Gonius, at it again!" Hogar the Poisoner said. He put the raspberry-apple back in the basket, turned and hurried into the main hall, his robes fluttering behind him.

"Who are Pearlamon and Gonius?" Jessie asked Tesseract.

"Two gods," the alien said.

They followed Hogar into the corridor and saw the source of the thumping racket that was still going on. In the middle of the hall, half-way back toward the elevators, two huge maseni males, dressed in little loincloths and headbands, were wrestling, tossing each other into the walls, lacking and punching and twisting ears, battering noses and pulling hair and biting necks.

"Maseni gods are a lively sort," Tesseract explained. "They always have to be up to something. Wrestling, boxing, engaging in relay races, drinking and singing..."

"Well, anyway," Jessie said, "it's not going to get dull around here."

## Chapter Nineteen

That same night, Jessie woke in the dark bedroom and found something soft and warm filling his mouth. For a moment, he suspected someone was trying to jam a pillow down his throat, but when he came fully awake, he realized the truth. He and Helena had gone to sleep while lying on their sides, facing each other; in the hours since, he had slid toward the foot of the bed, and now he held one of her delectable, round breasts in his mouth. Or part of one of her breasts, anyway. It was difficult, if not impossible, he knew, to hold all of one of Helena's breasts in his mouth.

He relaxed when he realized no one was trying to smother him. He would have been perfectly content to remain like that, nipple on his tongue, until morning, had he not heard the sound that -- he realized upon hearing it once more -- had originally awakened him: a moan.

He tensed, staring into the darkness.

Silence.

Imagination?

Then it came again, a low and agonized cry that originated either in the drawing room of the suite or from the corridor beyond. It cut across his spine like an ice pick and ended his sleepy satisfaction. He let go of Helena's breast and drew gently away from her, sat up and listened for the sound to come again.

It did: louder, more drawn out, more agonized than ever, like the cry of

a man who knew he was rapidly dying...

Jessie slid out of bed, felt around on the floor and found his robe, put it on and belted it tightly around the waist. His narcotics dart gun was on the dresser, and he managed to pick it up, check that the magazine was in place and slip it in a robe pocket without waking anyone. He walked quietly into the drawing room and stood there in the darkness, waiting.

Again: moaning.

Now, he realized that the injured party -- whoever or whatever it was -- was in the corridor beyond the drawing room. Moving quickly across the room, he pulled the door open and looked into the dimly lit hallway. One of the gods lay there, in front of the door, sprawled on his back, his hefty arms thrown out at his sides, his legs spread like two lifeless hunks of dark blubber. His tentacles wriggled senselessly as he groaned.

Jessie bent over the prostrate giant and looked into the amber eyes.

"What's the matter?"

"I've been done in," the god said.

"Poisoned?"

"Ah, that dastardly Hogar!" the god said, and he moaned twice as loudly as before. "He'll do anything for a price."

"What can I do to help you?" Jessie asked.

The tentacles wriggled more quickly than ever. "Nothing. Nothing at all! I have been dealt a foul intestinal blow, and I must succumb. But don't fear, my friend. I know who paid the dastardly Hogar, and I will seek revenge in my next life! It was Pearlamon, that odorous piece of godflesh, that pretender to true divinity!"

"What's going on here?" Helena asked. She had come, nude, from the bedroom and stood in the doorway, blinking her eyes.

Brutus appeared at her side and said, "Skullduggery."

"Exactly!" the god roared. "I had consumed but a cup of broth when the convulsions took me. I staggered this far and collapsed, seeking help. Now I am all but paralyzed, and I know help cannot be obtained. I die, I die!" Down the hall, Tesserax's door opened, and the maseni official came swaying toward them, nodding his bulbous head. "What's wrong with you, Goniuz?"

"What appears wrong with me?" the god moaned. "I am the victim of those I took to be my friends. Trusting, I was stabbed in the back, taken sore advantage of, used, discarded, betrayed!"

"Does he always talk so goddamned much?" Brutus asked. "If he does, no wonder someone poisoned him."

"Oh, woe, woe!" Goniuz cried, thrashing about as the poison seeped deeper into him.

"Pay, him no mind," Tesserax said. "He'll rise again, once he's dead, and he'll be poisoned again, too."

"Heartless mortal," Goniuz said.

Tesserax leaned over the god and said, "How often have you been poisoned by Hogar?"

"At least ten thousand times!" the giant cried. "Is that not proof of this man's awful villainy?"

"It is, indeed," Tesserax said. "And it's also proof that we need not shed any tears or hold any concern over you."

"What a cruel world it has become," Goniuz said, "when a god's own creatures care not for him."

"Poor, poor dear," Helena said, reaching out to touch the god's smooth, waxy face.

But she was too late with her sympathy, for Goniuz gasped and shuddered one last time, died swiftly after decrying the state of the world.

"His body's fading away," Jessie observed.

Slowly, the great hulk was taking on an obvious transparent tone, the

green carpet vaguely visible through it.

"In a few minutes," Tesserax said, "it will be gone altogether. In the morning, however, Gonius will be back at the breakfast table, screaming at Pearlamon and Hogar. It's rather a tedious cycle."

The body winked out of existence.

"Well, I suppose there's nothing more we can do," Jessie said.

"Get your sleep," Tesserax said. "Tomorrow, we begin questioning some locals about this beast we seek."

On the way back to their bedroom, Helena said, "Now I'm wide awake."

"I know just what you need," Jessie said. In the bedroom, he removed his robe. "A sedative."

Helena grinned and sat on the bed, reached to fluff the pillows, and found a note. "What's this?" she asked, picking it up. "It's a note to you," she answered, without waiting for him.

"A note? On my pillow? What's it say?"

She read: "Mr. Jessie Blake -- Beware all things maseni. Do not stir in cauldrons that do not concern you. If you persist at this, you will be the next victim of the beast." She flipped the piece of paper over and looked at the other side, which was blank. "That's it," she said.

Tesserax finished reading the note and blinked his yellow eyes as if he might be able to make the writing disappear. "Well, obviously," he said at last, "some supernatural creature came into your bedroom while you were in the hall watching Gonius die. Perhaps it phased through the wall, or pryed open a window... Clearly, however the note was planted, the maseni supernatural community does not want you to work on this case."

Jessie said, "Gonius was a diversion, then?"

"Probably."

"We'll question him."

"My friend, he would only lie. There appears to be enough at stake to justify lying and even more. Besides, supernaturals who were once gods make the worst subjects for interrogations. They've got a natural superiority complex that makes them insufferably rude."

"But what are we going to do about this?" Helena asked. "Look, Tessie, we have been nearly illegally bitten by vampires and werewolves, momentarily terrorized by a Shambler, paralyzed by a sorcerer -- and now we have to worry about being crushed to death by this mountain monster of yours. I will not --"

"

"Be calm, please," Tesserax said. "I have told you that the monster destroyed supernaturals as well as flesh-and-blooders. The people who wrote this do not control it; indeed, they may be its next victims. They are bluffing, trying to frighten you off."

"I just don't know," Helena said.

"Believe me, my friend," Tesserax said, patting her bare shoulder with six limpid tentacles. "What I say is true. Besides, maseni supernaturals would never break the law; especially, they would never kill anyone. Except for this new beast, of course. But on our world, supernaturals have lived in harmony with flesh-and-blooders for so many centuries that we have no unapproved interracial violence."

"Well..."

"You know I'm right," the maseni said. "Now, let's all get some sleep and forget this ugly incident."

"It won't be easy," Jessie said. He took the note back and read it through again. "I've never before been threatened by a giant, barrel-footed monster."

"When I spoke to my brood brother, Galiotor Fils, the day we left Earth," the alien said, "he informed me that you had taken on his case for

more than money. Indeed, he felt that money was the least of your interests in finding how I had died. He said that you were bored, weary of your day-to-day investigative routine, and that you were desperate for something challenging, something exciting."

"Your brood brother talks too much," Brutus said. "I should have given him an ass full of teeth, like I threatened."

"We've had plenty of excitement already," Helena said.

"Ah, I know you won't back out on me," Tesserax said. "None of you is a coward. And, besides, you don't get paid one thin tenth of a credit if you don't follow through on this."

"Maybe I'll give you an ass full of teeth," the hell hound said, lowering his head and opening his mouth.

Tesserax brushed nervously at his lipless mouth and looked at the rows of white teeth that Brutus displayed for his benefit. He said, "Surely, my friend, you jest!"

Brutus snarled.

Jessie said, "There are things more important than money, Tesserax."

"Yes," Helena said. "For instance: sex, contentment, peace of mind, freedom from insomnia, having two arms and legs, life in general, fame, fun, bubble baths and pillow fights."

Tesserax said, "If I were you, I'd also keep in mind the reaction of my fellow maseni if you should back out now."

"And what would that be?" Jessie asked.

"Well, I should guess, for a starter, they'd charge you with grave robbing and put out an omni-world bulletin for your arrests."

"Why a bulletin if you've already got us."

"I don't think we'd admit we already have you, my friend." Tesserax smiled, because he saw that, now, he had them over the proverbial barrel, no matter how shallow that proverb might be and how rotten the barrel.

"You couldn't hold us against our will," Jessie said. But he knew that was just so much bravado.

"That's just so much bravado," Tesserax said.

"Try us," Brutus growled.

The alien said, "Your people are only beginning to build a space travel system, at maseni direction. You'd have to leave here in a maseni ship. Do you seriously believe you could get tickets?"

Jessie threw the note on the dresser. "You win."

Tesserax beamed at each of them in turn. "Fine, fine. Well, shall we get some sleep so we're at least a bit fresh for the morning?" He turned and walked to the drawing room, then looked back and said, "Remember, if Hogar brings you anything for breakfast, don't eat it."

## Chapter Twenty

The maseni hermit's name was Kinibobur Biks, and he was quite ordinary in appearance: seven feet tall like other maseni, with those startling amber eyes, bulbous forehead, waxy skin, flap of a nose, lipless mouth, tentacles for fingers... He was, however, decidedly extraordinary so far as his choice of clothes was concerned. He wore a red and yellow, quilted woman's robe (which barely reached his first set of knees) and a pair of out-sized, fuzzy pink slippers, all imported from Earth.

"It gets damned cold, living in a cave," he told them, when he saw that they were staring at his slippers.

"I can imagine," Brutus said.

Biks said, "These keep my foot tentacles toasty warm." When they continued to stare, he got a bit defensive and, in a raised voice, he said,



"And I think they're spiffy as all get out. Very stylish. Real class."

The way in which the hermit Kinibobur Biks had furnished his retreat, this cave, was also extraordinary. He had two rooms, separated by a wide archway, both very comfortably proportioned once you got through the foyer on your hands and knees. The first chamber contained a shape-changing sofa and chair, end tables, a battery-powered television, a self-contained power-pak stereo and pole lamp combination built in the shape of an Earth cow.

"A strange animal indeed," Kinibobur Biks explained. "We maseni have never seen any creatures like them. The cow silhouette has become all the rage in furniture, cookie cutters, ice cube trays -- dozens of things."

Shortly, he realized that they were not staring at the stereo in admiration, but in disbelief, and he said, "Let me show you the rest of the place." It was an obvious maneuver to distract their attention from the furniture cow, but they followed him into the second room anyway.

This den contained a self-powered kitchen, including refrigerator, fusion disposal, oven, grill and pressure cooker. There were also several chairs and a table. The walls here were hung with full color, three-dimensional photographs of nude maseni females lying coyly on fur carpets and lush grass mats.

"A hermit gets hungry, like anyone else," Kinibobur Biks explained when he saw them staring at the elaborate self-powered kitchen. And when they congregated before the 3-D nudes, he said, rather plaintively, "And a hermit gets lonely, too, sometimes."

In the main room again, when they were all seated, Jessie said, "Mr. Kinibobur, why have you chosen to live in a cave, high in the mountains, as a hermit?"

The maseni crossed his thin, wax legs and popped a fuzzy slipper off his heel, swinging it from his foot tentacles as he spoke. "Modern maseni society is corrupt, depraved, cut through with greed and self-interest. The modern-day maseni thinks only of material objects, acquisitions, status symbols, creature comforts. He has forgotten his rugged individualism. He relies on gadgetry to serve him and has let his natural talents atrophy."

"But you've got plenty of gadgetry here," Jessie pointed out "You've got a modern apartment tucked away in a cave."

Kinibobur Biks sighed. "You're the first person to see through that excuse, sir, and I congratulate you for your powers of observation. In reality, I live here because I have fallen madly in love with an earth sprite who inhabits the center of the mountain."

"Earth sprite?" Helena asked.

The hermit's face became suffused with joy. "She's delightful, Miss. So svelte, so innocent, a child and yet a woman... Anyway, she cannot leave the caverns, so I had to come to her. We met twenty years ago, when I went spelunking with some friends, and we've been lovers ever since. Sometimes, she calls to me -- with voice as sweet as Coca Cola, and I go deeper into the mountains to be with her."

"I see," Jessie said.

"How lovely," Helena said.

Tesseract said, "Well, let's get off your personal life for a while, my friend, and discuss the events that transpired here exactly forty days ago."

"When the village was destroyed," the hermit said.

"That's correct."

"I was with Zemena at the time, you know. I didn't have any inkling what was going on."

"Zemena is this earth sprite?" Jessie asked.

"That's her, yes," Kinibobur Biks said. "She had called to me early in the day, and I went to be with her. We made passionate love in a basin of warm volcanic mud."

"Wonderful," Brutus growled.

"But you were the first to find the ruined village, were you not?" Tesseract inquired.

The hermit nodded, frowning. "Oh, it was a horrible sight! Bodies everywhere, crushed and torn, ripped as if by giant claws, limb smashed from limb. Blood in pools, enough to fill a lake. The houses were all demolished, tottering piles of debris, the stones crushed, the mortar powdered, the wood splintered and smouldering. Fluttercars lay in mangled heaps, and all the other artifacts of village life had shattered or run together in long streams of slag. Fires had raged and died; smoke still curled like a hateful mist through all that remained."

"You saw the tracks?" Jessie asked.

"Huge footprints," the hermit said. "It was those that made me turn and run for help."

"You saw no beast?"

"No. I was too late for that."

"Did you follow the tracks?"

"They faded out, led nowhere."

There was little more that Kinibobur Biks could tell them, but he was very good at describing the horror of the ruined village. Jessie had him run through that, in more detail, asking questions time and again, until there did not seem to be anything else they could gain from the hermit.

Outside the cave, on the narrow dirt path that led down to the road below and the charred sight of the blasted village, Jessie turned to Tesseract and said, "He was a strange one."

"We have many strange ones," Tesseract said. "Especially near these mountains. So much myth is centered here... It's a crazy place. Recently, we have had Earth vampires here who have established a clinic to help their kind kick the blood habit, regardless of their myth requirements. We have had couvani, our race's werewolves, coming to a doctor here for electrolytic removal of excess hair. A group of the old gods have gotten together to worship the people that created them, even though they understand that the man-myth relationship is like your chicken and its egg. And just two weeks ago, we had the first recorded suicides of supernaturals in the history of our planet."

"Two supernatural creatures took their own lives?" Jessie asked as they drew toward the bottom of the path.

"That's right. They sat down facing each other and said a forbidden chant from one of the old books. They apparently synchronized their voices so well that they reached the last line precisely together and dissipated each other simultaneously."

Jessie said no more until they had reached the ruined village and stood in the shadows of the blasted walls that still thrust up here and there. He stared at the vista of scorched stone and charred wood, and he said, "I'd like to have a report on that, in detail."

Tesseract followed his gaze across the demolished town, and said, "On this? An analysis of the rubble?"

"No, no. Those suicides."

"Whatever for?"

"They might tie in."

"I doubt it very much," Tesseract said.

"Who's the detective around here?" Brutus asked the alien. "You?"

Tesseract said, "Well, okay."

"In a short time, in the same area, you've experienced two unheard of events: supernatural suicides and this marauding beast. It would be stretching things a bit to call that coincidental. Coincidence is a word used by men who are too lazy to find real reasons."

"You'll have that report tonight," Tesserax said.

## Chapter Twenty-One

The remainder of that day, they spoke with four other maseni who had been the first on the scene after one or the other of the two disasters, and all of these tended to repeat, in their own words, what the hermit Kinibobur Biks had said. The only major difference was that these witnesses lived in ordinary maseni houses and did not wear fuzzy, pink bedroom slippers.

Late in the afternoon, they met with subjects six and seven, their last witnesses for the day, and these, surprisingly, had something vital to offer. What they contributed was not, however, obvious. In fact, at the time, they seemed to add very little to Jessie's fund of knowledge. Later, thinking over the events of the day, he would connect their attitude to other bits and pieces, begin to build a crazy picture...

The last two witnesses were both supernaturals, one of them maseni in origin, the other born of Earth mythology. The maseni was a mist demon by the name of Yilio, a shapeless mass of vapor, blue-white and icy cold, that hung together despite the way it whirled and roiled upon itself. He had no face or mouth, but that did not keep him from speaking. His voice was a hissing whisper that made Jessie uncomfortable. Yilio's wife, an Earth-born female angel named Hannah, didn't seem to mind her mate's voice or the pervasive chill he brought to their small apartment in a town not more than half an hour from the Gilorelamans Inn. She sat with him hovering over and around her, now and then preening her neatly clipped, golden wings. She always had a smile on her face, a big smile when she listened to him talk.

The strangest thing about the couple was their eagerness to question Jessie, thereby turning the tables a bit. For every piece of data he got from them, he had to give back twice as much. They wanted to know everything: how an earth detective had gotten into the case; whether news of the new monster's existence had reached the general public on Earth; what the Pure Earthers were like. Several times, one or the other of them returned to a single, central question:

"If this crisis isn't solved, if the beast can't easily be contained and destroyed, and if the news of its existence is leaked back to Earth, what will this do to Earth-maseni relations?" Yilio asked it, this time.

Jessie regarded the mist demon, wishing it had a face where he might read expressions, guess thoughts. "The Pure Earthers will be upset, naturally."

"Is there any chance they could win converts, gain political power?" Hannah asked, brushing golden curls from her cherubic face.

"No," Jessie said.

"Not even an outside chance?" Hannah asked.

"The Pure Earthers are borderline Shockies. No one will take their agitating seriously, even if it were learned the maseni were having trouble with a murderous supernatural. The gates have been opened. It's too late to close them now. Relations with our supernatural brothers are too advanced for us to return to total ignorance of them." He looked at his notepad, found his place, and said, "Now, just two more questions..."

The remainder of that interview should have taken ten minutes. It lasted, instead, nearly half an hour, because Yilio and Hannah were not done with their own interrogation, still interested in the nature of the Pure Earth movement.

At the time, Jessie was bothered by their interruptions, but he assigned no special value to their questions. He thought that they were merely curious and talkative by nature. Later, he realized that their behaviour, their

curiosity, was another thread in the rope of an explanation which he was slowly twining together.

Somewhat depressed that the day had, apparently, yielded so little, the quartet returned to the inn an hour before nightfall, piled out of their robot-driven limousine and went inside.

Hogar was waiting for them in the foyer. "Welcome back, honored visitors," he said. "Would you care for any home world salted seeds?" He held out a container full of little brown spheres.

They all declined. In no mood to humor anyone, they pressed past the poisoner toward the elevators. When they were within a few yards of the lifts, the doors on the nearest slid open, and one of the giant maseni gods, fully ten feet tall, staggered out and fell on his face, clutching his stomach and screaming at the top of his voice.

Jessie stepped around the god and punched the service button to call another lift. "Hello, Pearlamon," he said.

The oversized maseni myth figure rolled onto its back and looked up. "You're the detective? Arrest this Tooner Hogar! He has slipped me something in my milk, some dire concoction, some horrendous poison that is burning out my innards."

"You'll feel all right in a few minutes," Jessie said, disinterestedly, smiling fatuously. "You'll be dead."

"Nobody cares anymore!" Pearlamon yelled.

"That's right," Jessie said.

"That ruthless Gonius can do as he pleases, hire the murderous Hogar to poison me, and no one cares!"

Tesseract and the three Earth people crowded into the lift that popped open for them, and they ascended, leaving Pearlamon to his temporary death throes in the hotel lobby.

Two hours later, as they sat at a collapsible dining table in the main room of the suite, eating a dinner which the robot had prepared for them and tested for subtle poisons, Hogar brought a message for Tesseract. He knocked lightly at the door, and when the maseni answered, he handed him an olive-drab envelope. "This came for you by courier," Hogar said. "The courier is downstairs, having a drink on the house, so I thought I'd better bring this around myself."

Tesseract accepted the envelope and said, "Thank you," rather coldly, realizing that the courier would shortly be -- if he weren't already -- doubled up in the hotel bathroom with nausea or diarrhea.

"And," Hogar said, "in hopes that your important investigation has been proceeding as you would like it to, I have brought you a bottle of wine to celebrate."

Tesseract hesitated.

Hogar showed him the label. "A fine vintage."

Tesseract opted for the easiest course, took the bottle and said, "Thank you, Hogar."

"It's nothing, nothing at all," the poisoner said. "Drink hearty, now!"

Tesseract closed the door, dropped the unopened bottle into the nearest wastecan and returned to the table. He handed Jessie the envelope. "It's the report that you asked for -- on the suicides of those two supernaturals."

Jessie put it on the table, beside his plate. "I'll read it later," he said, "after I've stewed over everything else we've got."

Later, after Tesseract had left and they were alone, Jessie reached for the report and held it in both hands, looking at it, not opening it yet, waiting to be sure it was time. He had a certain intuition about how to proceed on a case, when it was right to consider datum, what order one should string the clues together for maximum and swiftest solutions. Right now, he wasn't sure about the wisdom of reading the suicide report. He felt that he

had not let other things jell enough, that it would only cloud his theories instead of clear them, at this point. Something else should be done first.

Helena said, "This has been an exciting case."

He looked up, across the table, and saw she'd removed her gown. Her heavy breasts thrust across her dirty plate, the nipples turgid. "It sure has," he agreed.

"Better than divorce jobs," Brutus agreed.

"On the other hand," Helena said, "it's been dull."

"Oh?" Jessie asked. "In what way?"

"If you have to ask, you've proven my point. With all that's been going on, we've not had much time for tumbling in the proverbial hay -- or in anything, for that matter."

She stood up and slid one hand along her flat belly, to her tangle of dark pubic curls.

Jessie put the envelope down. He had known there was something else to do, first, before reading that report. He just hadn't been able to think what it was. Now he remembered as, jiggling, Helena walked toward him.

Everyone was asleep but Jessie. He sat up against the headboard of the huge bed, trying to enjoy the gentle lines of Helena's nude body as she lay outside the covers: slightly sagging breasts, deep insweep of waist, thrust of hip, undulating curves of thighs and calves and ankles... But he couldn't keep his mind on her; his thoughts kept returning to the suicide report. When he found himself staring at her flat belly but thinking about the olive envelope, he knew it was time to read what Tesserax had given him. He had thought out all the other points.

He got up, slipped into his robe and went into the main drawing room, pulled the bedroom door shut and sat down at the dinner table which the robot had cleared. He tore open the envelope, separated twelve sheets of print and began to read.

When he was half finished with the report, Pearlamon or Goniux or one of the other gods staying on the second floor staggered out of his room, moaning loudly, cursing Hogar. Jessie ignored the hysterical cries for help, and they soon ceased. He kept reading. When he finished and considered what he had read in conjunction with what else he had heard and seen, he knew he had the answer. He knew what and why the murderous beast was...

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Brutus returned with Tesserax, who closed the door and joined Jessie, Helena and the service robot at the table in the middle of the room. "Is it true -- you know what the beast is?"

"Yes," Jessie said.

"And you know how to destroy it?"

"I believe so," the detective said. "I'll have a chance to prove that tonight. If I'm right, the beast knows we're here and it will be coming after us, before dawn."

Tesserax was unsettled by this revelation. He fluttered tentacles before his own mouth, smoothed his robes, patted the top of his head. "Well! Well, then we best unpack the EmRec." He turned to the service robot and gave that order.

"EmRec?" Jessie asked.

The service robot opened a large trunk which they had brought with them, pulled an airtight plastic seal away and activated the machine that waited inside.

"EmRec means 'Emergency Recording System'," Tesserax explained. "It's a

device adapted especially for this case."

A four-foot-high robot, in maseni form, waddled out of the trunk, swiveled its head to look at each of them, and toddled to the only empty chair, dragged itself into the seat and said, "I'm ready."

"You'll notice how compact the EmRec is," Tesseract said. "It has only stumpy legs, stumpy arms, and no differentiating 'neck' between its head and body."

"Yeah," Brutus said. "It looks like a dwarf robot."

"This compact design, in addition to the thick armored plating that covers the EmRec's taping areas, makes it nearly indestructible. It can 'live' through one of the beast's attacks. If the rest of us should perish, it will have a record of our progress to pass on to the next team of investigators, so they need not start from scratch."

Helena said, "But why such an elaborate machine? Would a regular, micro-miniaturized, armored recorder have done as well, one that didn't walk and talk?"

"No," Tesseract said. "The EmRec not only records, but makes comments on the tapes about facial expressions and gestures -- comments we won't hear, but which those who later listen to the tape might find valuable." Tesseract sat down and looked away from the EmRec. "Shall we get on with it, then? What is this beast that's killed so wantonly, Mr. Blake?"

Jessie cast one last glance at the stumpy EmRec, then began his detailed explanation. "You thought my alien viewpoint might give me a fresh enough slant to solve this puzzle where your best minds could not, and you were correct. The clues were obvious. Some of them, however, were things you were so accustomed to that you took them for granted. I didn't; they were unique things to me, and I employed them in seeking a solution."

"Excuse me," EmRec said.

Jessie looked at the metal dwarf. "Yes?"

"Would say your expression, there, was one of smug self-satisfaction or a more mild and simple pleasure at your supposed success? That is to say, can we assume your explanation is untainted by egotism, or is there a shading element of the ego involved?"

Tesseract said, "Some ego, clearly. But I believe Mr. Blake's facial expression was more simple satisfaction than smugness."

"Proceed," the EmRec said.

Jessie gathered his wits and said, "First of all there was your new myth figure -- the Drunken D river. I was aware that new myths are constantly generated, but not that cross-racial myths could spring up. From the moment I realized this possibility, I kept it in mind throughout the interviewing of other witnesses, in weighing everything I saw and heard. Your own people wouldn't have considered it particularly relevant. Next, I considered how rough the supernaturals have played to keep us from learning anything about this affair. It seemed to me that they were aware of a new myth, springing from maseni-human cultural interaction, but were desperate to keep its nature unknown for fear of losing something. When I talked with the mist demon Yilio and his angel wife Hannah, I suspected that what they feared was a law -- or an Earth government partial to such a law -- that would forbid marriage between maseni and human supernaturals. The only thing that could generate the demand for a law like that would be some calamitous result of interracial, supernatural breeding. In other words, if a maseni-human supernatural couple produced offspring that was dangerous, the Pure Earthers might get enough power, from public fear, to force through a law forbidding all interracial marriages."

Tesseract was impressed. "Then you think this beast is the offspring of the coupling of maseni and human supernaturals?"

"Excuse me," EmRec said. "Mr. Galiotor Tesseract, is that a look of awe

on your face or merely one of surprise? It is difficult for me to give it a certain interpretation. I apologize for the interruption, but I think one of my sight circuits was jolted loose during shipment."

"It was surprise and awe," Tesserax said.

"Thank you. Proceed."

Jessie took a moment, recovered, and said, "Yes, your beast is the child of an interracial, supernatural marriage. And I believe I can explain why this marriage produced an insane myth creature, a killer. You'll remember our discussion of the Protector in the space port when we landed. You said some people felt that those invading aliens, centuries ago, had not been able to live on this planet because some quirk in its geography, in its natural magnetic forces, was deadly to them."

"I recall," Tesserax said.

"Isn't it also possible," the detective went on, "that the same quirk might affect the offspring of certain supernatural marriages. Mind you, I'm not saying that all Earth myths who couple with maseni myths will produce unruly monsters. But isn't it feasible that one particular maseni species, matched with one particular Earth species, could produce an insane child by reason of your world's magnetic make-up, whatever that may be?"

"Perfectly possible," Tesserax said.

"Gentlemen," the EmRec said, "I wonder -- "

"It was awe, this time. No surprise, just awe," Tesserax said.

"Thank you," the dwarf robot said. "Proceed."

Jessie said, "Finally, the suicide report convinced me that I was on the right track. Two unprecedented incidents, so close together in time and space, seemed more than coincidental to me. I felt the suicides were somehow tied in with the marauding monster. Now, I believe that the couple who took their own lives were the parents of this killer plaguing your people. In horror at what they had unleashed, they took their own lives in a sort of warped atonement for the deaths of those people in the ruined villages." He picked up the suicide report, referred to it. "If the suicides were the parents of this monster, then its mother was Kekiopa, a little-known Carribbean storm goddess elemental worshipped by a small voodoo cult. And the father was a maseni myth figure, Ityitsil the Reptile Master."

"Fascinating," Tesserax said.

"EmRec," Brutus said, "you can describe me as awe-stricken, too."

"Proceed," EmRec said.

Tesserax said, "How do you propose to locate this beast, this cross-bred monster?"

"It will locate us," Jessie said. "Part of the myth of the storm goddess is that she knows what transpires in every nook and cranny where her breezes blow. If the child inherited this mythical omniscience, it has known about all our comings and goings today. It will seek and destroy us. It knows we're here, just as it knew to avoid those traps your people set for it in the past."

"But if it knows we're here," Tesserax said, "it also knows we might be able to destroy it. It knows that you've plumbed its secret."

"It can't know that," the detective said. "It can't, because its many breezes do not reach inside four walls; indoors, it has no powers of observation, no ears and eyes."

Helena said, "Then, if it's on its way, we should be looking for some way to deal with it."

Jessie smiled, started to speak, turned to EmRec and said, "Yes, my ego is showing. I am smugly satisfied with myself."

"I thought you were," EmRec said. "I already commented to that effect, on my inner tapes." It waved one stubby hand again. "Proceed."

Jessie said, "I cracked my mythology books and found out how to destroy,

how to disintegrate the souls, of each of the monster's parents."

"But they're already dead," Tesseract said.

It was Helena who was smiling smugly now. "Yes, they are, Tessie. But what Jessie means is -- if we go through the rituals for dissipating both the mother and the father, the combination ought to dissipate the child -- the beast."

"Exactly," Jessie said. "Now, to destroy the storm goddess, one has only to repeat this voodoo chant -- " he tapped an open book, " -- and throw a few drops of fresh human blood into her winds. To dissipate a Reptile Master, one must merely repeat a certain maseni prayer and pierce him with a silver shaft."

"Therefore," Helena continued, "when we confront this beast, one of us will say the voodoo thing and throw blood into the wind, while someone else repeats the maseni prayer and fires a silver shaft into the creature's hide."

Tesseract got to his feet, patting the top of his head excitedly. "Two questions come to mind, straight off. First, where will we obtain this silver shaft, on such short notice?"

Jessie said, "I have a dip of silver narcotics darts which I use in my pistol on Earth when I know I might have to shoot werewolves as well as human beings. There's not enough silver in the darts to kill a supernatural like a werewolf, but it stings them badly and keeps them back. And, judging from what I've read of your Reptile Masters, a few silver pins should turn the dissipation trick."

"And what about the human blood?" Tesseract asked.

"The service robot operates a roboclinic out of one of these trunks he brought along, doesn't he?" the detective asked.

"Yes. On any dangerous mission, a roboclinic -- "

Jessie interrupted: "We can have him take a blood sample from me, and I can throw that into the air."

"Will that be sufficient quantity of blood to meet the myth requirements?" the maseni asked.

"Yes, according to this UN text of mine."

Excitedly, Tesseract said, "Then we are ready for it -- or nearly so! If it should come after us tonight -- "

He was interrupted by a long, blood-curdling scream, a roaring, a thundering voice that shook the windows in their panes and made the mythical inn tremble violently on its mythical foundation.

"Already?" Tesseract asked.

Jessie said, "We had best move fast."

EmRec said, "Excuse me, gentlemen, but would you say that scream was merely one of rage -- or was it touched by madness? I think maybe my audio receptors were jarred a bit, in transport, in addition to my scanners."

### Chapter Twenty-Three

The home world's two large moons shone down on the detective, the woman, the hell hound, Tesseract, the service robot, EmRec, Hogar the Poisoner, and a couple of giant, loin-clothed maseni gods as the group gathered behind the inn, facing the dark snow forests on, the higher slopes of Piotimkin. The booming, inhuman voice came from that direction. Soon, the thing would appear.

"Anyone like a cookie?" Hogar asked. He passed a box of them around; the box came back to him, still full.

EmRec said, "Mr. Hogar, sir, is that some form of mad expectancy on your face, or do you suffer from indigestion?"

"Drop a bolt," Hogar snarled.

The stubby robot said, "I wouldn't have to ask if my sight circuits and



interpretation nodes hadn't been badly jarred in transport."

"Strip your threads," Hogar said, meaner than before.

Now, from upslope, came the sound of the giant conifers splitting apart like tiny saplings to make way for the monster. Trees crashed down, colliding noisily with other trees. Frightened woodland animals called out and rushed forth into the open meadow that separated the inn from the trees.

"There!" Helena cried.

Something enormous reared out of the last of the pines. Trees fell before it, revealing it in the pale moonlight.

"Ugly bastard, isn't he?" Brutus asked.

A core of violent winds, churning like beater blades on a mixmaster, whipped the trees and tore up the meadow sod and hurled it skyward in fist-sized chunks. The animals that had run into the meadow now ran out again, screeching shrilly, bellowing in terror. At the center of the maelstrom lay the more concretized aspect of the beast: a thirty-foot lizard which looked much like its father but was twice as large as a Reptile Master and a thousand times meaner. It turned green eyes on them and ran a pebbled tongue over rows of sabrelike teeth, started lumbering in their direction. Each of its six feet left barrel-sized depressions in the earth.

"I can't interpret the monster's facial expressions at all," EmRec said. "And considering that its bellows really convey no meaning, I should really get something down here, I don't suppose one of you gentlemen is in the mood to assist?"

"Pop a rivet," Hogar snapped, still holding his big boxful of poisoned cookies.

"I didn't think you'd be in the mood," the metal dwarf said.

Helena had begun the voodoo chant, while Brutus began to read the maseni prayer that would help dissipate the father's heritage. Jessie held both the vial of blood and the narcotics dart pistol loaded with silver pins.

"Blood," Hogar said, sarcastically. "Everyone derides me. But I'll tell you one thing -- poisoning is at least neat."

The gargantuan had crossed a third of the meadow and was picking up speed, bearing down on them with the determination of a wounded bear and the momentum of a freight train.

The maseni gods began to nonchalantly back away from the scene, their eyes wide in terror but not yet terrified enough to soil their godly reputations with a display of cowardice.

"Hurry with the chants!" Tesserax cried.

"That was raw fear," EmRec said, smugly. "That was the clearest expression of naked terror that I have ever seen, Mr. Galiotor."

Tesserax did not respond. Indeed, he had not even heard the dwarf, for his own loud screaming.

The earth shook with the dragon's approach. The force of the winds hit them and pasted their clothes tight against them; Tesserax's orange robes splashed out colorfully in his wake.

Jessie threw the blood into the wind as Helena finished her chant, then dropped to one knee and fired a dozen silver darts at the dragon's belly just as Brutus came to the final verse of the maseni prayer. The effect was quite dramatic. The charging beast jerked, staggered clumsily to the side, fell down and rolled past them, into the back of the inn. Mythical boards burst, and mythical windows shattered...

"It worked!" Tesserax cried.

"Elation," EmRec said. "Or is it surprise? It might even be relief of a sort..."

The dragon wailed and writhed, trying to regain its feet. But there was no use to its struggles. The winds around it had abated. Already it was becoming transparent, like a milk glass novelty in the pale moonlight.

A few minutes later, Tesserax said, "It's gone. We did it, Blake! Or, rather, you did it, my friend."

The animals, having fled to the far edges of the meadow, came slowly back toward the trees, now, sniffing the air where the beast had once walked.

"This calls for a celebration!" Hogar said. "Food, wine, candies and spices! All on the house, of course."

Pearlamon said, "I must admit, Mr. Blake, that many of us knew what the beast was. But we hoped to find a way to destroy it ourselves, without letting the secret out." He was munching on some peanuts which he had taken from a pouch in his loincloth, and his words were somewhat slurred. "But now that you and your brave companions -- " He stopped, looked startled, dropped the peanuts and grabbed his throat. "Ach!" he said.

Hogar giggled.

"Ach, ach, ach," Pearlamon choked.

Jessie turned away from the god as he fell onto his back. To Brutus, the detective said, "You know, you were right when you said I had a latent fear of becoming a Shockie like my folks. I don't have that fear any more. If I can keep my perspective in the midst of this crazy gang, I know I can adjust to anything at all."

"I never was afraid of change or of danger or of crazy creatures," Helena said. "Excitement always makes me horny, that's all."

"Ah, hah!" EmRec said. "I recognized that expression. Boy oh boy! Your face was a mask of sheer lust." The metal dwarf looked at Jessie and said, "Oh, and yours too, yours too!" He paused. "Or maybe yours isn't lust Perhaps you're constipated? I have a faulty visual node here, and I can't tell for sure. Is it, maybe, a tick in your cheek? Or could it be... No. I think what it is, you have had a religious revelation, a miraculous... No, not that either. Your expression is more one of... Or is it? Well now..."