

*THE ADVENTURES OF SOLO JONES*

**Book 1**

**Genesis**

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## **Chapter 1, *My Apprenticeship***

We were fools.

We had travelled together for a few months, in the spring and summer of that year. I was nineteen, and I was next to the oldest.

In my homeland I had trained as a warrior, using the staff; it was our traditional weapon, and I am proud to say I was quite good with it. I joined with Kras Dolan, a spearman, Fresia the Nimble, an acrobat and sometimes thief, and her lover Sol Avar the sorcerer. Together we traveled throughout the land now known as Spain, from the ice fields to the strait, and then across to the grasslands you now know as the Sahara Desert.

We fought highwaymen and collected the bounties; sometimes we found monstrous creatures to battle, like the Ape-Men or the Little People. They were not the elves or leprechauns you are thinking of, but more like modern-day Pygmys, endowed with magical powers.

Often we had heard of the evil wizard whose zombie army controlled a small kingdom in the northeast part of Africa, and one day Kras said "We can defeat him." So we headed east along the coast. We were fools.

No sooner than we had stepped into the courtyard of his dilapidated fortress, but we were beset by zombies from all sides. They drove us into the keep proper, where it was dark and gloomy, as the windows were all covered. Though badly abused we began to get the better of them, and Sol even said "Look, they flee before us!"

Those were his last words. I tripped over a zombie Kras had dismembered, so the bolt of eldritch power missed me; but the others were not so lucky. I stood up, and found myself face to face with a horrid, withered sorcerer. I could feel his icy breath from five feet away...

I ran, in abject terror. What man wouldn't, if he had not steeled himself for the experience? In my panic I chose a door we had not explored, and found myself descending. Soon I was lost in the caverns below the keep.

He pursued me for what seemed like days; in fact it may have been, for I drained my waterskin, refilled it and quenched my thirst at an underground stream, and drained it again before he caught me.

I had run down a blind alley, and before I had time to backtrack he was there. I had by then prepared myself to stand my ground, and fight like a trapped rat, but he raised his hand and spoke an arcane word, and I fell in a heap.

Three zombies came forward; one stripped my gear from me, and the the other two lifted my tingling body to a kneeling position. With another pass the monstrous wizard removed the spell, removing the paralysis.

"You are cunning and crafty," he said in a voice like dry leaves crackling. "Smarter by far than any of the other fools who have tried to best me. I will make you an offer, my friend: call me your master and become my apprentice, and I will give you power beyond your dreams. If you decline, know that I will make your death far more painful than that of your friends, here."

It was then that I realized the three zombies were the animated corpses of Kras, Fresia, and Sol. I cracked.

"You are my master, O great wizard."

"My name is Gruven Ket, but you will always call me Master." The zombies (I never think of them with the names they had in life) lifted me to a standing position, and I followed my new master meekly out of the caverns.

Ket never called me by my name; he never asked it. I was always "apprentice" except sometimes when he rebuked me, calling me "slave." I was given responsibility for the captives he kept in the dungeon, most of whom had been there many months and had thus lost their minds. The villages nearby gave tribute, in gold and in food, in return for safety from Ket's undead army; handling the food became my responsibility.

Much of my time was spent in study and practice; Ket had many projects occupying his time, and so he spent only two or three days in ten at most training me. Still, I learned steadily, for I had nothing else that I cared to do, and I could not leave. I passed four years in this manner.

Though I could not leave the keep, I was allowed access to the caverns. From time to time when the proximity of my master became too much to bear, I would wander about them for a day or so. It was on one such trip that I found a narrow, hidden passage, at the other end of which I saw sky. I determined that it opened just outside the outer wall of the keep, near the bluff overlooking the sea.

One day in the chill of winter my master called me to his study, for training I assumed; but he wished for the first time to discuss something with me. "In three days hence is the day of sacrifice, when I must give to the demon-lord who must not be named a virgin sacrifice. Here," he said, waving a hand at the door behind me. As I turned to look I saw a young woman, her hands bound behind her, gagged, and held by two zombies. Ket rose and approached her, causing her to writhe and struggle to no avail. With one icy claw he ripped her dress from top to bottom, and the zombies tore off what remained.

She was beautiful, of course, and terrified, her eyes like those of a trapped deer. "You will care for her, apprentice; see to it that she is still a virgin when I slay her on the altar." With that, he waved in dismissal and turned away.

I led the zombies, who by now were carrying her, down to the dungeon. I gave her a cell that had not been used in a while, and sent a zombie to bring fresh straw. After posting guards at the door I removed her bonds.

First she struck at me, but she was weak with fear and exhaustion and so did me no harm. I put my arms around her and held her tight until she stopped struggling and began to cry. After a time she moved away and I told her I would return soon with food and water.

When I returned, some hours later, I brought food and water for her consumption as well as a bowl of water for washing in. She watched me like a mouse watches a hawk, but she did eat and she did wash. Finally she spoke.

"My name is Mara. Have you a name, apprentice?"

"I am called Solomoriah, but not by my master, who does not know my name." I smiled at this, my first smile in many years.

She stood then, and approached me slowly. "I would do anything, Solomoriah, to escape the fate your master plans for me." She spread her arms slowly, a gesture of offering, and I would be no man if I didn't admit I was tempted. My master's warning rang in my ears still, though, and I refused her. I left quickly, before I could change my mind.

It was nearly daybreak then, and like my master I slept in the daytime; but I did not sleep that day, for in my mind I could see Mara bound to that altar Ket spoke of. I had seen it many times, even seen the bloodstains, but I had not allowed myself to think about its use before. Now I could think of nothing else.

The next night I did my best to avoid my master, and he seemed content to ignore me. I planned and plotted a thousand escapes before I settled on one.

As I have said, Ket's keep stood on a bluff overlooking the sea. The land above the bluff was flat and devoid of trees for a long distance, and I knew that zombies were "planted," half-buried, throughout that area as traps. The bluff, though... Ket's zombies had to be kept away from salt, lest he lose control of them, so the salty sands below never saw a zombie footprint. My master himself could not bear the daylight very long. We would flee, then, through the hidden tunnel to the outside and quickly over the bluff. If we did so at dawn Ket could not follow us, and I believed we would be safe.

As dawn was about to break I put on my gear and went to Mara, carrying some of my extra clothes to cover her against the cold. Though they fit her poorly she said they would do; for by now she realized I meant to save her.

As I led her from her cell I saw zombie guards massed at one end of the line of cells. I boldly approached them, ordering them away, but they did not obey me this time. With a cold chill I realized that Ket knew of my treason.

I ran back to Mara, throwing open all the cells (which were merely barred) as I went. The other slaves, particularly those with more aggressive forms of madness, ran out into the corridor and grappled with the zombies. I heard Ket calling to me but his words were unintelligible.

Both ends of the cellblock had entrances, and though it was a longer distance the other way it was our only choice. Mara, for her part, was tougher than I gave her credit for, and never fell behind. We narrowly missed being caught by zombies; fortunately they are slow and stupid opponents.

We reached the opening at last, and I put Mara through first, then followed her. The sky was clear and bright, and I felt confident.

I was a fool.

I started down the bluff first. The handholds and footholds were quite good, and I could see a ledge only five yards or so below where we could rest out of sight of the fortress. I turned to Mara to help her down just as a bolt of scarlet fire burned through her abdomen. She toppled, lifeless, falling on me and nearly bearing me to my own doom.

I was right that the zombies would not follow me onto the beach, so I buried her there under sand and a cairn of large stones. I wept, and as I wept I realized I had never wept for my lost friends.

It was a long, cold day as I fled along the seaside, putting as many miles between myself and my former master as I could. I don't know if he let me escape or if I really got away on my own; but I spent the next several years on the run. I freely used my name, certain he did not know it, and I became more powerful in the ways of magic. As with my friends years before I fought the unjust and evil, and lived on the proceeds.

## **Chapter 2, *The Madman and the King***

I fought many battles in that time, but two in particular are important, as they led to important increases in my capabilities. Specifically, from each I acquired a ring of mystic power.

The first such was, in fact, my first battle after leaving Ket's service. I was told, in a small town on the eastern coast of Africa, about a wild and dangerous creature known simply as the Madman. He attacked farms, killing all he found using his clawed hands.

I spoke with a warrior named Gar who had been one of a group sent to kill the Madman; only Gar returned. He described the Madman as short and wizened, but very strong and fast. Perhaps the most horrific thing about the Madman was the fact that any wound inflicted on him healed very quickly.

I prepared my spells, and the next morning I left in search of the Madman. He was said to attack only by night, so I assumed he slept by day. The townspeople advanced many theories about where he might be found, but based on the pattern of his attacks I deduced that he lived in the farm house where he performed his first murders. I was right.

At first it seemed no battle; I became invisible, and crept into the house. He was asleep on the floor, sleeping beside a perfectly serviceable bed. Had I not been trained as a necromancer the human body parts strewn about the two-room shack would have made me retch, or weep, or both. It was obvious that he was a cannibal.

Before he had time to awaken I cast a Paralysis spell on him. I had expected to thus make him helpless, and then to drag him back to town.

To my surprise, as soon as I spoke he leapt to his feet and charged at me. The Paralysis spell seemed only to slow him, and he shook like a wet dog to rid himself of it.

I didn't have time to cast a spell; so I raised my staff and fought. Round and round the small room we went; I nearly slipped on a puddle of blood, and he came at me at that sign of weakness. I struck forward with my staff, catching him in the forehead, and he reeled backward into the wall.

Several more times we feinted and parried like that, and then I saw an opening and struck with the tip of my staff into his chest. It caved in with a sickening sound, and he fell backward.

I breathed a sigh of relief as I took a step back. Why I stepped away from a downed foe I don't know, but it saved me... for as I watched his collapsed chest rose back into place, and he lifted his head slowly to show me an evil grin.

As he charged again I was prepared for him, and with a word I released a powerful spell of Sleep on him. He fought it, tried to shake it off, but I had prepared another just like it, and I used it.

I bound him with all the rope and cloth I could find. This gave me time to study him, and a simple spell of Mystic Vision revealed that he wore a magic ring. This, it turned out, was the source of his rapid healing: a Ring of Regeneration.

I took it from him, put it on, and then, as he was helpless, I dragged him back to the town. By then the spells had passed, and he was gibbering and screaming. The chieftain pronounced sentence on him quickly, and the next day they hung him. Perhaps in these latter days, he would be committed to an institution instead, but in those days that's how it was done. I accepted my payment and moved on.

The second ring came from a corrupt king of a seaside nation at the southern tip of Africa. I have by now forgotten the name of the nation, but the king was named Elmarin.

I did not intend to slay him; his nation was too powerful, and I was just one man. I was, in fact, just passing through.

As I walked down a street in a merchant district, I heard a cry of pain from down a narrow alley. There I saw two scruffy-looking men wrestling with a young boy. Ordinarily I would not pay much attention to such things (as children often overact to draw sympathetic attention), but this boy was much better dressed and cleaner than his opponents.

I stepped into the end of the alleyway and said, "What are you doing with that boy?" In answer, one of them turned and charged at me, brandishing a dagger. I stopped him with a Paralysis spell, and he fell on the dagger. By the time I turned him over I could see he was dead.

The other assailant released his young captive, and said "You're in big trouble, friend. Tigris will have your hide for interfering with his pleasure."

Now, I had heard of this Tigris. He was the mage-in-residence at Elmarin's castle, and had created (I was told) many powerful enchantments to protect the castle. I had also heard that he had unsavory appetites, but I really hadn't wanted to know any more.

So be it. "My friend, you will take me to this Tigris," I said, and then with three words and a gesture I compelled him to obey.

I am no great master of illusion, and I know it, so I chose a simple one: I impersonated the other thug. I instructed the thug under my control, whose name I have since forgotten, to take me to Tigris and to do all the talking, allowing me to avoid giving myself away.

We entered the palace of Elmarin by the rear entrance, as servants do. My guide spoke to some of the people we met, but I just grunted, feigning a cold. Presently we entered the private chambers of Tigris.

"I thought I sent you for a boy! Have you failed me, then?" yelled the tall, dark-skinned mage. He wore a light robe such as rich men wore when resting at home.

The thug began to sputter, unable to think clearly under the control of the Domination spell. I waved my hand at Tigris, saying a single word, and released a Paralysis spell.

Tigris was made of sterner stuff than the thug, though, and I could see he was going to resist the spell, so I quickly followed with a spell of Lightning. The bolt turned out not to be fatal to him, but he was made unconscious. I cast Sleep upon the thug, who was showing signs of overcoming the Domination; then I bound and gagged them both, and went to work looking for Tigris' spell books.

I had just found them, hidden under his huge bed, when I heard a noise from behind me. I turned and found Tigris standing up, no longer bound. "How," I began, and he interrupted with a spell of Paralysis.

"You fool. This perhaps is a bad time for you to learn this, but it is possible to cast spells without speaking. It is not the sound of the words but the mental act of forming them that makes the magic work. If you had time to read my books you might have learned the spell of Freedom which I used to overcome your bonds." He walked up beside the bed, which I had fallen upon when my muscles had failed me, and drew his dagger. "Now, I'd like to interrogate you, but you are much too dangerous, so goodbye." With that, he stabbed me in the chest. I died.

Well, I did, just as anyone in the modern world might die on the operating table, only to be brought back by doctors using advanced medical knowledge. Tigris did not know of the ring on my hand, and he turned away too quickly after removing the knife, so he did not see the flow of blood cease. The Ring of Regeneration repaired my ruptured heart, and I lay there, worrying that he would turn back and notice I was no longer dead before the spell of Paralysis wore off.

He didn't. I stood up quietly, and saw that he was trying to counter my spell on the thug. I decided to keep it simple, and released a Force Bolt spell of twofold power. He was transfixed, and as he turned and saw me I could see his shock and confusion. Then he died.

I always hated pedophiles, and I always will.

Unfortunately the scuffle had not gone unnoticed. The door burst open, and no less than five spearmen rushed in, menacing me. I was surprised, but even as I tried to cast my spell of Kinetic Shield they stabbed me.

I awoke in a cell, bound and gagged. Outside the cell stood a man of regal bearing in fine clothes with a leering grin. Elmarin, I supposed to myself. Behind him stood several guards. "You have killed Tigris, my chief mage, and so you must die. I have learned you are called Solomoriah. I have come here, Solomoriah, to thank you kindly for this fine ring, which saved your life. As you will not be needing it anymore I will wear it instead."

I remembered what Tigris had said about casting spells; he hadn't known that I also knew the spell of Freedom, though I didn't have it prepared. I began to cast it, forming the words in my mind as if I were speaking them, and I felt the mystic energies flowing into me.

Fortunately kings love to talk, and Elmarin was no exception. He continued in the same vein long enough for me to complete the spell, and as my bonds fell away I quickly spoke the word to activate my Kinetic Shield. I was just in time, as the guards rushed forward to stab at me through the bars with their spears. Elmarin stepped back behind them, toward the exit, as I released my Force Bolts one by one against the spearmen.

When the last guard fell, Elmarin turned tail and ran. The Freedom spell was already exhausted, so I used a simple Spirit Servant spell to retrieve the keys from the jailer's desk. I assume one of the fallen spearmen was the jailer, but frankly I don't know.

I was behind Elmarin by some seconds, but I still had spells left. I used a spell of Speed first. Then, Invisibility seemed prudent, and I cast it as I ran after him. I easily reached the corrupt King as he fled up the stairs and into a servant's hallway. I was nearly out of spells by this point, so I grabbed a nearby lampstand and struck him over the head with it. The bronze pole bent with the force of my strike, and he fell. Invisibility is a fragile spell, but I kept my mind calm even as I struck at him, and it did not fail me. I took all the rings he was wearing (for there were several) and fled the palace. I didn't slow down until I was outside the city.

Later I had time to study my "booty" and discovered one of his rings (besides the one he had taken from me) was enchanted. It took a while to puzzle it out, but I discovered that the ring served to detect scrying. Scrying refers to any spell or device which allows one to spy on a person or place remotely; a crystal ball, for instance, which incidentally are worthless for telling the future but quite handy for watching one's enemies.

The ring had a large blue sapphire in it, which I discovered turned orange when I was being scryed upon. The change was so fast that no one scrying upon me would be able to see it.

As I wore my Ring of Regeneration on my left hand, I put the Ring of the King (as I called it) on my right. It proved to be nearly as useful as the Ring of Regeneration in my battles against evil mages.

### **Chapter 3, *I Lose Another Friend***

I reached the village of Zimba some weeks later; it was the second village past the borders of Elmarin's territory, and I felt much safer at last. I stopped at a tavern and inquired about a room; the barkeep referred me to the owner, and he in turn showed me to a private room.

"Room and board, one night, one silver ringlet. Drinks extra." I paid him a gold ringlet, worth in those times about fifteen silver ringlets. "Will you be staying long, then?" he asked, a gleam in his eyes.

"I doubt it, but I may not have time to check out properly when I do leave. You may keep any excess." He left with a spring in his step. I closed the door and lay down on the surprisingly clean bed.

Later that evening I went down for my complimentary supper of stew. A gold ringlet bought my beer for the evening; I told the waitress to keep the change, and she also got a spring in her step.

I should tell you that money means little to me. Once I sold myself into slavery to a monster for the price of my life; money seems unimportant after you have lived through that. If I have enough for my physical needs, generally I am content.

As I finished my second beer, which I resolved would be all for the night, lest I become dangerously impaired, I overheard several men at a nearby table having a heated argument.

"I say he's a menace! Who knows what he's doing alone in that cave? He's a wizard, for Zor's sake!"

"Now, Rasha, how do you know this?" asked another man. "I, for one, have not seen him eating children or consorting with demons."

A third man spoke up. "Aye, but still, he at least is rustling our sheep, for how many herders have lost sheep in that district?"

The second man said, "Foo. That region is full of bluffs and washes. Sheep are stupid enough to die on their own there, and I fear some of the herders are also."

Rasha must have been a herder, for he leapt to his feet and raised a fist in the second man's face. "Cor Vinus, you have insulted me too many times!" A fight seemed imminent.

I considered a spell, but decided (perhaps it was the beer talking) to step in instead. "I am Solomoriah, the slayer of wizards. Calm yourself, Rasha, and you all will tell me of this man who lives in a cave."

It came out then that a hermit named Zam Nar lived in a cave in a nearby area. He was known to be a sorcerer, but no one knew his speciality, if indeed he had one. He came

to town every month or so with skins of various types to trade for food and supplies, and he never spoke to anyone if he didn't have to.

I resolved to meet this Zam Nar, and take his measure. "I will go to his cave, my friends, and learn about him; and if he poses a threat to you and yours, I will deal with that." There was some grumbling, but all agreed this seemed a reasonable course of action.

They were terrified, of course. They were scared of me, too; I could see it in their eyes. This had been my lot in life for quite a while.

The next day, I renewed my prepared spells and set out into the countryside. It took me about three hours to reach the bluffside cave the men in the tavern had described.

"Zam Nar, are you here?" I called. "I am Solomoriah, come to parley with you." My voice echoed in the cavern.

After a few moments, I heard "Enter, Solomoriah, slayer of wizards. Have you come to slay me today?"

"Not today, my friend. Many of the village of Zimba fear you, and they would like me to kill you, but it is not my way. Only if you are truly a threat to them would I do that."

At that moment, a light appeared in the cavern. I could see the hermit, wearing worn but generally clean clothing, standing in the back of the cavern with a flaming torch in hand. He put it in a crevice in the wall, a sort of makeshift sconce, and motioned me to sit on one of the several large rocks which formed his furniture.

As I did so I looked around his cave. He had bedding, in the form of skins and straw, in one spot, with a large, shapeless leather bag placed nearby... his "luggage," I presumed. Boxes and sacks of dry foodstuffs were in another corner, and hanging from a sort of wooden frame was a gazelle, obviously for his next meal, and some skins drying beside it.

"I am finishing my apprenticeship," he began. "My master feels that seven months spent in the wilderness, meditating and focusing, is the best way to make the transition to adept."

"A sort of sabbatical before you begin?"

"Just so. I am forbidden to eat meat or fish I have not caught and killed myself, but I may trade for other foodstuffs. I am also not to have visitors, so I am afraid you must leave."

"Who is your master?" I asked.

"Tigris, first mage of King Elmarin." I could not hide the brief moment of shock from my face; and Zam noticed it. He stood up. "You know them, don't you?" Then he looked me

over, taking my measure again. "That ring on your hand! It is the ring of Elmarin! You have slain them both, then!"

I braced myself, my spell of Kinetic Shield at the forefront of my mind.

"I suppose you think I should slay you now," he said, "to defend the honor of my master. In truth, I am relieved."

"How so?" I asked, relaxing slightly.

"Tigris was a dark and evil man. When he learned I had demonstrated unusual talent, he decided he wanted me as his apprentice. I refused, but he found out I have a little brother, Ren; so he blackmailed me, and I gave in to save my brother."

"Sit, Zam Nar, and consider your apprenticeship at an end a bit early," I said. "Let me tell you of my former master." So I did.

We talked all day, and all night, exchanging spells, drinking the wine he had brought to celebrate the end of his seclusion, telling tall tales of women we had known, and considerably more realistic tales of the men I had fought. I drank more than is my normal quota, and became quite drunk.

I awoke after noon the next day, in a smoke-filled cavern in terrible pain. As I looked down, in the smoky gloom I saw a spear working its way out of my abdomen; the ring at work. I looked around, and realized that we had been choked by smoke from a fire at the mouth of the cave, and then attacked by spearmen. They had apparently been too fearful to loot our bodies...

I saw Zam, a spear in his chest. He was not breathing.

My rage cleared my head. I prepared a fearful group of spells, and cast a potent Flight spell on myself, with enough power to carry me all the way to the village. I flew swiftly, and I saw Rasha and his friends laughing as they entered the tavern. I landed, and I listened at the door a moment.

"Barkeep! Beer all around!" yelled Rasha. "We have slain two foul wizards this day, and that's thirsty work!"

That was all I needed to hear. I cast a Force Bolt, which blew the door off its hinges. I stepped inside, already protected by a Kinetic Shield, and said "When you kill a foul wizard, you damn fool, make sure he's DEAD!"

I won't list the spells I cast; it is sufficient to say that the killers' bodies were a bit hard to identify when I was finished. Those not involved in the murderous plot quickly realized I wasn't interested in them, and fled.

The red haze before my eyes finally faded, and I was left drained of emotion. I picked up a forgotten mug of beer, drank it, and flew out the door.

I decided then and there to leave Africa. I had lived on that continent seven years, and had perhaps a month's worth of happy memories from that time. In the city of Gharu I found a merchant with a large ship (for the time, anyway) and arranged to exchange my magical services for passage to the continent now known as South America.

## **Chapter 4, *A Cup of Xocholotl***

In a village in a country in South America, I was told of an evil sorcerer. It was said that he lived on the side of a volcanic mountain and held sway over several villages in the lowlands below. When I learned he was known for human sacrifices, I vowed to defeat him.

His name was Tjarik; that's about all I knew. The last time I had battled a wizard I didn't know anything about, my friends died and I became a slave. Since then I always tried to learn something about my foe first.

I went to the temple district, in the city of Ta Charka. It lay on the mouth of the river Yoris; you know it as the Amazon. I approached the gate to the temple district in the morning, before the heat of the equatorial sun became too much to bear. An alert guard challenged me. "You are impure, stranger. I can see it in your aura."

"I am certain you are right, sir. I need to speak with a priest regarding Tjarik the sorcerer. I can wait here if you prefer me not to enter."

The guard sent a runner, a young boy, to get a priestess named Zanice. Shortly she arrived, and we moved to a nearby restaurant to get out of the heat. I bought her an iced xocholotl and sat down across from her.

"You said you wanted to talk about Tjarik," she said.

"Indeed. I am Solomoriah, the sorcerer, and I intend to defeat him."

"And take over his domain, I suppose?"

"You haven't heard of me, have you? I am Solomoriah, slayer of mages. I plan to defeat him, take his works of mystic knowledge, and move on, as I always have."

"Why do you live this way, Solomoriah? Has it anything to do with the taint upon your aura?"

I grimaced. "Most likely. Ask not for more than I dare to tell."

"Why should I trust you?"

"You shouldn't, I suppose; but what harm can it do to tell me what you know of him?"

Well, she told me what I needed to know. Tjarik was a fire-mage, and evidently feared necromancers in the worst way; this could work to my advantage. She could tell me little of the lay of the land, but she did reveal that one of the villagers, a man called Bombas in the village of Korth, could be trusted. "Tell him the one with the commanding eyes sends you," she said. I decided to seek him out.

The trip around the coast to Korth was uneventful; I booked passage on a merchant ship heading in that direction, but as it didn't proceed all the way to Korth I had to walk

the last few miles. I found the house of Bombas much as Zanice had described it, and likewise the tan-skinned and portly owner thereof.

A glance at the ring on my right hand told me I was being watched; so I said, "Bombas! I am sent by the one with commanding eyes! Call me Zam Nar."

"Well met, Zam Nar. Please grace my home with your presence," he said, as he held open the cloth covering the door.

Inside, he indicated a chair at his kitchen table, and I sat. He sat opposite me, and said "You have come to battle Tjarik, then?"

"No, my friend, to join him. He is said to be a powerful fire-mage, and I believe I can learn much from him."

"Then you don't want to defeat him?" Bombas looked shocked.

"Why should I do that? He is a man of might and power!"

I feared that Bombas would cast me out right then, and then I noticed the stone in the ring was again blue.

"We may speak now, Bombas. I knew Tjarik was listening. I am not Zam Nar; rather I am Solomoriah, the slayer of mages. I do intend to slay Tjarik." Bombas' face softened.

I drank from a cup of warm xocholotl he offered. "I plan to enter his fortress, not by force nor by stealth, but by guile. I will offer him an exchange of knowledge, but he will not know I am a necromancer until it is too late."

"Is your necromancy more powerful than his pyromancy, then?"

"Not really, but he fears it, I have learned. I plan to claim I am an air-mage, then when the battle finally begins I will use some fearsome spells I know to rattle him. I plan to go to his fortress tomorrow; may I spend the night here?"

"Of course, friend of Zanice."

"She wouldn't call me that, but she will be grateful for my intervention."

The next morning after a hot breakfast prepared by Bombas' equally portly wife, I went out to the small barn and sat down in the straw. My ring was a steady blue, so I began with the necromantic spells.

Most spells take too long to cast to be used in battle if you must gather the power and speak all the words; so mages prepare them, performing almost all the casting and capturing the required power. When the spell is to be released, just the last few words and gestures, such as targeting, must be performed.

It had been a long time since I had cast any spells of necromancy; so far as I know, no one outside of Ket's fortress knew I was a necromancer, and this is because I avoided

those spells. I found I had to get out my old spell scroll, and refresh my memory. I kept two spell "books," the scroll of necromantic spells from my old master and a leather-bound tome I had created since containing no necromancy. This second book is the one I used when exchanging spells with other mages. Because it was too heavy, I sold Zam Nar's spell book in Gharu after transcribing those spells I had learned from him into my own book.

As I finished my preparations, Bombas hurried into the barn, evidently looking for me. He looked agitated. I checked my ring, then said, "You may speak, Bombas."

"Tjarik has sent word that he requires another sacrifice. It has been only a month since the last!"

"Has one been chosen?" I asked, rising.

"Yes. My niece, Silla."

Now I understood his worry. Certainly, any death by sacrifice to Tjarik's fiery patron was sad, but this hit too close to his home.

"What is the procedure for delivery of a sacrifice?"

Bombas took a moment to calm himself. "The sacrifice is to have her hands bound, and to be delivered by one of our warriors to his front entrance. He lets down his flame barrier, and his guards take the sacrifice inside."

"This can work to our advantage. Bombas, let me take the girl. I swear to you that I will protect her."

"The other elders will never allow it. They fear Tjarik too much; if they knew what you were doing they'd turn us both over to him."

"I doubt they'd find it easy. Still, I can make this work."

I left the village shortly after the warrior took Silla from her weeping family. I went in a different direction until I entered the jungle, then after again checking my ring, I used the spell of Flight to become airborne. Flying low over the treetops, I knew the people of Korth would not see me. Presently I overtook the warrior and the sacrifice.

A wave and a word, and the warrior fell as if he were struck. The spell I used was Sleep, not Paralysis, because I did not want him to see me; the paralyzed still have their senses. Quickly I whispered to Silla my plan, and she agreed to cooperate, though I could see she was terrified. Reluctantly I placed a Compulsion on her to ensure her silence, as I did not want her to give me away.

## Chapter 5, *The Mage of Flame*

The trip to Tjarik's fortress took two days; so we had to make camp that first day at the edge of the jungle. I untied Silla and together we prepared the site. I gathered firewood nearby, keeping an eye on my unwilling assistant, then placed it in the circle of stones she had arranged. With a few words of magic I had a pretty little campfire.

We ate our ration of jerky and warm water in silence, for as I have said, she could not speak due to my Compulsion spell; and I had little interest in talking to a silent person. Then, I placed my bedroll on the ground, and motioned her onto it. She looked suspicious, but of course I had no plans such as she was considering.

"Silla, I can't trust you to remain with me, so you must lie down here and I will bind you. Please don't resist." She did as I said, and I bound her hand and foot. Naturally no gag was needed, for only threat of death would overcome the Compulsion.

From the smoke of the campfire I summoned a Spirit Guardian, a nature spirit bound to my service for the night, and charged it to wake me if any men or large predators approached. Then, secure in this arrangement, I rolled up my cloak and used it for a pillow. Sleep came surprisingly easily.

The night and the next morning passed uneventfully. We moved from the jungle onto the barren blackened stone of the volcano, following an old lava flow which stretched out like a cracked roadway toward the fortress visible in the distance. As we grew closer I saw a flaming barricade around the fortress.

"Who needs a moat," I said to no one in particular. As we neared the gate, the flames abated in that area and they opened. Two guards came out, and one immediately took charge of the girl. Before the other could close the gate I said, "I am Zam Nar, a wizard, and I would like to meet your master Tjarik."

"Wait," was the only word he said, and he closed the gate. Quite a while passed, but the flames were not reignited before the gateway, so I had hope. Finally the same guard again opened the gate, and said "Come."

I followed. The fortress was along the lines of a fortified manor house, rather than a proper castle such as you might be imagining. The guard led me to a man in finer clothing whose manner identified him as a steward.

"I am Dalderi, assistant to the Mage of Flame. He is occupied now, but wishes for you to meet him for the evening meal." As he said this, Dalderi led me through several rooms and hallways. I made note of the dining hall when we passed it, and also of the stairs in both directions. Quarters on the first floor were assigned to me, and I was encouraged to bathe before supper. Naturally I did so, for I had not had a good bath since Ta Charka.

I had considered from every angle whether or not to place defensive enchantments on myself, or on Silla, but finally I decided against. I had two good Flame Resistance spells

prepared at twofold power, and a twofold Kinetic Shield spell as well, each needing a single word and no gestures to activate. The extra Flame Resistance was simply because I expected Tjarik to have the counterspell ready. If I placed the spells on myself I knew he could detect them, but there was no spell I knew of to reveal another caster's prepared spells.

As I was drying off from my bath, I looked out the window and saw that there was an interior courtyard, perhaps twenty yards square, with a pillar in the middle. The pillar was smoke-blackened, as was the paving around it, and as I leaned out further I found a pile of human bones, also blackened, just below and to the right of the window.

This, I thought, could be useful.

I dressed for supper just in time for Dalderi to arrive and take me there. Tjarik was already seated, and did not rise as I entered. Then, as now, this is an indication of contempt. I ignored it.

"Master, this is Zam Nar, a sorcerer," said Dalderi.

He looked up. "Ah, Zam Nar. Your apprenticeship is over, then?"

"I decided to end my time in the wilderness after I learned of my master's death."

"So it is true that Solomoriah the mage-slayer killed Tigris and King Elmarin?"

"Indeed, sir. I have decided to seek retribution against Solomoriah, and as I have learned that you are a powerful man I have decided to come here and seek to learn from you."

"Young man, I would be delighted to help you. However, tomorrow I must again make sacrifice to the God of Flame, and any such activities must wait until then."

By now Dalderi had brought the first course, a soup. I wondered if he cooked it himself or if there were other servants. "I understand, sir. When will the sacrifice take place?"

"Exactly at noon tomorrow I will light the flames."

"I'll be there." The conversation shifted to other matters as the courses came and went. I drank lightly of the potent wine Dalderi served me, to keep my wits. I was lucky that Tjarik didn't ask me anything about Tigris I didn't know.

Late that night, I left my bed. After using the chamberpot I went to the window in the bath and looked out, apparently taken with the full moon. Actually I needed the light to check my ring; and it was not orange. I stepped back into the darkness and silently activated my Invisibility spell, thanking the stars that Tigris had revealed that trick to me.

I dropped over the side, into the courtyard. The bonepile was quite large; for a moment I was overcome with the sadness of it, and then with rage at the waste of lives. After I

recovered my self-control, I released the spell of Animation I had prepared. Fortunately the spell takes care of sorting out the bones by means of the principle of sympathy.

The spell animated five of the skeletons; I silently commanded them to remain down, and was relieved that there was only a slight shifting of the bones. The fortress was small enough, I reckoned, that I could call them by force of will anywhere within the walls; but I would probably only need them in the courtyard, if my plan went as I hoped.

My return to my bed was uneventful; I dismissed the Invisibility while passing through the window, which was in deep shadow.

The next morning I awoke with the sunrise, and prepared spells to replace what I had cast. I prepared no necromancy, of course, in case I should be watched.

Dalderi brought my breakfast to my room. "Tjarik is busy, Zam Nar, making preparations for the sacrifice. He instructs that you meet him in the courtyard before noon. Do you know the way?"

"Indeed, down the hall past the bath, then turn right and out the door."

"Then I don't need to instruct you. The master prefers you stay out of the way, as you are not versed in the procedures he is performing. If you wish, he has instructed me that you may have access to the library."

I took him up on it, and after perusing the tomes and scrolls which appeared the most used, I realized why Tjarik performed sacrifice after sacrifice: He believed that the Flame-God would grant him greater magic power in return for the spirits of the virgins. Even Ket knew better than this; evidently Tjarik fell under cult influences at an early age, and now that he had reached his personal limit of power he wanted more.

Ket, by the way, performed sacrifices to the Demon Lord in return for his undying existence. I fully believe that there is no other way he could have achieved such an undead form.

Perhaps half an hour before noon I went out to the courtyard. It was hot. The two guards, who I had finally decided were all there were, brought Silla out. She was naked, and her hands were bound. One guard (the tallest) tied her hands over a bronze hook protruding high up on the pillar, and then began wrapping a long, thin rope around and around her, giving her no room to move. He obviously enjoyed it, but he didn't waste much time fondling her. The other guard left, then returned with a large urn, which he handed to the taller guard.

As he tipped the urn and poured the honey-colored liquid over her, I realized it was oil.

Tjarik entered shortly thereafter, wearing robes embroidered with arcane symbols with which I was unfamiliar. He had been meditating, I assumed, as he had that blissful look that many get when they perform the ancient disciplines. Then he smiled.

I had to act. "Tjarik, look! Your servant hasn't bound her securely!" I said. Before he or the guards could inspect her bonds, I trotted over and tied the very secure knot another couple of passes. Secretly I also focused my mind and released one of my Flame Resistance spells, to protect Silla.

I returned to my place, wiping my oily hands on my pants and looking down, so I would not give myself away by smiling. Tjarik said, "Are you finished now, Zam Nar? Or must I wait for you to fix her hair also?"

"Proceed, O Mage of Flame," I said with all the fake sincerity I could muster. He turned toward her, raised his hands before him with fingers spread, and spoke two words. Flames appeared at the tips of his fingers. He stretched out his hands toward her, and a mighty fan of flames spread out from them. He was three or four yards away from her, but the flame sheet easily reached her, and the oil burst into flame. I braced myself, expecting him to realize shortly that she wasn't being killed by the burning oil on her skin, when she screamed out, "Save me, Solomoriah! Save me!"

Ah, I thought, threat of death will overcome the Compulsion. Of course she didn't immediately realize she was safe; she surely thought she was burning alive.

Tjarik turned toward me, his fingers still flaming, and I spoke the word for the other Flame Resistance just in time; the sheet of flame left me unharmed. My staff smoked but my clothes were undamaged.

I quickly cast my Force Bolt, but he must have already cast his Kinetic Shield. He was pushed back but appeared unharmed. The two guards decided that discretion was the better part of staying alive, and fled into the fortress. I could see Dalderi watching from the doorway.

Tjarik pointed at me and spoke three words, and I felt the Flame Resistance faltering. Before he could follow up I cast Paralysis, and saw him struggling to resist it. I followed with another Force Bolt, and this one shattered his Kinetic Shield. Unfortunately I was out of those at that point.

He stood up, the Paralysis gone, and I played my trump card: I called the skeletons into action. "Arise, my servants, and slay him who burned you alive!"

Tjarik did not know, and I didn't feel like telling him, that the Animated undead were not controlled by the original spirit or soul, but by a nature spirit bound to the task. He had every reason to think that the clattering monsters approaching him were truly seeking vengeance.

He cast another flaming sheet spell (I don't know the real name, as I never learned the spell), but the bony things were not affected. I knew that only force attacks, antimagic, or physical weapons could damage them, but evidently he didn't.

As the nearest skeleton clutched at him, he cracked, turning to run from the courtyard. I turned to Silla, who had stopped screaming when she realized she was not dying, nor

even being harmed. The oil was still burning fiercely, but my Flame Resistance still protected me enough to help her. The ropes against her skin were unaffected, just as my clothing was protected, but where they went around the pillar they went out of the protected area and were burned through. As a consequence, I had only to lift her up off the hook and cut her bonds with my knife.

The guards and Dalderi had fled ahead of their master. I told the still-flaming girl, "Go to the bath, through that door and left, and immerse yourself to put out the fire. Bar the door and remain there, and I will come for you."

"What about you?" she asked.

"I must slay Tjarik."

I ran into the fortress then, in search of Tjarik. I assumed his rooms were in the upper level, so I ran straight to the staircase, and was rewarded by the sounds of the skeletons. I found them scrabbling at a door, so I ordered them out of the way and blasted it with a Force Bolt. No, I didn't have any more prepared, but the spell is short and I had time to cast it.

Tjarik turned toward me, from the tome he had been frantically searching. I could see his terror as he realized I was a necromancer and he had no place left to run. I smiled, and walked into the room.

"Solomoriah, please," he pleaded, kneeling, "let me live, and I'll grant you any boon you ask."

"You are reprehensible, Tjarik, for though I am a necromancer, I have never sacrificed an innocent. Your time is up." I drew back my staff and struck at him as if I were stabbing with a spear. I hit his head, and he fell hard onto the floor. He was dead; I checked to make sure.

Some who have heard this story are outraged at this point; for Tjarik was a beaten foe, so surely I should have restrained him and turned him over to the authorities. To them I say, what authorities? There was no national nor state government, no police to call, no court he could be tried in. Should I have turned him over to the elders he had controlled by means of fear? No. His guilt was evident, and I was the only person who could carry out his punishment.

I sent the skeletons to wander the fortress and attack anyone they found other than Silla and I. Then I set about finding all his spell books and scrolls.

His room was full of shelves, with books and sorcerous nicknacks all over them, in terrible disarray. Truly this was a treasure trove! I had looked at perhaps half of the items when I saw a small box on a high shelf. It looked valuable, and I wondered what he kept within it.

I got it down to a lower shelf, and lifted the lid. Inside was a small, white lizard with large dark eyes. I had one timeless instant to realize what it was, and curse myself for a fool, before the darkness fell over me.

It was a Basilisk, and I had been turned to stone.

My last impression was of falling...

## **Chapter 6, *The Museum***

I awoke in a pool of blood. Someone was screaming; after a moment I realized it was me. My entire body seemed on fire.

I stopped screaming by sheer act of will, and tried to stand. That's when I realized my right arm was missing, from just above the elbow, and that's where the pool of blood had come from.

The Ring of Regeneration was still on my left hand, and I knew it would heal me... so why was it taking so long?

The flow of blood from my arm stopped just in time to prevent me from falling down. The pain receded and I looked around.

The extravagant glass cases, apparently held together with silver, contained all manner of old artifacts. I didn't need to be told to realize it was a museum. I also discovered I couldn't read any of the signs.

In the world I had left, all civilized people wrote in the same script, and spoke the same language. Some other time I will explain how this was so, but for now accept that writing I could not read alarmed me.

I realized it must be late at night, and just as I wondered about guards I heard footsteps. They sounded distant, but just the same...

All my remaining prepared spells were gone; I didn't have time to wonder why. I decided to become invisible, and began the spell.

There seemed to be no power available; the spell failed.

The footsteps were closer, now. I had been screaming, after all... I tried again, focusing all my will on gathering the power, and I was rewarded with success.

Just in time, too. His uniform and weapon may have been unfamiliar but a guard is a guard, and the man who entered the room was one. He gasped at the pool of blood, then took a box from his belt and spoke to it. His language was as unfamiliar as the writing on the signs.

I quietly moved around him, and out the door. The museum was like a maze, in the dim after-hours lighting, but I managed to find the front entrance. Just then a police car pulled up. Naturally I did not recognize the machine, but the policemen who emerged were as recognizable as the guard.

When they entered, I slipped out the door before it closed. It was cold in the night, but the lighting of the streets at least made my way clearly visible.

I came to a row of storefronts just as my invisibility wore off, and regarded my reflection. I looked like death itself, my shirt drenched in blood, tattered and worn

through in many places. I was wearing short sleeves and had no cloak, as I had last been in an equatorial region. At least my leather pants and boots remained serviceable, although the pants were worn almost through at the knees.

The worst part to the onlooker had to be my face; my eyebrows and eyelashes were gone, and the tip of my nose was missing. The Ring had managed to grow a thin layer of skin over it, and I was sure it would eventually regrow it entirely, but for now I was a monster.

How long had I been a statue? I imagined a thousand years; it turned out to have been much longer.

I found a litter-strewn alleyway in which to hide, stepping over other men who had come for the same reason as I: it was cold. Several of them spoke to me, but I couldn't understand them. Eventually they decided I was harmless and left me alone. I covered myself in cardboard and newspaper, frowning in frustration at all the strange writing, and went to sleep.

I wish I could say I awakened at dawn, but it was more like noon. I felt much better, though I was ravenously hungry and thirsty and really badly needed to relieve myself. I felt of my nose with my left hand, and found the tip still missing; I would ordinarily have expected such an injury to have healed by now with my ring, but obviously the shortage of magical energy affected it also. I wondered how long it would take me to regrow my missing parts, and for the first time since my awakening was truly worried.

I stood up, shaking off the papers that had protected me. The day was warm, though not hot, which was a relief after my cold night outdoors. I noticed a rank smell that told me that others had used a spot behind some garbage cans as a latrine. After checking for onlookers, I did so myself.

One down, two to go. I was worried that my strange clothing and maimed visage might draw unwanted attention in this huge city. I resolved to pretend I was a native, not looking too much in awe of this place or craning my neck to look about like a tourist. Of course that **is** how I felt, but I didn't want to show it.

I needn't have worried. When I came out of the alley onto the street, I saw people in all manner of strange dress; not just different from mine, but from each other. There were bald men in red robes singing a high-pitched song, women in shoes with such high heels that I could not see how they could stand, men in dark suits that, even to a stranger such as I, almost smelled of gold... I could go on and on, but if you are at all familiar with the city of San Fransisco you know what I am speaking of.

More importantly, no one paid me any attention; in fact, they actively looked away from me. I realized that, in my worn clothing, I appeared to be a beggar. This could work to my advantage in the short term, if charity worked the same here as it had in my own time. I hated the thought of depending on the kindness of strangers, but survival comes first.

At that moment I remembered my belpouch. It was still there, tied to my belt! I ducked back into the alley and felt it, and found that it was intact; and I was glad I had invested in a leather pouch instead of cloth.

The pouch, you see, was about half full of "ringlets," the currency of my time, and most of them were gold. I didn't know if gold had any value, but it always had before. I removed the pouch from my belt with some difficulty one-handed, and then slipped the long loops of cord over the stub of my right arm and up to my shoulder. In this way, my otherwise useless arm could at least protect my only valuables.

Thus prepared, I ventured onto the street again, and began to wander. I found a small park nearby, and observed young people using a water fountain; it was a simple enough to do, and so I waited until the fountain was free, and quenched my thirst. I also wet my face and wiped it with my shirttail; it felt good to be even a bit cleaner.

I wandered the streets until nightfall, still hungry but not desperate enough to steal yet, when I heard noises down an alleyway. I looked, and saw two scruffy men menacing a smaller man with a paper sack of groceries in his hands. One of the men had a knife.

At any other time in my adult life I would have jumped into action, swinging my staff or casting Paralysis spells; but I had neither, nor did I even have my good right fist.

Then I remembered how I looked. In the twilight they would not be able to see me clearly, but perhaps well enough. I ran into the alley, screaming like the Madman and flailing my left arm.

The unarmed assailant took one look at me and fled, but the knife-wielder turned and stood his ground. The victim seemed stunned. I raised my left arm in the guard position, but of course he had a knife; I took a nasty cut to the outer side of my forearm. His strike had left him open, though, and I smashed my left hand into his throat.

He wasn't dead, I soon discovered. I debated taking the knife, but it's never safe to make assumptions about an alien culture, so I left it.

The victim was speaking to me. I shook my head slowly; he seemed to grasp that I couldn't understand. I took his tone for gratitude, as he motioned me to follow him.

## **Chapter 7, *Safe Haven***

He took me into a nearby building, and up the stairs. As we ascended we met a woman who seemed familiar to me; she was of African extraction, I assumed, based on her xocholotl-with-milk skin color and her features. She was beautiful, wearing a dress of a simple design and complex print; her shoulders and most of her legs were bare, and she was altogether a wondrous sight.

Of course, like everyone on the street she avoided looking at me. I had thought I was used to it, but this time it stung.

He led me to a third-story apartment. It was two rooms and a bath, and it appeared that he lived alone. Many of the things in the apartment were strange, of course, but I paid close attention to what my new friend did to make each device work.

I noticed that the apartment was mostly unadorned, but on one small table there were numerous pictures of a red-headed little girl. I had never seen a photograph, but by now I was prepared to accept about anything. His daughter? What about his wife, or lover?

He put the groceries on a table in the end of the "common" room where the kitchen was located, and began putting the bag's contents in the cabinet. He talked almost constantly, looking at me frequently as he did so, but of course I didn't understand.

There are (or were) spells of comprehension to let one understand and converse in a foreign language, but as I have said, in my time all civilized men and women spoke one language. I rarely interacted with primitive peoples, and when I did I usually found one among them who spoke the civilized tongue. You can see why I never paid much attention to those spells. Now, I wished that I had.

My new friend went into the bathroom, closing the door, and I heard the telltale sounds of a man relieving himself. When he came out, I went in.

Of course, I had not watched him, but the operation of the fixtures was easy enough to puzzle out, and I took care of my needs. As I was about to leave, I suddenly had an idea that might help me to communicate. I sat down on the toilet and began to focus on collecting the scant mystic energy to cast a spell.

A bit later I emerged from the bathroom. My friend had calmed down somewhat, and began by pointing at himself. "Mark," he said, and I was sure that was his name.

"Solomoriah," I said, mimicking his gesture. I had to repeat it, as he had trouble with my accent. Eventually he said it back to me correctly.

He began then to teach me his language, and was astounded at how quickly I picked it up. He didn't know I was reading his mind. Now, don't believe all that rubbish you may have read about a "universal language" of the mind, because it is false; but as we speak we usually form images or sensations that correspond to the words, and the

harder we try to be understood the stronger those impressions are. I only needed to understand part of the words to get the meaning of his statements.

I thought it safest to stick to items and concepts inside his apartment, and so I learned such words as "chair," "table," and "computer," though not all of them had meaning right away. As he taught and I learned, he prepared a meal consisting of bologna sandwiches and chips. I found that I liked mustard, but really didn't care for iced tea. Nothing beats a good cup of xocholotl; I wondered if it still existed.

We had finished eating, and moved into the "living room" to more comfortable chairs. About that point I asked him about the red-headed girl in the pictures, and his reaction was powerful.

I must admit at this point that I am writing this under the influence of a Mnemonic Enhancement spell; so I am able to remember his words pretty well exactly even though it has been some time.

"She's my daughter, Emily. She's four years old. Her mother, Valerie, divorced me when she was just two. I don't know what went wrong... we were so happy in the beginning, and then when Emily was almost a year old Val began to change.

"She accused me of doing all sorts of little things to infuriate her; yeah, I did them, but they were accidents, I swear. Then she decided my late nights at work were because I was cheating with my boss' secretary. I wasn't, swear to God.

"My lawyer advised me to accept the divorce under negotiated terms. The judge assigned me child support and alimony to pay, and I got Emily alternate weekends. I was to get custody each summer after she turned six.

"It wasn't what I wanted, but I lived with it. I got this place because it was cheap, so I would be sure to be able to make my payments. Then the dot-com crash hit, and I was out of a job. Freelancing keeps me in this apartment, but it doesn't pay enough, and pretty quick I was behind on my payments. Even after the judge lowered my payments I still couldn't make them. I haven't seen my daughter for more than a few minutes since then, almost a year ago now."

No, I didn't get much of that then, but I understood that he couldn't pay his obligations to his ex-wife, and so was unable to see his daughter. I also could feel how it rended his soul.

Without another thought, I reached into my tattered shirt and removed the pouch. It was hard to open one-handed, so it took a few moments; Mark watched me closely. He almost fell out of his chair when I poured the pouch of gold and silver ringlets onto the coffee table.

Imagine this for yourself... you are sitting across from a one-armed, disfigured beggar, and he offers you a pile of gold. What would you think?

"Are... are you giving this to me?" he asked.

"No. Half, trade for helping me in this world."

"This world?" he asked, moving aside the other papers and magazines on the coffee table; I think he meant to count the ringlets. As he did so, he uncovered a newspaper with a certain picture on the front page, and he stopped, his mouth hanging open.

The picture was of me, as a statue. It was a file photo from the museum where I awoke, and the story with it told of the missing statue and the pool of blood. In his mind I saw him compare the broken nose and missing arm of the statue with mine, and he looked back and forth between the paper and me over and over again.

Finally, he said "This can't be you."

"It is." I sat back on the couch.

"How?" he asked. I shook my head.

"I don't have the words. Wait, you learn while I do."

I had to end it there; my spell was fading and I really didn't know enough to continue conversing. After a few moments, he did count out the ringlets, then said "I know a man who will buy these for a fair price." I nodded, pretending to understand. He put the ringlets back in the pouch and left it on the coffee table.

He brought me out a blanket and pillow and indicated that I should sleep on the couch. He then went to the bathroom and took a shower. When he had finished and gone to his bed, I also took a shower. It was a new sensation for me, and I liked it.

I lay down on the couch under the blanket on the couch and thought about a woman with skin like xocholotl-with-milk...

## Chapter 8, *Discovery*

The next day I awoke at dawn; my first time doing so since the museum. Before Mark got out of bed, I prepared a Mind Reading spell of long duration. It was getting easier to cast spells, but the long duration of concentration needed to draw the energy limited what I could cast or prepare. Fortunately Mind Reading doesn't need a large energy input; Force Bolt or Kinetic Shield would be another story.

I decided to hold the Mind Reading until training started in earnest. I couldn't be absolutely certain how long it would last.

Mark began preparing breakfast, and I happily joined him at table. I had never had bologna before the previous night, but fried eggs are fried eggs, and they tasted great to me. He served me orange juice, which I had never tasted, but it was much better than the tea. I ate until I was full.

Then Mark began my training again. I spoke the word to activate my Mind Reading spell; how would he know it was a magic word, I wondered. Since learning a new language is tedious, I won't detail it for you. Before the day was over, I had begun to learn to read.

This astonished Mark, but of course I already knew how to read the language of my time; I was familiar with over one thousand ideograms of that day. Most scribes of my time only knew the most-used two to three hundred. A phonetic alphabet was surprising, but easily mastered; I only had to learn the sixty to seventy glyphs used in English.

I had put aside the newspaper with the photo of me as a statue, so I began paging through it, trying to read each article and advertisement. I had so much to learn about this age!

After we had eaten supper, Mark said "I have to go to work tomorrow. I have a job arranged, and even with your generous loan I'll need to keep up my freelancing if I ever want another regular job."

"It's not a loan, it's a payment," I said.

"Nonsense. I'll pay you back when I have the money; but that may be a while." He paused for a moment, thinking. "I'll take the gold with me tomorrow, if it's alright with you, and sell it to a jeweler I know pretty well. I'm sure he'll give me a fair price."

By now I understood modern money as well as I probably ever would. Why accept valueless paper or cheap metals backed by an empty promise from the government? Gold is much better. Still, when in Ta Charka, do as the Ta Charkans do.

Finally I remembered the girl. "Yesterday morning, when we were coming up here we met a dark-skinned woman on the stairway. Tell me about her."

"Her name is Mara." I was stunned. The Mara I knew, who died fleeing Ket's fortress with me, was who this Mara resembled. I hadn't seen it before. This Mara was taller, and a bit paler, and of course clean and dressed rather than dirty and nude, so the resemblance was not clear to me then.

So much like my Mara, and with the same name... How could this be?

I had to know more of her. Mark had seen the surprise on my face and stopped; now I nodded, and he continued. "She lives upstairs. Her family came here as refugees from the Sudan, I think... somewhere in Africa anyway, when she was about ten or so. Her mother was ill when they arrived, and didn't live here long before they were burying her. I don't know what was wrong with her. Mara's father took care of her until a couple of years ago. I think it was a heart attack that killed him; I was in the middle of my divorce and didn't pay a lot of attention."

"She isn't married then?"

"No. No regular boyfriend either; no boyfriends at all." He had a strange look on his face, but his thoughts were guarded. Did he realize I could read his mind?

"Why not?" I finally asked.

"Before she came here, her people performed a female circumcision on her." I didn't have to ask what the word meant; the images in his thoughts were horrific. I was stunned that anyone would do such a horrible thing to their own child.

If you, the reader, are unfamiliar with this barbaric custom, I'll only say that she was maimed and mutilated so that sexual pleasure would always be denied her, and so that the act would actually be painful. Childbirth is also dangerous afterward.

I seethed with rage at her family, but all of them I knew of were now dead, and I didn't plan to go to Africa and seek retribution there. That would be foolish.

Then my thoughts turned to beautiful, sad Mara. I looked at the ring on my finger, and realized her permanent disfigurement did not need to be permanent after all.

It was late, so I told Mark I needed to sleep. The Mind Reading spell had lasted much longer than I expected this day, so I had to dismiss it before going to bed; one should never leave such a spell running when one is about to sleep. Other people's thoughts don't belong in my dreams.

As I lay there sleeplessly on the couch, thinking of Mara, I constructed and discarded many plans to heal her. You see, I not only wanted to heal her, I wanted her to love me. I had never even spoken to her and I already felt I was falling in love. It would be too easy to tell her who I was and what I could do, then use the ring to heal her; she might easily love me out of gratitude, and such a thing is dishonorable to me. It is a weak man's way.

No, I had to heal her without her knowing it was I who did it, and so then I must hide my powers from her afterward. If she woke up one morning healed, not knowing how, and then shortly afterward met a man who could do magic, she would not be fooled long.

I resolved that I would tell her I had healed her only after she declared her love for me, but that I would not in any event make love to her without her knowing. I could easily see her being very angry with me if I withheld this knowledge from her at that point.

Then it hit me. I was assuming I could heal her, indeed that I could do magic; but I lay there rubbing the stub of my nose, which was no bigger than the day before, and realized I might not be able to do it. If I couldn't heal myself, how could I heal her?

I needed power. Was it really all gone from the world? I went to sleep pondering that question.

## Chapter 9, *The Library*

The next morning Mark's alarm scared me half to death. I had not awakened as early as usual, and the strange sound made me leap to my feet. I was trying to remember why I didn't have any defensive spells prepared when I remembered where and when I was.

Mark came out of his room looking like a zombie. He went straight into the bathroom and took a shower without a word along the way. I decided to prepare us a breakfast; he still had some eggs, and the stove was simple enough to operate. While I was looking through the cabinets for oil to fry with, I found a brown tin which had "Cocoa" written on it. It was in the way of the oil, so I took it down; and when it got near my nose I smelled a heavenly smell...

Xocholotl! I was elated!

Quickly I got the eggs frying, then I found a pan and filled it with water. I set it to boil, then looked for a cup that could hold hot liquid (a coffee cup, of course). I found such just as the eggs got done, so I turned off the gas flame and began spooning the powder into the cups.

I didn't know how strong the cocoa was, so I had no idea how much to put in. It took several experiments before I found the right proportion. A dash of sugar and a dollop of milk helped the flavor, and though I had drunk better, still I was pleased.

Mark appeared, dressed, drawn by the smells of my cooking. "What's the drink? Hot chocolate?"

"Xocholotl. Try it."

Mark took a sip, and made a face. "Bitter. How do you drink this stuff?" I motioned toward the sugar bowl and the milk carton which I had not yet put away. He put entirely too much sugar in to suit me, but evidently he liked it that way.

He ate his eggs on bread, and as he finished he sat back and said, "Tonight, Solo, you are going to tell me where you came from. You've kept me waiting long enough." I smiled.

"While you are working today, I'd like to study this world. Where would I find books on history?"

"The library would probably be best. There's one not far from here. Since you don't have any ID you'll have to do all your reading there." Now, in my day no library would let you take works home, so this was no problem for me.

He went into his room, and came out with a sweatshirt. "This should fit you well enough." Mark is a bit shorter and smaller than me, but the shirt was elastic enough to be comfortable.

"In San Francisco, leather pants aren't that strange, so no one should pay you much attention." I was sure his pants wouldn't fit me, so this was welcome news. He gave me a twenty from his wallet. "You'll need lunch money, I expect. Tonight I'll pay myself back from the proceeds of the gold."

I nodded. We had discussed denominations of money briefly; I hoped I wouldn't make a fool of myself. "I need my pouch; these pants don't have pockets," I said. Mark double-bagged the gold in paper sacks, rolling the tops down to close them, and put the bag in his briefcase. I put the pouch back under my arm with the bill rolled up in it.

"Try not to get mugged," I said.

After Mark left I cleaned up from breakfast, then sat down on the couch and prepared a Mind Reading spell. I didn't know if I'd need it, but it doesn't hurt to be prepared. I tried to prepare Paralysis but couldn't hold concentration long enough to collect all the power needed.

Mark had given me directions to the library, and it was no problem to find it. No one paid me much attention, although the librarian at the front desk did give me a looking over. I pretended I already knew where to go, diving between the bookcases and trying to look nonchalant. I started by picking books at random from the shelf and reading from them, then I worked my way to the section marked History and collected a few books. I sat down at a table near the Reference section so I could grab a dictionary or encyclopedia if needed, and began to read.

I spent all day at that activity; lunch was forgotten. By the time hunger moved me it was suppertime. I put the books in the bin provided (for the sign said that the librarian would return books to the shelf) and I headed for the door. As I passed her desk the librarian looked at me strangely; I didn't know why, then, but soon I would find out.

Mark was already there, preparing supper, which appeared to be steak and some sort of tuber; I had never had potatoes, but it turned out that I liked them. I fixed myself a hot *xocholotl* as we bantered about our respective days.

"I got a pretty good return from the gold... ten grand." Mark had a grin on his face much like the cat that ate the canary. I wasn't sure how much that was; my people may have invented mathematics, but this money business still had me confused. Then Mark said, "That's five hundred of the bills I gave you this morning."

"Ah. That should help matters, shouldn't it?"

"Well, my half is five thousand, and I'm behind just over three thousand, so I should be able to see my daughter this weekend!" Mark did a little victory dance then; I dodged the swinging spatula.

"I imagine I will have to spend much of mine on clothing and accommodations."

"You may have to spend it on ID; as of right now, you're undocumented, and the government is liable to try to deport you if they can figure out where you are from."

"Not likely. You are saying I'll need forged papers then?"

"Possibly. I've always lived on the clean side of the law, Solo, so I don't know anyone who can help. I'm sure there are lots of forgers in SanFran, but I don't know them personally."

We ate mostly in silence as I considered my next step. Clearly I needed to get clothing to help me fit in, and I couldn't sleep on Mark's couch forever.

After supper was over and cleared away, Mark sat down at the table and began to count out hundred dollar bills, saying "One for you, one for me" over and over. I reached into my shirt and got out my pouch. I had not spent the twenty, so I gave it back to Mark and stuffed the wad of hundreds into the pouch. It made quite a lump under my arm.

"So when are you going to tell me what happened to your nose, Solo?"

My nose? I felt it, and discovered it was almost whole. "I don't know, Mark, but I have a feeling I'm going to be pleased when I figure it out."

I went to the kitchen and made some hot xocholotl. Mark had shown me how to use the coffee maker, and I ran it without any coffee in it to make a carafe full of hot water; then I made the xocholotl right in it. I took mine straight this time, as I always do when I am going to be speaking a lot.

I sat down there on the couch and told Mark everything. The more I told him, the more amazed he looked, but to his credit he took me seriously. Perhaps growing back my nose proved something to him.

When I was finished with the story, Mark said, "So what about your nose then?"

"I expect the level of mystic energy was greater at the library, though I'm at a loss to say how. In my time magic was like air; it was everywhere, and we took it for granted. This idea of magical energy having high and low points is new to me."

"Ley lines."

"What?" I asked.

"Ley lines. I've read about them; they're supposed to be the most magically powerful areas of the world. I don't know if they are real, but it does make sense considering your experience."

I thought on this for a moment. "Can we go up to the roof of this building?" I asked.

"Sure. Follow me." This time we took the elevator, which Mark seemed to think was slow arriving; he called it several foul names before the doors opened. At the top floor we got out and walked down the hallway to the door marked "Roof Access Management Only."

"Shoot, it's locked," said Mark.

"Allow me." I focused my mind and began to gather the power for a spell of Opening. The power was no greater here, but I was determined to get out onto the roof, so I made myself maintain concentration.

When I spoke the words and turned the knob, I could tell Mark was finally convinced.

We went up the stairs to a second door, then out onto the roof. It was dark, and the city was beautiful. That wasn't what I came to see, I reminded myself, and began again summoning power for a spell. This was a simple spell of Mystic Vision, which needed much less power, and I completed it easily if not quickly.

"There they are!" I cried. Mark couldn't see them, of course, and I didn't think I could get the power together for another spell, so I said "Take my word for it. I can see them!"

They formed a glowing golden net in the sky. Each segment was three to five miles long, connecting into a pattern of triangular sections. I wondered if the power was greater at a junction than in the middle of a segment.

The library was just visible from the rooftop, and it was, in fact, right under a line. The magic obviously got stronger the closer to the line you were; what if you got inside one?

Then I saw it... an office building downtown which stabbed up into a segment of the Ley lines. I counted floors. "That building, there, Mark, the Ley lines go right through it at the twenty-fourth story."

"That's 50 Fremont Center."

"And that's where I'm going tomorrow."

## **Chapter 10, 50 Fremont Center**

The next morning I awoke before the dawn. I was excited; Mark would say "pumped." He had to go to work again, but he gave me directions to the shopping center.

Mark likes to complain about shopping, but I have never had a problem with it. I did have to remember not to try to haggle; I learned how from my mother when I was just a boy, and old habits die hard.

I had my plan of attack all thought out. First I purchased more casual clothing: black jeans and button shirts, socks, sneakers, underwear, and a wallet. I took my purchases into the main mall restroom and changed in a stall. I found a salon and convinced the hairdresser to give me a conservative haircut; my hair was a bit unruly for modern times. Last, I went to another clothing store and purchased a dark business suit, including shoes, shirt, and tie. The clerk there was a pretty blonde, and she was most helpful. I think she was interested in me; she kept dropping hints, but I acted as if I didn't notice.

I was about to leave the shopping center when I remembered I needed a briefcase for my plan. I chose a fairly large one.

In, done, and out by lunchtime. I found a fast-food place and had my first burger and fries. Soda didn't do much for me, though.

After lunch I took my purchases back to Mark's apartment, then went to the library to do some more research. The librarian looked at me closely again but still said nothing.

That evening at supper Mark asked me, "So have you figured out how long you were a statue yet?"

"When I was a boy in the land now called Spain, the great ice sheets still covered most of Europe. Based on other things I've found in reference works, I think it was about thirteen thousand years."

"Holy crap."

"Yup. According to the newspaper article I was moved to the museum about a year ago, directly from a dig site in South America. I think that the area I was in previously must have been near a Ley line, and the museum isn't. The magic just leaked out of me until the transformation was broken."

"Wow."

"Evidently I was found some distance from where Tjarik's fortress would have been. I must have been moved."

Mark looked thoughtful for a moment. "According to what I've read, there were no large civilizations that far back in time. Where are the cities, temples, and monuments of your people?"

"Underwater, for the most part," I answered. "Remember, during the ice age sea level was much lower. My people lived on the coasts; primitive natives lived inland.

"I have been reading religious and mythological works, and I think that the flood referred to in most of the old stories must have been the end of my people's age... Something must have made the ice sheets melt very fast."

"An asteroid."

"Eh?"

"Rocks from space. If one hit in the North Atlantic on top of the ice sheet, it would release a lot of heat and melt the ice. That might also cause the torrential rain described in the Bible."

I considered Mark's idea for a moment. "Unfortunately we can't prove it, but it does seem the most likely theory. At any rate, according to the atlas I looked at today, Ta Charka would have been east of the Brazilian city of Belem, under more than two hundred feet of water."

"No wonder nobody remembers you."

"My people, anyway. Actually you do. There are tales of Atlantis, and Mu, and numerous other ancient civilizations, but they are so distorted by time and retellings that even I have trouble figuring out who they refer to."

"Wow."

I got up and began to make ready. I put on the business suit; Mark had to tie my tie, I'm afraid; even had I known how I could not do it with just one hand. I picked up the empty briefcase, said "Goodbye" and went out the door.

I met Mara in the stairwell as I was going down, and I think I caught her looking at me. It put a spring in my step.

It was quite a walk to the neighborhood of 50 Fremont Center. I found a McDonald's nearby, and I went in. The line was long, but I didn't mind as I needed the time to puzzle out the menu. The Big Mac appeared to be the largest sandwich, and as I looked for a beverage I saw "chocolate" listed as a flavor of "shake."

"Ten Big Macs and a large chocolate shake, please," I said to the waitress. She looked at me strangely. "Uh, the guys are coming over tonight," I lied, and she said, "So you want this to go, right?"

I nodded. It was a few minutes before she handed me the bags. I paid, stuffed the change in my pocket, and took my purchases outside. The Big Macs just barely fit in the briefcase, and I had to carry the shake by pinning it under the stub of my right arm. It was a bit uncomfortable walking to my destination, but I made it.

Mark had warned me about modern security systems, but I didn't want to get into anyone's vault, just onto the twenty-fourth floor. There was a guard at the front desk, but he looked bored.

"Working late, sir?" he asked.

"Just back from a trip. I need to check some things in my office, up on the twenty-fourth floor." The guard frowned, trying to place my accent.

"KRS Financials, eh? Mister K just left a few minutes ago."

"Darn," I said, "I had hoped to speak with him." I walked over to the elevator, put down my briefcase and pushed the up button.

It seemed to take forever, and I tried not to look nervous. I felt like the guard was staring at the back of my head.

Finally the doors opened, and I picked up my briefcase and stepped inside. As I turned I saw that the guard was reading a paperback book, and not paying me any attention after all. I put down the briefcase again and pressed the button marked 24.

The doors closed, and I remembered to breathe. I had not felt so exposed since that day on the bluff, when Mara died. The elevator lurched upward and I almost dropped my shake.

Before I reached my destination I began to feel the power. I hadn't realized I could actually feel it; in my own time it was everywhere, and I took it for granted.

When I stepped out on the twenty-fourth floor, a cleaning lady of oriental descent saw me; but she looked quickly back to her dusting. I felt the tingling in my right arm which indicated that the ring was working. I looked around and found a men's room, so I went in.

I put the briefcase on the counter, then the shake (being one-handed was definitely a drag, as Mark would say). I decided first to prepare a few spells, but I only got Invisibility done before ravenous hunger overtook me.

I opened the briefcase and began eating the sandwiches. You see, the Ring of Regeneration can make my body repair itself, but it can't make matter from nothing. I needed enough food intake to supply mass for the accelerated healing.

I had eaten four Big Macs when I heard a voice outside the rest room. "Good evening, Mrs. Kim."

"Evening, sir. How was your meeting?"

"The food was good, and that's all I'll say about it." Both of them laughed. "Is anyone else here?"

"Some new guy went into the washroom a while ago. Been in there quite a while."

"New guy? I'm not familiar with any new employees." I heard footsteps coming my way. I had prepared my Invisibility spell first as I thought something like this might happen. I closed the briefcase, pinned the shake with my right elbow (it was back by then!), picked up the case and quietly spoke the word to activate my Invisibility spell. As the door opened I stepped back into a corner.

Just in time; a man in a business suit stepped into the room. "No one here." He sniffed. "Smells like a fast food joint in here, Mrs. Kim. Did he have any food with him?"

"A cup of soda I think... large."

Just then I saw I had dropped a wrapper on the floor. The man picked it up and threw it in the trash can. Then he opened all the stalls, passing within inches of me at one point. I held my breath.

Finally he left. As soon as the door closed I began to breathe again.

I decided to remain invisible for a while longer, and was rewarded for this when Mrs. Kim entered and began cleaning. When I saw that she was going to mop I realized my footprints would show, so I climbed up onto the counter beside the sink. It creaked, and she turned and looked right at me; when you are invisible it's unnerving when someone seems to be looking at you. She turned back to her mopping and I relaxed a bit.

Finally she left. I got down off the counter with some difficulty, as I still didn't have my right hand. I was ravenously hungry, so I opened the case and began stuffing myself rather rudely.

The shake was pretty liquid by now, but it was still cold. Chocolate isn't exactly xocholotl but it was good, and I was hungry. When the cup was empty I rinsed it and filled it with water to wash down the last of the Big Macs.

It was well past midnight when my hand was complete. It looked just like the original, except that it was hairless; regeneration doesn't seem to apply to hair growth.

As I stood there admiring my hand, my blood chilled. Most people in this time wouldn't recognize me, so the sudden reappearance of my hand wouldn't cause much notice; but the librarian, I knew, had paid attention to me, and so had Mara this very night.

The librarian I didn't care about; there were other libraries in the city, I knew. But Mara was another matter. How could I prevent her from knowing I was a mage now?

My Invisibility was only a onefold spell, and it had already expired, so I didn't have to dismiss it. I drained the cup, stuffed the wrappers inside it, and put it in my briefcase. Then, I sat down on the counter and began to prepare spells.

I felt like my old self at last as I descended on the elevator. It was morning by now, early enough that most people weren't at work yet. The guard at the desk had been

replaced by a woman who appeared to be a receptionist; there was now a sign on the desk labelled "Information." I waved to her in a friendly fashion as I left the building.

At the apartment building I looked carefully around, hoping not to meet Mara. I was in luck, and I knocked on the door of Mark's apartment. I felt very exposed while I waited. After a moment or two, he opened the door and I went in.

Mark stared at my right hand, then smiled and said, "It went well, then?"

"I'll tell you tonight, my friend. Now I need some rest." I got out of my business suit and lay down under the blanket on the couch. Mark asked me something more, but I was already falling asleep; I didn't answer.

## Chapter 11, *I Am Not Alone*

I was dreaming of Mara. Which one? I couldn't tell you; but she was beautiful, and we were kissing. In my dream we were in a park somewhere, a bit like the one where I first slaked my thirst in this era. We'd walk a bit, and kiss, and smile, and walk on...

A male voice spoke from the air as I looked at her. "*Who is she?*" I looked around, but couldn't find the speaker. I looked back at her; she looked bemused. "*Who is she?*" came again. Again I looked around, more concerned this time, and then I awoke.

It was just after noon. The dream left me uneasy, for the question of the disembodied voice was a valid one. Why was I so infatuated with this girl anyway? I told myself I would want to heal her even if I wasn't so attracted to her, and I believe now that I was being truthful to myself. Still, I had never even spoken to this Mara, and for that matter the "original" Mara hadn't lived long enough for us to develop a relationship, or even a friendship. In fact, I think she may have feared me almost as much as she feared my old master.

I shook my head. No time to waste on idle musing, I thought. There was one thing I had been overlooking, and it was time to tend to it.

One of the things Mark had named for me that first evening was the "computer." Now, I had no idea at the time what it was good for, but stuck in the back of one of its components was a stack of perfectly good paper. I grabbed that, then went looking for something to write with. I had seen Mark using a pen which seemed to contain its own ink; I managed to find several in a drawer in the kitchen, and made one of them work.

I sat down at the table with the paper and pen and began to write, not in English but in the language of my people. You see, among the things I lost in Tjarik's fortress were my spell books. I knew from my experience preparing necromantic spells that it was possible for me to forget them, so I needed a written record to prevent that.

A spell written down is not just the words you say to cast it; the written work must contain descriptions or even diagrams of the gestures, if any, and an explanation of how the spell is supposed to work. The words said by the caster serve to focus some part of the mind which actually controls the spell. This is why the trick I learned from Tigris works.

Mark came home near sunset; he had been working late on a "website," which he promised to explain later. We dined on franks and beans, and I discovered that I liked root beer.

"I paid up all my obligations and still had almost two grand left," he said. "Valerie wasn't happy about it, but I have arranged to have Emily for the weekend." He looked at me strangely for a moment.

"You are thinking that I need new accommodations, right?" I asked.

He looked intently at his food then. "Yeah. You made this all possible, and I hate to kick you out, but..."

"I understand. I'd feel the same way. Tomorrow I'll start looking for a place."

"Not having ID is going to be a problem, I'm afraid," he said.

"I fear you are right." I took a drink as I thought for a minute. "Well, nothing to do but try."

Later Mark talked about his work. That was when I was introduced to the World Wide Web.

"My mainboard died a few months back and I couldn't afford to get it fixed," he said. Confused, I activated my Mind Reading spell, but I didn't learn much more that way. I watched silently as he disassembled the white-painted box, removing arcane components and inserting the "mainboard" he had purchased that day. About an hour later the computer was running, and I stood there agape like a fool watching a magician as he logged on.

It was after midnight when I finally went to bed. Mark had shown me how to search the web for information, and I had spent all evening reading website after website. He warned me about the unreliability of the information due to the variations among the sources, and I found that to be very true... particularly on the websites I viewed regarding magic. The vast majority of "serious" magic-oriented websites were no more than primitive tribal magic; I found only a few where the systematic form I was trained in was discussed, and only one of them mentioned the Ley lines.

I added that last one to my Favorites. No, I won't tell you which one it was; if you are capable of handling the information you'll be able to find the site. I resolved to contact the site operator as soon as I had a private email address.

So I lay down to sleep, my mind buzzing with all the new information I had learned; I wondered how much would be false, or half-true... Finally I fell asleep.

Again I was dreaming of Mara. We were in the park again, and all progressed much as it had the first time; and the voice came again. "*Who are you?*" it asked this time. The voice was louder, more commanding, and I realized something strange was going on. "*Who are you?*" it asked again.

"Solomoriah. Who are you?" The dream-park faded away, and Mara with it, leaving me in an endless space of white floor and white sky.

"*My name is my secret. You may call me Dreamwalker. You should call me Death!*" He laughed... not the maniacal movie villain laughter you are probably thinking of, but rather a chilling laugh from someone who believes he has already won.

"I am Solomoriah. Once I was enslaved to a monster. I don't fear the likes of you." Brave words, with nothing to back them up. I couldn't wake up.

*"Don't struggle so, wizard. You can't awaken, so you can't stop what is happening in the real world. Shortly you will be dead." He laughed again, briefly. "Did you think you could draw so much power from the Ley lines without being noticed? This is my territory, and I don't like trespassers."*

As he gloated I was thinking furiously. I had always been told you couldn't cast spells in your dreams; that is, you might dream you are casting spells but you can't actually activate a real one. But was I really asleep? I felt fully clear-headed and cognizant, and I well knew that I could cast spells without speaking... I decided to try it.

In my dream I spoke a single word, activating the spell of Mind Reading. It worked! I was able to sense the link Dreamwalker had forged between us. He was shocked to feel the magic rising in me, and I didn't give him time to think; I charged down the link toward him, mentally screaming in rage. It was a ruse; he couldn't know his spell was superior to mine, not without time to think about it, and he was fooled by my bravado. He broke the link.

I sat bolt upright on the couch, and framed in the moonlight streaming through the window was a demonic figure. I had but a moment to consider its inky, apelike form, bat wings, and claws dripping smoking acid before it launched itself at me.

By reflex I blasted it with my most powerful Force Bolt, and it exploded all over the room like it was made of black jelly. I sat there breathing hard for a moment. Then, all the little blobs of black jelly grew spider-legs and ran together in the center of the room, and the demon reformed.

This time I didn't wait to be attacked. I fired my Lightning spell at it, and it stood there transfixed by the bolt, screaming in pain and frustration; but when my power ran out it was not dead, just diminished in size.

The little monster stood there and soaked up shadows, growing until it was the original size. I began to fear for my life as none of my spells seemed to do much to it. Just as it leaped at me again, I activated my Kinetic Shield, and it bounced back into the room. That would only work until the demon realized it could approach more slowly and wrestle with me...

Suddenly the room was illuminated, and the demon was screaming again. Mark had turned on the light, and that seemed to be hurting the demon. It cowered on the floor, the skin on its back bubbling slightly.

I stood up and activated a Light spell, focused on my right hand. When I closed my fingers like a flower closes for the night, the light became a focused beam as bright as daylight. I directed the beam at the demon, and it quickly melted into a puddle of bubbling black goo. Mercifully, the goo couldn't scream. I kept the beam on it until it began to smoke; then Mark opened the window to clear the smoke. Shortly nothing was left but a black stain on the carpet.

Mark began to say something, but he was interrupted by a scream from a higher floor... a woman's scream. I remembered the voice in the first dream... *"Who is she?"* I ran out the door in just my underwear, with Mark following close behind...

## **Chapter 12, *We Meet Again, For The First Time***

We charged up the stairs to the next floor. I didn't know exactly where the scream came from, but another scream helped us navigate. As we ran down the corridor, Mark panted "Mara?" I just nodded.

I heard strange scratching noises behind one door; I guessed that this must be the place. With a word I opened the locked door, and saw that the apartment was a mirror image of Mark's. At the door to the bathroom, another little black horror was clawing at the door. Sawdust was flying all around it, and I could see that it would quickly break through.

Daylight was still streaming from my fingertips, but I decided to release a Silence spell before I attacked. A word and a gesture, and then I focused the Light on the demon.

It screamed into the Silence, then slumped into a puddle, and began to smoke. Mark ran to open the window; he had evidently closed the door behind him.

In a few moments, it was just a black stain on the carpet.

Mark and I stood there, panting. After a few moments, the bathroom door opened and Mara stepped out. She put one bare foot into the black stain and recoiled, a look mingling disgust and fear on her face. Then she stepped over it, turned to us and said something into the Silence.

Picture us, if you will. Mara was wearing a t-shirt and white panties. I was wearing just my jockey shorts, and Mark was dressed in shorts and a t-shirt. Light still streamed from my fingers, illuminating the room strangely, and all was draped in Silence.

I revoked the Silence, and heard a loud knocking at the door. Quickly, I whispered: "Mara, tell them you had a nightmare. Mark, come on!" Mark and I went into the bathroom; then I remembered the stain, and the sawdust. As I have said before, I'm no expert at illusion, but I can hide an ugly spot in the carpet. I dismissed the Light and silently formed two words for the Illusion. Just then I heard Mara open the door.

A man's voice: "Mara, are you alright?"

"Yeah," she said, feigning sleepiness, "I'm fine. Just a real bad dream."

"Well, if you're sure..."

"I am," she said with more force. "Thanks for looking in on me."

"No problem. If you need any help you know who to call."

She closed the door, and turned on the light. I dismissed the Illusion (as it was taking some of my concentration) and Mark and I stepped out of the bathroom.

"Who are you," she said to me, "and how did you do that? What was that thing?"

"Solomoriah is my name, and I'm a wizard. That thing was some sort of evil spirit in corporeal form, sent by someone calling himself Dreamwalker."

"A wizard," she said in disbelief. Then I saw her looking at my right hand. "My mother told me of wizards, and that I should steer clear of them, but I thought it was just superstition."

"You saw the light, and the illusion which covered the stain. I don't really want to waste power proving myself; I saved you from that creature, didn't I?"

"Yes," she said. "I am grateful."

Mark was looking at the stain. "Look here," he said, pointing. I bent down and looked. A small black opal lay in the center of the stain. "I'll go check the one downstairs," he said, "if I didn't lock myself out." He left. I was grateful, for now I could speak to Mara in private.

She said, "Why did this Dreamwalker want to harm me?"

"It's a bit embarrassing, really. Once, longer ago than you would easily believe, I knew a woman named Mara, whom you resemble greatly. When I saw you on the stairs, I remembered her, and later I dreamed of you, or her; in my dream I couldn't tell."

"Were these dreams... erotic?" she asked hesitantly.

"No, but we did kiss. In the dream a voice asked who you were. I never answered, but somehow Dreamwalker found you." I paused a moment, then said "I'm sorry you were dragged into this. You don't even know me."

She looked at me with an indecipherable look, and I was tempted to use Mind Reading, but I didn't. It wouldn't have been right; in fact, I felt it might be time to come clean with Mark.

"Perhaps," she began, then her face fell. "No. It would never work."

"Why not?" I asked, though I was sure I knew.

"I came here at twelve with my parents, as refugees from the unrest in the Sudan. Before that, when I was just ten, I was... circumcised. Do you know what that means for me?"

"I do."

"It wasn't long after we moved here that I learned what had really been done to me... what I had truly lost. I can't be with a man, not now."

I looked at her, thinking of all my discarded plans. She knew everything I aimed to keep secret now.

I held out my right hand. "Look, Mara, and think of the first time you saw me, or of yesterday when we met in the hall."

She thought for a moment. "You had just one hand yesterday! How?"

I removed my ring, took her by the hand, and put it on her. There was just enough power in it to make her tingle, and considering the location the fact that she jumped a bit should not be surprising.

"This ring healed you?"

"Yes." I put it back on. "Unfortunately there is not enough energy here to heal you. Remember the business suit I was wearing yesterday? I had to go to the twenty-fourth floor of 50 Fremont Center where a Ley line passes through it to get enough power to be healed." I could see she was still confused, and trying to decide what to ask me next. I said, "I'll go get some clothes on, and you do likewise, and I'll meet you back here in a few minutes. I'm going to take you up on the roof and show you something that will make this clearer for you."

"Okay," she said. She had just realized how little we were both wearing, and she was trying not to stare; I'd been doing that since the friendly visitor at the door left.

So I left. I went back downstairs, hoping no one saw me; I didn't want to waste an Invisibility spell just to protect my dignity. I did surprise a little old lady looking out her door, but she flushed and ducked back inside.

Mark had left the door ajar, so I could get back in. He showed me the black opal he had found, and I realized I'd left the other one upstairs. No telling what trouble it might cause; I resolved to pick it up when I went back to her apartment.

"Get dressed, Mark. We're going up on the roof."

"Again?"

"This time I'm going to let you see what I see."

We dressed quickly and met Mara at her door. "I need that black stone," I said, and she handed it to me. She was dressed in jeans and a sweater; but I was still remembering her from earlier...

I had prepared two spells of Opening, so I had one left to open the rooftop entrance. I wasn't sure I'd be able to draw enough to cast it otherwise. I noticed Mara watching intently as I said the word and turned the knob, but Mark was already beginning to take my magic for granted.

We looked out over the city. It was overcast, but the visibility was good. I laid my hands on their shoulders and released the special spell of Mystic Vision I had prepared, altered to affect all those I touched when I activated it. Mark and Mara both went "Oooh..." at the same time.

"Those are the Ley lines, then?" she asked.

"Yes. See how one intersects 50 Fremont Center?"

She nodded. Mark was walking around the edges of the roof, seemingly unconcerned about the altitude. "What's that?" he asked, pointing.

Some distance to the south, a thin golden line traced down from a Ley line segment into an area of townhouses. As we watched, I could see energy flowing down the thin line in pulses. I had to get a closer look, so I released the only Flight spell I had prepared.

I flew as fast as I could, the wind tearing at my face, toward the area which was the target of the thin stream of energy. Just before I reached the target zone, the line faded. There were many townhouses there, apparently just alike, but none showed any visible trace of mystic energy.

I searched briefly but found no further evidence, so I turned about and returned to our building. It was harder to find in the dark than I thought, but I reached it before my spell of Flight was exhausted.

Mark and Mara were still on the roof. Mara shivered, and I found myself in agreement with her. As we made our way to the steps Mark asked, "Did you find it?"

"No. I wasn't quick enough. It has given me food for thought, though..."

We took the elevator down. When it stopped at Mara's floor she took my hand and led me off. Mark smiled and said, "See you in the morning, Solo," as the doors closed.

Mara busied herself preparing an herbal tea. I found it to my liking, much more so than the iced tea which Mark preferred. We sat down on her couch, sipped at our tea and looked at each other uneasily.

Finally I decided to go first. "Mark told me of your situation. I want you to understand, I would want to heal you even if I weren't attracted to you. I don't know if you can believe that."

"I can. You seem like a good person."

"You don't know me very well, Mara. I should tell you that the first Mara I knew died despite my attempt to save her."

"Tell me about it."

So I did. I told her of my apprenticeship to Gruven Ket, and how the first Mara died. I skipped much of the middle part of the story, but I did tell her how I was turned to stone and awoke in the museum.

"You wanted to save her. You just underestimated your enemy. If I were she I would forgive you."

"How can it be that you look so much like her?" I wondered.

"I don't know, but Solomoriah... you seem familiar to me also. Perhaps that is why I find it so easy to believe you. I can't believe that I am about to be healed!" She paused in reflection. "I never forgave my mother. She died of illness when I was just fifteen, and on her deathbed she told me she knew I resented her. She begged my forgiveness, and I just said 'Mother, I'm sorry, I can't forgive you. I hope you find forgiveness in the next world.'" She broke down in tears. I moved next to her, pulled her to me, and she cried bitterly.

After a time she composed herself, pushing away gently. "Why did you want to keep from me that you are a wizard, if you planned to pursue my affections?"

"I thought of many plans to heal you without you realizing I did it. All of my plans depended on you not knowing I can work magic, for you would surely suspect that I was the one who healed you."

"But why keep that a secret?"

"I didn't want you to fall for me out of gratitude."

She mused on this. "You didn't want an unfair advantage, then? Most men would love to have such an edge."

"It's a weak man's way, Mara, and I've been a weak man enough times in my life."

She kissed me then, and it was better than the dream. Then she kissed me again, and it was better still...

We fell asleep in each other's arms. All we had done was kiss, and hold each other, and make a little small talk; but it was more than enough.

## Chapter 13, *Wednesday*

The next morning Mara and I ate cereal for breakfast. I told her about Mark's daughter coming on the weekend, and that I needed to look for accommodations. She said, "No you don't. You'll move in here. You could sleep with me now if you wanted, Solomoriah, but if you aren't comfortable with that yet my couch is as good as his."

Part of me was uncomfortable, but I agreed anyway. Mara told me she needed to go to work shortly, and she gave me her spare key. I kissed her goodbye as she left, then I went quickly to Mark's apartment to get my things before he left for work also.

To my surprise, Mark didn't have to work that morning; he said his first appointment was in the afternoon. I decided it was time we talked.

"I'm moving in with Mara," I said.

"You work fast, Solo. Go easy with her, will you?"

"I will. It is as if I've been given a second chance somehow. I don't plan to screw it up."

"You know, Solo, your accent is going away."

"Good. That was my plan. I am trying very hard to speak with the same accent that you do. I don't want to stand out any more than I have to."

"I dunno, bud, I like Mara's accent. Makes her sound exotic." He grinned broadly.

I thought about it. "I never noticed she had an accent. She sounds to me exactly as I somehow expected she would."

"Have you considered what an amazing set of coincidences have happened to you? You were a statue thirteen thousand years, then woke up in this time and found your way to this place where a woman who looks almost exactly like the first Mara lives."

I had thought about it. I was thinking about it. I just wasn't getting to any conclusions, and I told Mark so.

"The strangest thing is, Mara says she believes me because I seem familiar."

"That may not be the strangest thing, Solo. I find you familiar somehow too. It's why I invited you into my apartment when no sane man in this city would do such a thing. You seem like a long-lost friend." He thought a moment, then said, "Last night I dreamed I was Zam Nar. I saw the men coming through the smoke with spears, and I saw them kill you as I lay there with a spear in my chest. I woke up in a cold sweat. It was so real I thought for a moment I had died."

"Do you believe in reincarnation?"

"I didn't, but I'm beginning to." He paused. "Tell me about religion in your time."

"We had many beliefs, but all were facets of one belief: We believed in a Creator-God of boundless power. As he was so far above us that we could not comprehend him, he created beings of great power to be our gods. Thus we were both monotheists and pantheists; the gods were worthy of our worship because they were made so by the Creator, who was himself worthy of worship because he was all powerful."

"Do you believe that way?"

"I was not much of a believer, even when I thought myself doomed at the hands of Gruven Ket. I am beginning to wonder if I have been wrong."

"You realize that most modern religions would find your beliefs heretical, don't you?"

"How many of them would burn me for being a wizard?" He thought on that a while, and did not answer.

"More practical matters beg my attention, Mark. Remember the thin stream of energy last night? Obviously mages of this day know how to 'tap' the Ley lines, so they don't have to climb up into them."

"I wondered what good they did, more than twenty stories in the air."

"Exactly. Now I must learn how to 'tap' the Ley lines. I plan to move my things up to Mara's apartment this morning, then spend the afternoon trying to work out the details of a Tapping spell."

"You create your own spells, then?"

"Usually I use spells created by others. Designing a spell from scratch is difficult and time consuming; a wrong word, a wrong order of words, or a badly planned gesture can be dangerous, but most likely will result in a wasting of energy." I thought a moment. "The spell of Tapping must need very little power..."

I mused about this as I collected my property. I needed a single large paper bag to contain what didn't fit in the briefcase (which still smelled like Big Macs). Truly I didn't have much in this world.

In Mara's apartment I put what I had on the floor. I decided to go out to eat, and when I invited Mark along he said, "It's time to introduce you to some ethnic cooking. There's a Thai place just a block from here; do you like spicy food?"

I allowed that I did, and we went there. Mark cautioned me that it was considered bad manners not to eat all you were given, and the portions turned out to be large. Even with Mnemonic Enhancement I can't recall what I ate, but I do remember being very full.

While we ate we spoke only of ordinary things. We were in public, after all. Mark told me about the sights I should see and the things I should do in San Francisco.

I am a great traveller, but a poor tourist. I rarely took time out in my old life to look at the scenery or see the great wonders, and I haven't changed.

After lunch Mark caught a bus to get to his meeting, and I walked back to the apartment building. I stopped at a drugstore and purchased a package of good black pens (there were so many I could hardly choose) and a thick "college" notebook.

As I left the drugstore I met a woman who seemed familiar. She frankly stared at me, and when I saw it was my right arm she was looking at, I recognized her as the librarian. I left quickly.

I spent the afternoon scribbling notes in the ancient language. Each phrasing, each diagram for the conduit seemed wrong somehow. There was something I was missing.

Mara came home early, I thought, but then I remembered the customs and the timekeeping and realized that work ended when the clock said so, not the sun. It was just as well, as I was "banging my head against the wall" as the saying goes.

She kissed me, then asked "What are you working on?"

"Trying to puzzle out the nature of the spell for the 'tap' which I saw last night."

"Is it hard?"

"I can't make it work out. In my day, a spell to transport magical energy would have been a ridiculous waste of time, so I never studied how such a thing would be done. Now I'm finding that I can't understand how it should work."

"Come with me, Solomoriah. Let's take a walk. It'll clear your head." She took me by the hand and led me out the door.

We walked to the park nearby, and around inside it. I silently released a spell of Mystic Vision (the last one I had prepared) during a lull in our conversation. Mara saw me looking at the sky and figured it out. "You're looking at the Ley lines! You aren't even paying attention!" She tried to act angry but she was evidently too happy otherwise. The conflicting emotions on her face were a bit funny, and I laughed.

"Now you're laughing at me!" she said.

There was only one thing to do, and I did it. I kissed her. We stood there, in the middle of the sidewalk, kissing passionately for quite a while. Someone passing whistled, and Mara pulled away, annoyed... but not at me. I thanked the gods for that.

She turned back to me. "When can I be healed, my love?"

"I had hoped to have the 'tap' spell figured out before you got home, and to use it to power the ring. Now I don't know what to do."

"What about the Fremont building?"

"I don't know if I can sneak in there again; if the guard has been alerted about me I'll have a hard time getting by him."

"Don't you have magic that can help?"

"I have one Invisibility spell prepared, for one person. I can use it, or you can, but not both of us." I looked at the sky for a moment, pondering. "Honestly, right now I am more worried about tonight. I don't have much prepared magic left. If Dreamwalker attacks again, I may not be able to stop him."

"I don't understand; can't you just cast any spell whenever you want?"

So I explained it to her. We sat down on a park bench, as the explanation got quite long; but in the end she seemed to understand.

"This just makes it more important to get into the Fremont building," she said.

"You are thinking, you heal while I prepare. I agree, that is, ah, 'killing two birds with one arrow'..."

"Stone."

"Indeed. But we need a plan."

"I think I have one. Come on, we have to get back to the apartment!" We walked quickly. I wondered what she had in mind.

## Chapter 14, *Back to the Tower*

Mara took me to her bedroom and began to disrobe. I must have looked surprised; she made a disapproving noise and stuck her tongue out at me.

She quickly dressed in a dress I could tell was old, an apron of sorts, socks and sneakers. Then she presented herself like a model. "What do you think?"

"Cleaning lady?" I asked.

"You catch on quickly, love. Now we go to the Fremont building just before quitting time. We go in the back way as everyone is going out the front. You'll be invisible, so if the guards are looking for you they won't see you, and I'll look like an ordinary cleaning lady going to work.

"I used to clean offices before I got my current job." I became uncomfortably aware that I didn't know what she did for a living. It must have showed, as she giggled. "You know what I do now? I sell perfume and cosmetics at a department store. Pays better, but I can't smell anything by the end of the day."

"Easier work too, I'd imagine."

"Come on, let's go. There isn't much time!" She grabbed my hand and her purse and nearly dragged me out the door.

At the rear of the building we encountered a few people leaving. I was already invisible, and there appeared to be no guard. I had not yet learned about cameras, and in fact there was one in that rear hallway, but as I was invisible and Mara in disguise it didn't matter. She pressed the UP button and waited for the freight elevator.

Just as it arrived, two other women dressed similarly to Mara came in, and all of us got on the elevator together. Fortunately it was a large elevator... just try to stay out of the way of people who can't see you. One of the newcomers was black, and the other was of some oriental extraction, and older. As Mara pushed the button labelled 24, the older woman looked her over intently.

"You aren't one of ours," she said in a cross voice. "What are you doing going to KRS?"

Mara looked shocked for just a moment, then said, "Okay, you busted me. My husband works up there, and I think he's having an affair with his secretary. He don't come home from work 'til late an' he smells like cheap perfume when he does. I've tried to sneak in on him, but I think the guard's in his pocket."

The black woman spoke then. "Yeah, you can't trust the brothers when they get together. She's okay, Mrs. Kim. Let's help her out."

Mrs. Kim! Now I recognized her! I was certainly glad to be invisible.

Just then we reached our destination, and I felt the power flowing into me. The elevator opened, and Mara waited for the other women to disembark first; then she went the other way. It took some dodging around for her to avoid them as she looked for an appropriate room to use. Obviously we hadn't intended to introduce ourselves to the cleaning crew.

Mara slipped into an empty office and closed the door. I grabbed the doorknob and cast the spell of Closing as quickly as I could; now nobody could surprise us. I lost my Invisibility when I cast that spell. You have to maintain a certain "quiet" of the mind, or the spell is broken. Spell casting by those made Invisible is possible but must be done with care.

Mara held out her hand, smiling. I put the ring on her middle finger; it was a bit loose but would work for her purpose. She didn't jump this time when the tingling began. Then she slid up her skirt and took off her panties.

Now, I had been with women that way before, and ordinarily it would have been a matter of some interest to me; but what I saw before I turned away made my bile rise and my blood run cold. I self-consciously began preparing spells, trying to cover the awkward moment with activity.

This time I prepared three Light spells of twofold potency, dropping all but one of my Mind Reading spells to make the "space." In place of the pair of Invisibility spells I normally prepare, I prepared one multi-target version. Otherwise I prepared spells as I usually would when expecting to battle a wizard.

I was almost done when someone tried the door. Naturally the cleaning crew would get here eventually; Mara and I stepped back into a corner as I began to cast an Invisibility spell for two. The door had a large translucent window, and while the door would not open that window could be broken.

Of course the door didn't open, and the cleaning lady (I don't know which one) moved on. I heard what I took to be curses; it sounded like the younger woman. I cancelled the spell I was casting and finished my spell preparations.

When I had finished I said, "How are you doing?"

"Fine, I guess. Look if you want." So I did. I would say that she was about half healed at that point; it had taken most of an hour so far. She was using a small pocket mirror to watch the progress, and while I understand it was a matter of great interest to her I found it rather like watching a clock without a second hand. In other words, tedious. I decided to explore, so I cast a spell of Invisibility on myself and carefully slipped out the door. (The spell of Closing does not bar its caster.) No one was in that hallway, fortunately, so I wandered about on that floor for a while, looking through open doors, and generally being nosy.

Eventually I reckoned enough time had passed, so I went back toward the office where I left Mara. As I turned the last corner I saw a guard approaching. He went directly to

that office and tried the door. Of course, the knob didn't turn, as the mechanism was still held by the Closing. Next he tried his master key, and of course it wouldn't turn either. Now he was suspicious. He got out a thick cylindrical object (a flashlight, I later learned) and drew back his arm for a backhand smash into the window. I readied a Sleep spell... I couldn't let him catch Mara.

For a moment he stood that way, and I realized he was listening. He smiled and shook his head, put away his flashlight and spoke into a radio. "Yeah, Mick, never mind on that cleaning lady. Mr. Steele has some company, sounds like."

He turned and went back the way he came, and I relaxed. Sure enough, the door of the office said Harvey Steele, Partner; but what was he listening to?

So I listened, and I heard Mara making sounds. It seemed to me that the ring had finished its work and Mara was... testing. So I waited outside; it seemed the gentlemanly thing to do.

After a time the sounds ended. I waited a bit more, then entered the office, ending the fading Invisibility spell as I did so. Mara looked... happy. "Oh, Solomoriah, thank you!" she exclaimed, pressing the ring into my palm. Then she kissed me deeply, and whispered "Let's go back to my place" into my ear.

I could easily see in my mind what she was thinking, with no magical assistance. Now it may not be very manly to say so, but this made me wary. If she were just another woman seeking pleasure from a mysterious traveller, such as I had dallied with in the past, I wouldn't have felt that way. This woman, though, I knew to be special. Rushing into sex with her might be a mistake, even if it was what she wanted.

Still, the first part, namely leaving the building, was for sure a good idea. I cast a fresh Invisibility spell, dismissed the spell of Closing and led Mara by the hand to the freight elevator.

We had only gone a single floor down when the elevator stopped. As the door opened I saw an oriental woman in a businesslike dress and shoes. She was one of those women of ageless beauty, one who's age you could not easily determine.

She looked directly at my invisible face, ignoring Mara, and said, "Who are you, and what are you doing in my territory?"

I let the Invisibility go then. Obviously she could see me, so there was no use trying to hide. "I am Solomoriah. I apologize for intruding on your territory; I'm not from around here, I'm afraid."

She stepped into the elevator and pressed the Close Door button. "I am Natomi Osaka. This building is my territory. You will do well to avoid it." The elevator started down.

"I understand, Natomi Osaka. I will not trouble you again." I hoped I would master the tapping spell soon so as to not need intimate contact with a Ley line; sneaking into the building was becoming a liability I could ill afford.

"Good. Just so we understand each other."

We reached the ground floor, and the doors opened. The freight elevator was located at the top of a T-shaped intersection of hallways, facing the lower part of the T, and that lower part led straight to the back doors. All three of us stepped off the elevator and started down the hallway; that's when I heard the familiar clattering noises...

"Skeletons!" I yelled. Sure enough, I saw several coming through the back entrance. Natomi said, "Behind us, too!" She spoke a word in Japanese (I assumed) and I heard the crackle of lightning. Next I heard what had to be a curse, also in Japanese.

I released a Force Bolt, blasting one of my opponents to pieces, then yelled "Only force attacks will work!" over my shoulder.

I let fly another bolt and heard Natomi do the same; hers didn't sound quite like mine. I quickly released a third bolt, then in the moment of reprieve I chanced a look behind me. Natomi spoke again and another force spell was released, but unlike mine, her spell expanded into a wave which knocked back and destroyed several of the skeletons.

I released my last bolt. Now I was facing three skeletons, each strong enough to pull me down, and I was out of force attacks. I longed for my staff.

Skeletons, animated by necromancy, are strong but unimaginative opponents. Usually they either grab and wrestle with a victim, or club him with their arms. Clubbing would be stopped for quite a long time by my Kinetic Shield, but I didn't waste time invoking it because I was certain they would grapple.

I was right. I raised my arms to defend myself and tried to block the corridor so they wouldn't get to Mara, but two of them pulled me down and the third bypassed me. I heard Mara scream but couldn't take time to look.

Wrestle a human and you can do things to hurt him, even if he is quite strong; but animated skeletons have no tendons, nor joints, nor muscles. If you grab the skull and turn it completely around you haven't done a bit of harm, and the same is true of most of their joints. To defeat one, you must break its bones or forcibly separate its joints.

Naturally while you are doing this, it is trying to hurt you too.

One skeleton had its arms around my legs, and the other straddled me and was trying to pin my arms. Somehow I slipped my left leg free and wrapped it around the second ones spine (coming in under the ribcage). I bent that leg with all my might and separated the spine of the one on top. Unfortunately that only disabled its lower section, and the arms continued wrestling with me.

Meanwhile the lower one was trying to use my exposure to bite me in a very tender place. I kicked at it hard and knocked its skull off; but the larger part of it continued to grapple with me, getting a hold on my left leg again.

Now the one on top decided to bite off my nose. It was all I could do to keep those ragged teeth out of reach; I didn't want to have to grow it back again.

I had heard Natomi fire off at least two more of her Force Wave spells, and Mara had only screamed once. I hoped they were doing better than I was.

Finally I worked my right hand loose, and tore the jawbone away from the skull. The circulation was cut off to my legs, and they were becoming numb; so I had to rely on my upper body. I bent the skeleton's left arm up at an unnatural angle, grinding it against the collarbone until it came free. Then I used the largest armbone as a club, smashing it into the skull until it came off, and then into the monster's right collarbone until it broke and the arm came off.

Now I had both hands free, so I threw the writhing ribcage and upper spine off of me and set to work dislodging the headless skeleton from my legs. I started by reaching over it and grabbing the hipbones, then bending the monster backward until the spine separated. Now I just had the arms to worry about.

As I was pulling off its shoulder blades I chanced a look behind me. Mara was held down by a headless skeleton, and Natomi was working it over with martial arts moves I would have loved to have watched. Unfortunately I was too busy.

I got free about the same time that Natomi freed Mara. Standing was difficult, as my legs were asleep. "You have an enemy, I see," Natomi said. "Who is it?"

"He called himself Dreamwalker," I answered. Mara came into my arms and held me almost as tightly as the skeleton had. She was shaking, frightened.

"His name is Caleb Smith, and he lives somewhere south of here. He tries to claim San Francisco is his turf, but we have all learned to deal with him."

"All? Are there many mages in San Francisco?"

"A handful." She paused. "You would not have defeated those skeletons without my help." Natomi opened a nearby closet, and handed me a broom. We began sweeping the bones outside.

"We are in your debt," I said as I swept. "Tomorrow I will try to find this Caleb Smith and make him pay for his attempt on our lives."

"You'll need magic for that, and you have depleted your prepared spells, haven't you?" she asked.

"Yes. I have a few attack spells, but no more Force Bolts."

"Come with me. You can use my office." She looked up at the cameras, and what she said next explained much to me. "The guards will have seen our fight. I'll have to help them forget it. Here's my key," she said, handing it to me, "Room 2316. I'll meet you shortly."

So we went to her office. I spent some time comforting Mara; it's easy for me to forget the horror an animated skeleton is for the uninitiated. To me they are no more than machines; the fact that they are made of bone doesn't bother me.

Mara felt differently. After a time, she recovered, and I began preparing fresh Force Bolt spells.

I thanked Natomi again, as I was finishing up when she arrived. Again Mara and I went down the elevator, but this time there were no surprises.

The pile of bones was gone from outside the building; I wondered what Natomi had done with them.

Mara didn't say much as we walked home. I put my arm around her for comfort, and for warmth, as it had gotten quite chilly after dark.

I would have liked to exchange spells with Natomi, though I suspected it would be hard as I didn't speak Japanese. That Force Wave spell would be quite useful, after all, and I was sure that she knew the secret to the Tap spell.

Back at her apartment, Mara absently disrobed and went to the shower. It's strange that her immodesty bothered me, as I had spent time in cities such as Gharu and Ta Charka where a woman might wear only a loincloth and not be bothered when the wind blew it up; but I had come from a more modest people, and here I found myself in a place where most of the citizens went about dressed in public. (Yes, I still had a lot to learn about the modern world.)

She spent a lot of time showering that night, as if to remove some imagined odor or taint. When she came out, I went in, and made a conscious effort to emulate her. I didn't want her to "smell" anything on me.

She had expected a joyous night of lovemaking. That obviously would not happen, now. When I got out of the shower I put on a fresh pair of shorts and looked out. Mara was laying on the bed, on her abdomen, crying quietly. She had on T-shirt and panties as I had first seen her.

I lay down beside her and held her, and we fell asleep that way.

## **Chapter 15, *I Learn The Secret On Television***

That morning I awoke before dawn. I had been having an "interesting" dream, and was surprised to find Mara beside me. I looked at her in the dimness, innocent and peaceful. Her beauty astounded me still.

She awoke slowly, looked at me and smiled. "Solomoriah."

"Yes?"

"I love you." Those words put a thrill in me which was like lightning running through me. That was what I had been waiting for, I realized... that was why her advances had made me uncomfortable. She was too important for a casual encounter.

"And I love you, Mara," I said.

We made love, then. It was glorious!

Afterward we lay together as the sun rose and tried to creep past the curtains. "I have been so alone, Solomoriah," she said. "When other people look at me they see a black woman. Of course I am; but I'm not what they are expecting. I have slaves among my ancestors, but white men weren't their masters. My family came here willingly to escape slavery and abuse. I'm not the 'sister' that other black people are expecting. I don't belong among them."

"Surely there are other refugees from Sudan here?"

"Yes, there are. I have turned my back on that culture, though, as they most all feel as my parents did. They encourage mutilation, they mutilate their own daughters. How can I feel I belong to them?"

"I see," I said, knowing nothing else to say.

"But Solomoriah, you don't belong here either! You are part of a culture long forgotten. We are alike, that way... neither of us belong."

"You know how dangerous my life is, Mara. Do you dare stay with me?"

"There is nowhere else I would ever want to be, and no danger will keep me from you!" She kissed me then, and that line of conversation was closed forever. I was glad of it.

After a time, we made love again.

When I set out to write this, I told Mara that these things were nobody's business. She disagreed. "If you are going to tell your story, don't leave out the important parts. Just don't make it X rated." So I have tried to comply with her wishes, though I admit it does make me uncomfortable.

Finally hunger overtook us and we went in search of breakfast. Mara said, "Oh, my love, I don't want to go to work today!"

"Do you have to?" I asked.

"I'm afraid so. It's a good job, and you must admit that your money will run out sometime; so I must work at least until you figure out your place in this world."

"I'm sorry it's that way, Mara. I promise I'll make it up to you."

She smiled a impish smile. "I know you will, love."

After she had dressed and gone, I sat down with my notebook. It was the work of an hour to puzzle out the Force Wave spell; just a matter of figuring out how to insert an expansive element into the regular Force Bolt. I determined to test it as soon as I worked out the power problem.

That still stumped me. I had figured out how to create a conduit for magical energy, but the math doesn't lie... I couldn't create a conduit large enough and long enough with the energy available at ground level, even directly below a Ley line. How did they do it?

After probably another hour or so of banging my head, I went into the "living" area and sat down on the couch. Mara didn't have a computer, but she did have a television. Mark had named it for me during that first lesson, but I didn't know its purpose. I decided to investigate.

I identified the buttons on the front; I didn't know what "channel" or "volume" referred to but "power" seemed pretty obvious. After considering for a moment I pressed the power button.

Well, to make a long story short, I had the thing figured out in a few minutes, and in a few more I had discovered the purpose of the remote control. Mara said later that it was a "guy thing" and it was some time before I understood the joke.

So I wasted the rest of the morning, conscious that I did so and feeling a bit guilty about it. Just as I was about to look in the kitchenette for something for lunch, I saw a commercial that stopped me.

It seemed they wanted to sell me a hose. Its purpose, namely watering the lawn of my non-existent estate, was perfectly obvious; but one thing about it was very important. You see, the hose was the one which lay flat for storage, then expanded when the water was turned on... and I had the answer to my problem!

Lunch forgotten, I sat down at the table with my notebook and scribbled furiously. The spell was more complex than I imagined, but well within my skill to cast. The conduit would be thin, composed of mystic elements in an explicitly loose chain; thus little power would be required to form it. When it reached the Ley line and connected, the power from the line would expand it to full capacity, strengthening it in the process!

I thought I was starving when I finally sat back from the table. I transcribed the finished spell onto a sheet of the computer paper and put it with the others. The ideogram for Tap headed the page.

I ate quickly. I had to try it! I needed a place of seclusion near a Ley line; I would have to look for one. I laboriously wrote Mara a note in my still-terrible handwriting, in case I wasn't back when she got home, and then I dressed (yes, I was still in my underwear) and went out.

It was a warm day, and my dark clothes quickly became hot. I had at least had the sense to wear short sleeves. I released a spell of Mystic Vision and began to look for Ley lines. I had to detour to avoid the library, but I thought it prudent to avoid that place for a while.

I was looking for a place of seclusion; a park with dense undergrowth, perhaps. I couldn't think of another place that would serve as well.

Then I saw it, as I crested a hill... one of the great junctions, a six-way, seemed poised above a tall hill. The hill was covered with trees, grass, and wildflowers, and atop it I could just make out a monument of sorts. I was intrigued, so I turned in that direction.

I was glad I had left the note, for I was going to be late.

The sign called it "Mount Davidson," although where I came from it would not have been called a mountain. Still, it was obviously an esteemed park. Traversing it on the paths provided was easy enough, and at the top I found a large cross.

I knew what it represented, of course; I had studied modern religion somewhat during my library visits. The interesting thing to me was that the junction was almost directly overhead. The sky was still bright, but the Ley lines seemed brimming with energy.

I noticed some individuals in foreign dress praying before the cross. Of course, I couldn't understand their language...

It hit me like a sling-stone. No one could understand mine either! How would anyone know I was preparing spells? Only another mage would know, and the Tap would be a giveaway there, so why worry?

This was the perfect place to hide my magic in plain sight.

I looked around somewhat for the best location; then, trying to look devout, I began casting the Tap spell. As I completed the words I brought my hands together over my head, pointing up at the Ley lines...

The spell fizzled, the first time. A wizard learns to expect failure, and I was undaunted. After a moment's reflection I believed I knew what had gone wrong: I had gestured too late, too quickly. I resolved to make the motions more slowly, and I began again.

This time it worked! The Tap snaked up to the sky, like a line trailing an arrow, then ballooned into full power on contact. It was exhilarating!

I must have looked beatific indeed; the other worshippers wandered away, casting sidelong glances at me. I wandered into some nearby trees, the Tap following me, for I had made it elastic and bound it to me.

When I was sure that no one could see me, I cast Flight, drawing enough power to ensure not only a long flying time but also a large weight limit, and then Invisibility. I then dismissed the Tap and lifted off slowly between the trees (not wanting to be lashed by the branches). When I had attained perhaps a thirty yards of altitude I accelerated to my maximum velocity and headed back to the apartment.

As the wind tore at me I wondered if a Kinetic Shield could be modified to act as a windscreen; but I had only one prepared and didn't want to waste it. The shortage of mystical energy I suffered from most of the time was beginning to wear on me; in the old days, I would freely release a full load of magic, then prepare again right after the battle. I didn't prepare every spell, for those not useful in battle could generally be cast at leisure. Did modern mages have some tricks to increase their prepared spell load?

Back at the building, I stepped into the shadows and dropped my Invisibility, then went up to Mara's apartment and let myself in.

"Oh, Solomoriah!" she cried, and threw herself into my arms, "I was so worried!"

"Did you get my note?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, "but with everything that's happened I still worried. Dreamwalker will surely attack again tonight, won't he?"

"He hasn't missed a beat yet," I answered. "I have succeeded with the Tap spell, Mara. Now I just need to find a place near a Ley line where I can prepare my spells. I have enough to battle Dreamwalker, I think, if we can avoid being surprised by him. We should go get Mark as he may be a target also."

Together we closed up the apartment and went downstairs to find Mark. That's when things got interesting...

## Chapter 16, *The Clay Golem*

As soon as we entered the stairwell, we could hear it... a loud pounding noise from the next floor down. We ran. As we stepped into the hallway we were both amazed at what we saw.

It was masculine, but sexless, more than two yards tall and almost two yards wide, and it seemed carved out of reddish-orange clay. They are called golems; automatons of normally inanimate material, powered by magic. The pounding was its footsteps.

As we watched it approached Mark's door, and with a single blow of its fist it smashed through the door. I didn't know if Mark was there or not, but I had to assume he was. I fired a Force Bolt at it.

The hole in its chest was bigger than my head and went clear through. The walls and floor were splattered with large gobbets of clay. The monster stood still, stunned it seemed.

I decided to investigate further. I walked slowly down the hall, leading Mara by the hand, and as I approached I released my Mystic Vision spell. Golems are quite unintelligent and usually require a controlling mage close by; I thought he might be there, invisible, but all I saw with my spell was the potent glow of magic from the monster.

Then the clay on the floor and walls began to move, and flow, and rejoined the creature's body. As soon as the hole filled in, it began pounding toward me.

I told Mara to back away to the stairwell, and then spoke the word to activate my Kinetic Shield. The golem swung its massive right fist at me in an uppercut and threw me down the hallway. The shield took the hit, and the fall, but before I could stand up again the monster was standing over me, pounding one, two, one, two on my shield.

What to do? I didn't know, and I got as close to panic as I have ever been. I needed to get it away from me, and stand up, but I had not prepared the Force Wave spell.

If I could draw enough energy I could modify one of my remaining Force Bolts. It was hard to concentrate with those massive fists pounding so close to my face, but the alternative wasn't good either.

I yelled the words, no longer caring if anyone heard, and let the spell fly. The results were spectacular! From mid-thigh up, the monster was pancaked against the ceiling and walls, leaving its feet and legs standing.

I got to my feet and backed toward Mara as quickly as I could. The hallways in that building formed a square, and we were almost back to the corner. I saw Mark on the other side of the clay mess, stepping out of his doorway to come toward us. I yelled, "Stay back!" just as the clay began to drop from the ceiling in great chunks. The monster began to reform.

I hadn't really thought I'd destroyed it; I just needed a breather.

Just as the golem began to move again, I saw a policeman come around the far corner, beyond the monster. He had his pistol out, and when he saw the clay thing begin to walk toward me, he lost it. Two gunshots echoed through the hallway, and I felt a stabbing pain in my left shoulder. The bullets had passed through the golem and struck my Kinetic Shield; it stopped the first, then failed.

Naturally the golem was unharmed. It began to walk toward me, its footsteps echoing. I didn't know what to do, but a strategic withdrawal seemed logical. I could have picked up Mara and flown away, as the spell still persisted; the golem could not keep up. In fact I thought I could outrun it on foot easily. But without me for a target what havoc would it wreak?

At least the cop didn't shoot anymore. I was half-deafened by all the noise but I thought I heard Mark yelling at him.

The golem got closer. I began to tell Mara to run around the hallway the long way to Mark and the policeman; but she interrupted me. "Remember the black opals!" she yelled.

What was she talking about? Ah! I peered at the golem; it was almost in arms reach of me... and I saw an area of greater magic, around its left eye. As it drew back to smash me I released a tightly focused Force Bolt. There was a twanging sound, the sound guns make when the bullet ricochets, and the monster's head collapsed. Then its body did the same, leaving a pile of red clay on the floor at my feet.

Down the hallway I saw that whatever I had dislodged from the golem's head had become embedded in the wall. Another stone, I assumed. A moment of silence passed, as I waited to see what would happen next.

As I expected, the monster wasn't finished yet. The clay began to roll and ooze down the hallway, toward that dark spot in the wall. Before I could decide what to do Mark ran to the spot and began to pry the stone out of the wall with a pocketknife.

The clay rose up in a wave just as he pried it loose from the wall. "Throw it here!" I yelled, though I hadn't thought about what to do with it when I got it. He threw sidearm around the wave of clay, and somehow I caught it.

Naturally the clay pile changed direction. I looked around... a hammer, pliers, something to smash the small red stone with; but we were in a hallway, after all, and there wasn't much there.

Then Mara took the stone out of my hand, and put it down on the metal threshold of the elevator. She removed her right shoe and began striking the stone with the heel.

It took her three hits before the stone broke; and the clay subsided into a quiet puddle.

I was sure it was over then. I surveyed the wreckage... the light gray walls and ceiling were stained orange in multiple locations, and there were cracks and one small hole in the walls. Of course Mark's door was smashed. I was at a loss how to cover this up.

Mara and I went the long way around; stepping in that clay seemed somehow foolish even though we were sure it was no longer dangerous. The police officer, whose name was evidently Carson, was looking at the damaged hallway, and some of the tenants were timidly peeking out their doors.

"How am I going to explain this?" Officer Carson asked, to no one in particular it seemed. Mark stepped up to him.

"What did you see?" asked Mark.

"It doesn't matter what I saw," said the policeman, "I can't write it on a report! I'll be in the funny farm for sure!"

"Then make something up. It's that or your career, bud."

"Okay, here it is... vandals came up here with that red clay in buckets to make a mess. You tried to tell them to stop and they broke your door down. How's that work for you?"

"Fine," said Mark. Just then a man showed up, and introduced himself as Mr. Kreisler the "building super." I suddenly felt conspicuous with my bloody shirt; black doesn't show it too badly though, so I stood slightly behind Mara and she hid the spot for me.

I felt the bullet fall down inside my shirt; the ring had done all it could until I fed it some more power, but I thought that would be enough for now. Other people showed up eventually, including Officer Carson's supervisor and a man from the building's insurance company. They walked around inspecting the mess, shaking their heads almost in unison. It was obvious to anyone that Carson was lying, but given the evidence what other conclusion could they come to?

Eventually they were gone; Mr. Kreisler put a totally useless sign on the wall over the clay puddle which read "Watch Your Step" and told us that a cleaning company would be brought in the next morning to deal with the mess.

Mark's door wasn't as bad as it had appeared, and with a spell of Closing on it (which I attuned to him rather than me) it would be fine until morning. Mark brought us beer and we sat and drank it, even though Mara didn't seem to care for it much. I put my arm around her, and she leaned into me.

"How long will this go on?" said Mara into the silence.

"Until I stop the Dreamwalker, this Caleb Smith fellow. Have you noticed that he attacks only by night? That tells me that he is strongest then... so it stands to reason he is weakest in the daytime."

We hadn't had a chance to tell Mark about the skeletons, or about Natomi Osaka for that matter, so Mara and I took turns at the story.

Mark said, "So he does necromancy, and summons demons, and creates golems too? A real Renaissance Man." I didn't get the reference but I ignored it.

"Not so different really; I suspect the 'demons' were actually golems of a different sort than the one tonight. I remember my old master talking about liquifying darkness; he said it wasn't what it sounded like but it didn't matter to the victims. I think I finally know what he meant. And animated skeletons, well, they are only necromantic because you use human remains. Really they are more like golems, but no controller stone is needed."

"What are you going to do, Solomoriah?" asked Mara.

"Tomorrow I'll search out the hiding place of this snake Caleb Smith, and I'll convince him to leave us be."

"You'll kill him," said Mara.

"If he makes me. I expect he will."

"I'm going with you, Solo," said Mark. Before I could answer, he got up and went into his room. He came out carrying a gun.

"You know how to use that, I hope," I said.

"My uncle taught me. He was a cop. It made my mom mad, but I spent a lot of weekends with him after my dad left. He felt guilty somehow, that his little brother had skipped without a word." He looked off into infinity for a moment. "Anyway I got pretty good with it."

"You don't have work tomorrow?" I asked.

"I'm afraid not. I got the job I was on done, at least until they approve more website expansions. I doubt I'll have anything on Monday either."

"I'm going too, Solomoriah," said Mara.

"I don't want to be mean about it, Mara, but can you fight? Cast spells? I love you, and I respect you, but you are no warrior. You have the spirit but not the training." She looked disgusted; I hoped I had not driven a wedge between us.

"Very well," she said. "I will learn, though. I promise you that." I believed her.

"How are we gonna find this guy, Solo? Magic?"

"Yes," I said, pulling the two black opals from my pocket. "He gave us the key. I just need to draw the power."

After a moment, I had a thought. "Mara, how did you know about the controller stone? I know how they work and I didn't think of it."

"I'm smarter than you think, love." She laughed, and my heart lightened. "I saw it. You cast your Mystic Vision on me, so I assumed I was supposed to be looking for something."

Ah. I had forgotten that the second Mystic Vision spell I prepared was modified to affect all those I touched. I had thought to use it with my friends to study the Ley lines more. In fact it was still in effect; it's easy to ignore once you get used to it.

"Well, I'm glad you were thinking. I was just trying to stay alive."

"You're welcome, love. Sure you don't need me?"

"I'll think about it," I answered. She kissed me deeply, and after a few moments Mark cleared his throat.

Mara and I took our leave of him then, and went to her apartment. It was a long time before we slept.

## Chapter 17, *Quest by Taxi*

I saw Mara and Mark, both naked, their hands nailed to a wall. A figure completely swathed in robes, hooded and gloved, was torturing them with a dagger and a hot poker. I saw atrocities I won't write here, and had I been anyone else my mind might have cracked.

I was trained by a necromancer. Just being in the same castle with him was a threat to sanity. Besides, I knew I was dreaming before I even heard the voice.

"You have no chance, Solomoriah." It was the same voice as before, I was sure. It had the strength of youth combined with the authority of age, and more than a tinge of evil intent.

"Your little show here doesn't impress me, Dreamwalker. I know it isn't real." I was considering using my Mind Reading spell again, but I felt sure that bluff wouldn't work again.

"But I have you trapped again, my enemy. Even now my servants are preparing to do this to your friends for real!" He laughed then, a hearty evil laugh as before.

This was what I was afraid of. I prepared to cast the Mind Reading spell; it was my only hope, I thought.

Then, before my "eyes" Mara pulled herself down from the wall, her wounds fading. She walked through the robed figure like it was only an illusion (of course it was). As she approached me, a dark dress appeared covering her.

"What is this?" asked the voice.

"Solomoriah has an ally, you pathetic coward," she answered, taking my hand. How had she gotten into my dreams?

Somehow that seemed like a stupid question.

When she touched me in the dream I could feel she was filled with psychic power. Together we reached out toward the Dreamwalker, feeling for his link. We had barely found it when he broke the connection.

I woke up, sweating. Quickly I got up and checked the apartment for "servants" of the Dreamwalker. Mara followed me.

It seemed he had been bluffing, probably trying to increase my anxiety. Thanks to Mara he didn't have time to make it work.

I turned to her. "How did you do that?"

She frowned. "I don't know. I woke up, and you were thrashing around and mumbling. I was sure that Dreamwalker was attacking you, and I so wanted to help you... and then I was there, in the dream with you."

"I doubt he'll be back again tonight," I said.

"We should check on Mark," she said. I began looking for clothes, as I was naked, after all... but then she picked up the phone and called him. There was still much I needed to learn about this time.

After she finished she said "He was really groggy until I said you had been attacked; then he woke up fast. Everything is okay with him."

"Mara, my love, I think maybe you should go with us tomorrow." She was a "sensitive," apparently. I had heard of them before but never met one; they have the instinctive ability to make mental connections without using spells. Usually without training or at least experience with other sensitives they never discover their full powers.

"We'd better get some sleep then," she said, pulling me onto the bed. After a time we did sleep.

Even with Mnemonic Enhancement, I can't remember what I had for breakfast that day, but I am pretty sure I ate. Mara called Mark at some point after we were dressed, and he joined us. I'm afraid I was lost in thought, trying to plan the unplannable.

"Is there any way we can be back here by five?" he asked.

"You ask much, my friend. Are you sure you want to go with us? You haven't seen Emily in a long time."

"If I can't make it tonight, I can pick her up tomorrow. It's no biggie." But I could tell it was.

"We'll do our best to be done early. One usually doesn't plan a battle with limited duration in mind." I thought a moment. "There are two phases to this mission. First, I need to prepare spells. This means I need a place near a Ley line where I can be undisturbed for, say, an hour or more." I didn't need that long, but I had only figured out modern timekeeping a few days ago, and estimating time was frankly a struggle. "Mount Davidson worked pretty well, but it's quite a walk there; I don't think we can afford the time."

"Why don't we call a cab?" asked Mara. This led to an explanation; then Mara made a phone call.

While we waited for the driver, Mara helped me with some basic preparations to assist in finding our foe... I'll explain that a bit later.

The taxi was a bit crowded for three. We travelled in silence; the repeated attempts by the driver to talk to us made me irritated, and eventually he noticed and shut up.

I paid the driver on our arrival, including a tip; Mark had explained this procedure to me repeatedly. We walked up to the top, still in silence. I wasn't sure why we weren't talking; I had never gone into battle with comrades who didn't chatter beforehand.

There were a few people near the monument, ignoring its religious significance and enjoying the morning. It was still early, before most people left for work.

I dismissed a few spells to make "room" for what I had in mind; then I established the Tap. I got it right the first time, even with my still-sore shoulder; and the ring began to work in earnest, relieving my pain.

It took perhaps half an hour, and when I was done I had three twofold Force Bolts, a twofold Force Wave, two Lightnings (one of which was twofold strength), Invisibility enhanced to cover those I touched, Freedom, Paralysis, Opening, and of course a Kinetic Shield of twofold power and twofold duration. I found I could slip in a "small" spell, so I added a Spirit Servant spell to the mix.

My friends watched, evidently fascinated, although the other people there ignored me. Modern city people ignore those who are behaving strangely, which has helped me many times.

I called Mark and Mara to me, and placing my hands on their shoulders I cast first Mystic Vision, then Mind Reading, to affect us all. The second spell would allow us to communicate without words. My friends stood there looking foolishly at each other, suddenly much more interested in "chattering," and I had to consciously ignore them to perform my last spell.

This one I was more than a little unsure of. I had learned the principles of tracking a mage by his works from my old master, but he had not taught me an actual spell for it. I had to invent it from whole cloth, as they say.

Early that morning, as I previously mentioned, Mara helped me with some preparations. We attached the two black opals to one end of a small bar of soap, pushing them into carefully carved holes. The bar of soap would be used with a jar of water, but of course since the soap would melt we didn't put it in the water right away. Now I cast the spell I had invented on the completed assembly, and we tested it immediately.

Well, it worked. The soap, which was the sort that floats, turned constantly to point the black opals toward the present location of the Dreamwalker. Since I believed him to be nocturnal I didn't expect that location to change, so we should be able to triangulate.

Mara hailed another cab at streetside, and as we all watched the floating soap turning she called out directions for turns to the driver. Finally, when I judged we were within a block or so I called for the driver to stop. I paid our tab; he looked at our jar and said, "Only in San Francisco. Hoo boy."

Shortly we stood before a house. That it was old was obvious even to me, and it was large besides, two stories plus a full attic. The house was one of several which stood

atop the hill, but even without the black opals for guidance I would have easily been able to guess which one contained my foe.

A large, probably permanent Tap was evident to my Mystic Vision, reaching down at a slight angle from a Ley line junction. The house was the target; just the place for a wizard to live, in this time of little magic.

Mark thought, "*Now what?*"

"*We go in.*" I started up the walk to the door.

## Chapter 18, *The House of Dreamwalker*

We were fools.

At least, I hoped Dreamwalker thought so. Of course, I knew we were walking into a trap. It's not that my foe made his challenges easy to defeat; he didn't. But each challenge left me depleted of magic, while he sat here under the Tap with all the power he could use. Why not, after beating me up with the skeletons, throw in the clay golem before I could reload? Even with Natomi's help I could easily have lost. He could have sent the skeletons to Mara's apartment; without the Japanese mage's help I might not have survived them.

No, he wanted me to come here. He wanted something from me. I just hoped I could figure out what it was in time. One thing was clear, though... he didn't want to leave his base of power.

I carefully kept all that away from my surface thoughts. I focused on the chatter between Mark and Mara; that's a lot of why I wanted them along. Their "noise" made it easier for me to block out the things in my mind I didn't want Dreamwalker to know; after all, he either had psychic powers or spells to enter my mind before, and I knew how easy Mind Reading was to cast. I needed to keep my secrets secret.

We walked up to the big front door. The house looked solid and sound, but otherwise unmaintained. Someone obviously mowed the small front yard, but there was no landscaping or flowers, and the house needed a paint job.

At the front door we stood there, looking foolish. I hadn't thought about how this would all begin... I couldn't just blow the door down; the neighbors might well call the police, and I didn't want any outside interference this time.

So, I knocked.

After a brief moment the door was opened by a blond, healthy-looking man in his twenties. I was not expecting a young man; then he spoke and explained all.

"Hello, Solomoriah. I am David, the Dreamwalker's apprentice. He is waiting for you in the parlor. Please follow me."

So we did. I went first, with Mara and Mark following in that order. The parlor was close by, and I got to see Dreamwalker for the first time.

He was old... very old. He sat there in a wheelchair facing across a glass-topped antique coffee table toward three comfortable-looking chairs. He waved toward the central one and said, "Be seated, Solomoriah. Your woman and apprentice may also sit." David took up a position standing behind Dreamwalker's right shoulder.

As we took our seats I glanced around the room. Mark thought, "*Victorian*," and I took it that he meant the style. The room was darkened by curtains over all the windows; I wondered if he had the same weakness which plagued my old master.

"Daylight depresses me, Solomoriah," he said creakily. I had expected he would be reading my thoughts, and this confirmed it. "We have much to discuss, my friend."

Before I could react he waved his hand and spoke a word, and for a moment I thought his spell had failed, for I didn't feel any different. Then I realized I couldn't move; but unlike my own Paralysis spell, this spell didn't make me collapse like a jellyfish. What had he done?

He pointed at Mark and Mara in succession, saying "You, and you, come here," and my friends arose and approached him. I thought to them, "*It's some kind of domination... be strong.*" He took each of them by the hand and intoned a spell, evidently casting it from scratch, and I realized when he had finished that the Mind Reading I placed on them had been dispelled. They could no longer "hear" me or each other. Mine was still in effect, though. I wondered what he had planned.

"You," he said, pointing at Mark, "give me the gun." Mark reached under his jacket in the back and pulled it out. Dreamwalker put the gun beside him in the wheelchair.

"You two, go with David, obey him. David, take them to the dining room, stay there. This mage and I must speak." David did as he was told, smirking at Mara. I reached out to his mind and saw what he was thinking, and raged at my inability to move, to chase him, to strike him down.

"*Patience, Solomoriah.*" That voice... the strength of youth and the authority of age. Dreamwalker now spoke in my mind. It wasn't my Mind Reading, it was his mental link spell... I hadn't tried but I was sure his mind was defended. Why wasn't David's?

"*Watch and learn,*" came Dreamwalker's reply, as he gestured at the glass-topped table and spoke two words. The glass became a "window" into the dining room, and of course since he had so commanded me I watched.

David left Mark standing against the wall, and turned his attention to Mara. He commanded her to disrobe, and she obeyed, her frozen features betraying no emotion. I reached out to her mind and found her strangely calm. She was taunting David in her mind, the sort of taunts meant to strike a man's pride.

Then she stood there, naked, and David began belatedly to unfasten his belt. Mara continued to silently taunt him.

Suddenly he stopped, looking dismayed. I looked into his mind and saw the reason... a sudden case of impotence. He was not aware that Mara was taunting him, I could tell, but I wondered if it was having an effect anyway...

He slapped her. She didn't respond visibly, but I could see in her mind that it hurt. He smiled an evil smile, and did it again. Mara couldn't maintain her concentration; and whether it was that fact, or the simple sadistic pleasure he was feeling, I didn't know, but his impotence was passing. I switched back and forth between the two of them, raging at my own inability to act.

*"Now watch, as I let the spell controlling Mark slip..."*

Mark was unarmed now, but as I looked at him I saw a dagger hanging above the mantle of the fireplace. It was ornate, of gold and jade, and looked old, but the blade was exposed and evidently sharp. Mark would have seen it when he entered the room, and now as he pulled free of the spell controlling him he turned quietly and took it down.

It had to be a trap... didn't it? I watched, as that was all I could do. Mark held the knife underhanded, like a true knife fighter, but uncomfortably enough that I could tell he'd never actually used one before.

David struck Mara again, and this was apparently enough to make him ready. He unfastened his pants and bent to push them down, and then he saw Mark in his peripheral vision. It was too late for him, as Mark jabbed under his ribcage from the left side. If he didn't hit David's heart, he most likely punctured his lung. David fell in a heap, the dagger still in him.

That's wrong, I thought... a young, healthy man like that shouldn't die so easily. My rage disappeared as a cold chill seemed to descend on me. What was happening here?

I watched as Mark stepped away from the body. He spoke to Mara; I heard him through her ears, saying "Are you okay?" but she couldn't answer. Then, like a marionette when its strings are picked up by the puppeteer, Mark gave a jerk and then stood still. Dreamwalker had reasserted his power.

*"He thought himself free,"* thought Dreamwalker, chuckling. It was a terrible sound, like he was breathing his last breath. *"I spent much time crafting that spell for just that purpose. It often pleases me to play puppets with people."*

He sat staring at the now-still image in the tabletop. *"She's a beautiful savage, Solomoriah. The beautiful ones are always the downfall of someone."* He had arranged to slay his own apprentice by using my friend... why?

*"I'll tell you soon, my friend. First, though, give me the ring you are wearing."* I complied, though my mind was screaming not to do it. He took it and shakily put it on his hand.

"Ahhh..." he sighed. "It is as I had hoped." His voice was already audibly plainer and stronger. As I watched he seemed to fill out before my eyes. "I'm hungry!" he said. With his mind he reached out to Mara, and I heard his voice echoing in her mind, *"The kitchen is through that door. Make me a plate of sandwiches. Use the roast and lettuce in the refrigerator, the bread on the counter, and bring a glass of water with it."*

Evidently instructions to a person under this form of domination had to be pretty well complete.

He hadn't bothered to tell Mara to dress, and this did bother me a bit; he sensed this, and when she brought the plate of sandwiches he said "Dress, for your master here is

offended by your nakedness. Then prepare another plate of sandwiches just like this and bring it." He began to wolf down the food.

As he ate he spoke to me with his mind. *"You wonder why I killed my own apprentice, using yours as my weapon? I'll tell you, my friend. In just over a month I'll be one hundred ninety-nine years old. The year I turned forty my master died. I decided then that the Reaper would have a harder time with me.*

*"I studied necromancy, which my master had forbidden, and I soon learned the secrets of long life. I discovered part of a spell to stave off aging and death, and I completed it myself. However, it needed a lot of power, and the older I got the more it required. By the time I was eighty, I looked only sixty but I was spending more than four hours a day in meditation to draw the power I needed to keep the spell going. By its nature, if it ever fails I cannot cast it again.*

*"I had an apprentice then, an avaricious youngster who saw my magic as a way to line his pockets and live a high life. I taught him a few spells, which he used to perform thefts of numerous items of value. I let him enjoy it for perhaps a month, and then I killed him with that knife.*

"Your master was a necromancer, wasn't he?" asked my foe. He read my affirmative answer from my thoughts. *"Then you know that when you create a zombie you must cast the spell at the moment of death, or within just a very few seconds afterward."* I nodded, wondering where this was leading and yet afraid I knew. *"That knife makes the spell easy. It traps the spirit in the body, stopping the process of death for several hours. I acquired it from an antiques dealer who claimed it came from Argentina; he had no idea what it was really worth.*

*"I slew my first apprentice with that knife, and put his zombie to work gathering magical energy for me. It's true, he was not as efficient as I, but he had nothing better to do all day but gather the energy for me. I had to create an additional spell for this purpose, to allow me to move about untethered by the zombie, but that posed no real difficulty for me."* He wiped his hands on his pants then, his last sandwich eaten. Mara entered just then with another plate. She looked as if she had slept in her clothes, but at least she was covered.

"Ah, good, you are an excellent slave, my girl." He took the plate and began to eat. *"Where was I? Oh, yes. This sufficed for some time, but in about twenty years I found myself in the same predicament. I sought out another apprentice; this one wanted women to be his slaves. I taught him the very spell you are under right now; I call it Physical Dominance. He went out that same day and brought home three women, a petite redhead, a buxom blonde, and a sensible-looking brunette, all under his spell. I let him have them for a night and a day; that second night, after he fell asleep, I entered the room and overrode his spell. The blonde stabbed him while the other two held him down, and as I was already rather weak I cast the spell right away and put them to work processing him."*

Processing, I thought. What does he mean? *"You'll find out soon enough, Solomoriah. As I was saying, I put him to work alongside my original zombie apprentice, killed the women, and went on about my business. This worked well for about fourteen years, before I found myself needing another apprentice.*

*"I've had many over the years; besides the ever-increasing power requirements of my life-extension spell, zombies don't last forever. You have to replace them now and again.*

*"But over all this time I was aging, slower than normal men but still aging. In time I would become unable to maintain my stable of zombies, and then I would die slowly. This is not to be, now! Your Ring of Regeneration has set me free! The accumulated damage and wear of almost two hundred years of living is falling away from me."*

I could see by my still-functional Mystic Vision that the ring was glowing more strongly than ever; and if you had asked me how old he was, by looking at him I'd have said fifty, perhaps sixty years. "That's quite a compliment, my boy!" he said, again wiping his hands on his pants. He took the last gulp from the glass and handed it to Mara, saying "Get me more."

He stood up from the wheelchair, and stretched, and I didn't have to be able to read his mind to know it had been a long time since he had last done that. "Stand up, mage, and follow me," he said, and I did.

He led me to the dining room, and said "You two pick up my apprentice and follow me." We did so, and he led us to a door; when he opened it I saw stairs descending. "Put him on the table in the basement below, and then shackle yourselves to the wall." Mara came in then, and he took the glass from her and told her to shackle herself also.

There were shackles enough in that basement for six people, and they were strong enough even as old as they were to hold some very strong men. As I turned to put my back to the wall and reached over my head, I saw at the other end of the dimly-lit basement something to make your stomach turn and your blood run cold.

Heads, in jars. Six of them, all young men, floating in a fluid I later discovered was formaldehyde. Dreamwalker did not follow us down right away, and after a time I felt the spell begin to slip away from me.

Was I really free of it, or had he simply loosened my reins? I looked about, my stiff neck shooting pains, to find Mara on my left, Mark on my right. They were also beginning to move.

"How do we get out of here, Solo?" asked Mark.

"I don't know," I said, and it was true.

## **Chapter 19, *I Shoot Myself***

As I said, the spell controlling me seemed to have lapsed, and I was left wondering why. If it had actually expired, surely Dreamwalker would have come to recast it; otherwise I would be able to cast spells, to free us and thwart his plans.

If I continued thinking in this vein I might give away my secrets. It was time to act. He must be watching; so he expected me to free myself, I assumed, and then probably to try to destroy the zombie heads powering his unnatural life.

Why would he have risked putting me in the same room with the heads? Even if he were watching me like a hawk I might still be able to get off a Force Bolt and destroy some of them, before he could act to stop me. I focused my Mystic Vision, which was waning in power but still usable, and studied the heads carefully.

I became certain they were an illusion.

"Dreamwalker! I don't feel like playing this game. If you have plans for us, get on with it!"

It worked. Almost as soon as I called out, the door at the top of the stairs opened and Dreamwalker entered. "You are too loud, Solomoriah. You disturb me. Be silent!" With a wave and a word he cast Silence over us.

Without further ado he turned to the impaled corpse on the table. I realized then he was not paying attention to me; he thought, with the shackles and the Silence I was powerless. I tried not to smile.

Dreamwalker apparently hadn't prepared the Zombie Creation spell, for he was going through all the words and gestures. I waited until he began to pull out the knife, then I spoke a word into the Silence and the shackles dropped away. Before he could turn toward me I let fly one of my Force Bolt spells...

It disappeared, like it had been absorbed, just before it hit him. Antimagic! I had heard of it many times but never before encountered it. With my Mystic Vision I could see a blackness, sort of a blankness, in the mystic field surrounding him.

Evidently I had interrupted his spell, though. He stood there enraged, the knife in his hand, with Daniel's body obviously completely dead. Dreamwalker was screaming at me, but of course all I could hear was a faint ringing in my ears.

I circled toward the staircase, not wanting my friends to be in the line of fire, as I activated my Kinetic Shield. Why had he not attacked me yet?

Just as I left the area of Silence he pointed at me and spoke a word. I recognized the feeling of the Physical Dominance this time, and tried to resist, but it was no use. "You have ruined my zombie, Solomoriah. You must serve in his place. Come here and remove this corpse from the table." Of course I complied, as I had no choice.

What to do? Magic would not affect him, but physical injury would at least slow him down, perhaps disrupt his concentration or even render him unconscious. But I was not free to move... what could I do?

I remembered then that Dreamwalker had left the upstairs door open, and I remembered the last spell I prepared, and I remembered one other thing... so I silently activated my Spirit Servant just as I laid Daniel's corpse on the floor. I willed it to go upstairs and retrieve Mark's gun from the wheelchair.

Was Dreamwalker still reading my mind?

"Lay down on the table in his place." I did so, and he said "Take this knife in your right hand and stab yourself directly in the heart, between the ribs." As I reached for the knife I saw with my peripheral vision the gun floating down the staircase behind him. Shoot him, I willed, shoot him!

I had the knife in my hand, and I was moving it into position. Dreamwalker somehow sensed something and turned around. The blast was deafening in that small stone room. The bullet took him in the forehead, and he slumped to the floor.

He wasn't dead, of course, and with my ring he would make a full recovery in minutes, perhaps seconds. Meanwhile I was about to stab the knife into my chest.

I sent my will out to the servant... shoot my hand! It **hurt**, as much as I have ever been hurt, but the knife flew out of my hand and across the room. Dreamwalker's exacting instructions didn't include a contingency plan; he even said to use my right hand, which was now impossible. The spell continued in effect, but now I just lay there awaiting instructions.

I tried to will the servant to shoot him again, repeatedly, but before it could maneuver into position (for Spirit Servants aren't made for combat) Dreamwalker awoke and dispelled it. The gun fell to the stairs, bounced down a few steps and stopped.

Dreamwalker stood up. "If you want a man killed, you mustn't depend on him to do it right." He smiled at his joke, and went around the table to retrieve the knife. My doom hadn't been averted, only delayed; I felt despair creeping up on me.

I couldn't move even my eyes under the constraint of the spell; I had to look straight ahead until I was given instructions otherwise. I saw Dreamwalker in my peripheral vision rising up on my left side, and on my right, I seemed to see activity on the stairs...

The shot was still more deafening than the first; and Dreamwalker fell. Who was shooting? I couldn't look to see! It seemed like forever, and then I saw Mara looking down at me. She held the gun in her right hand, which was bleeding.

Of course! The shackles were made to restrain strong men; her slim hands slipped through the large cuffs, causing only minor injuries.

She spoke, but I couldn't hear her plainly. I wanted to yell, "Get the ring!" but could not. Somehow she seemed to understand anyway; I could see her walking around the table carefully, the gun held at the ready. There was another shot and then I could just see Mara fall to the floor.

After a moment there were more shots, until I reasoned the gun must be empty. It seemed an eternity was passing... what happened? Was Mara okay? Then I realized, foolishly, that the Mind Reading was still in force, and that Mark was shackled where he could see. I reached out to him.

Through his eyes I saw Mara pushing the ancient wizard off of her. He was bleeding from multiple bullet wounds to the head, and anyone else would have thought him dead for sure. I knew better.

I was relieved when I saw Mara remove the ring from his hand. She put it on her own finger, and then stood up, backing away from him. Without the ring he would still heal; his own life-extension spell would ensure that he lived until that happened. But he might be brain-damaged, without my ring to cause perfect healing.

Even though he was helpless now, I felt he must be destroyed. If he regained his mind enough to do magic he would again be a threat, and his crimes were surely capital. But what court could he be convicted in? It seemed I would again have to be judge, jury, and executioner.

Assuming I ever got off the table.

Mara put the ring on my left hand (of course) as soon as she got up. Ah, that felt better! Her injuries were so minor that they were already healed. I looked at the empty gun in her hand; it looked strange, and then I realized that the slide must lock back when it was empty.

She searched the old mage, the corpse of the apprentice, and then the shelves, looking for the key to Mark's manacles. I could still hear her thoughts but that was all I could do. She carefully avoided the heads, not knowing that they were illusions.

This enforced inactivity was wearing on me. I looked at Dreamwalker through Mark's eyes, and silently raged at him.

Well, no point in that. The previous time Dreamwalker had placed this spell on us, it lasted quite a while; and this time I was the only target, so the duration might be even longer. I needed a counterspell, and I didn't have one.

So I decided to invent one. Creating spells on the spur of the moment is tough, but I had nothing better to do. Usually at a time like this I would have paper and a pencil, scribbling spell outlines, diagrams, and symbols; this time I had to work entirely in my own head.

Several times I tried experimental castings, probing the spell which controlled my body. It proved difficult to affect it at all... it was very different than the Domination and Compulsion spells I already knew.

Mara came and held my hand, having given up on finding the key. She didn't want to leave the room with Mark and I helpless, and I was grateful for that.

It seemed to take a long time, but finally I had a spell I thought would work. I focused, drawing in the power and forming the words carefully in my mind.

It worked on the first try. My muscles were quite sore from the enforced inactivity. Apparently the ring didn't help with that; I wondered why not. As soon as I could stand up I freed Mark with my spell of Opening, and dispelled the annoying Silence.

Dreamwalker lay on the floor, comatose. It would be a while before he woke up, and he would probably be brain damaged, I was sure. I picked him up and put him on the table. Mark dragged Daniel's body over to the wall, out of the way.

There was a heavy door under the staircase. Though it had no lock, I could not open it. I cast the spell of Opening, and it failed.

"This must be where he keeps the good stuff," said Mark. I focused, drawing more than thrice the power I usually would use for the spell, and cast Opening again. This time the door came open.

I heard Dreamwalker moan "No..." as I pulled the door open. Inside was a small room, bare save for two shelves on the far wall, each laden with three heads in jars. This was exactly the same as the illusion, and Mark and Mara were both confused. I explained it to them as I surveyed the room.

There was one difference between the real thing and the illusion... on a stool in front of the shelves lay a large irregular chunk of obsidian, wrapped loosely with silvery wires. Each jar had such a wire attached to the metal jar lid, trailing down to the stone.

Without a second thought, I released my Force Wave spell.

Naturally the contents of the room were smashed against the wall. The smell of formaldehyde was overpowering. As we stepped back I heard Dreamwalker breathe his last breath.

"Was that really necessary?" asked Mara, annoyance in her eyes and her mind. It was the first time she had spoken to me in anger.

"I needed to do it," I said, turning toward her. It was the first time she had seen the coldness in my eyes and my heart.

The best way to end the tension between us was to make ourselves busy. Mark had moved away, avoiding us. I closed the door behind us and looked around.

"What now, Solo?" asked Mark.

"Now, we clean house," I answered.

## **Chapter 20, *Spring Cleaning***

Mark reminded me that we hadn't eaten yet, and suggested ordering a pizza. I hadn't seen a telephone in the house, but before I could ask Mara pulled a cell phone out of her purse. I did indeed have much to learn.

I hadn't experienced pizza yet, so I let my friends decide what to order. The pizza delivery man seemed uneasy delivering to the old house, but I paid including a tip (as Mark had taught me) and that seemed to make him happy.

We ate on the back porch. The grisly contents of the basement made the house seem an inappropriate place to eat. The back yard was spooky, and overgrown, and after we had eaten Mark and I walked out into it.

The yard was surprisingly deep, considering how little front yard the house had. It was all downhill from the house, surrounded by a vine-laden picket fence. At the very back, the lowest point, we found a small family cemetery. It had a sort of a low fence of black-painted metal, and inside the grass was tall.

Mark said, "Look, a path!" and I could see the trail through the tall grass. It led to the foot of a large, flat gravestone, a sort of a lid or cover. The nameplate was eroded and illegible. "Someone important to the old man... his mother maybe?"

"I don't think so," I answered. I bent down and felt around the lip of the "lid," and I felt the hidden handholds I was expecting. I had to pull hard to start it, but then some magic or mechanism took it the rest of the way up, revealing a stone staircase descending.

Mara approached at that moment, and I said, "Both of you wait here, I'll be back shortly." Then I went down.

What I found was the answer to a question which had occurred to me as I listened to Dreamwalker's story. Where did he hide the bodies?

Here, in this catacomb, cut back into the hill below his house. It was larger than I expected, several sections of what I later learned was fairly standard mausoleum accommodations. The last section was mostly empty spaces, and piled at the end of it I found the covers or lids (I have yet to learn the correct name) along with a bucket and trowel, both poorly cleaned, and a half a bag of dry mortar.

It seemed as good a place as any to dispose of the bodies.

If that seems wrong to you, the reader, think about my position for a moment. What court of law would understand the situation? By that time I had determined I had to take control of Dreamwalker's house and property, some way or another; even had I not wanted it for myself, the massive Tap would surely attract other mages or even monstrous creatures. So I had to cover up the mess.

If you have thoughts of turning me in, trust me, the evidence is long since gone or I wouldn't be admitting this here.

I rejoined my friends, telling them of my plan. Mark had to leave soon but promised to come Monday and help with whatever remained.

I spent the rest of the afternoon going around the house with a tightly focused Mystic Vision spell, looking for traps. There were plenty; I lost my right hand to an exploding box, and Mara and I had to flee quickly from a book which released poison gas. I could see I would be at it a while.

After I cleared each room, Mara began cleaning them out, removing old things she declared were trash, dusting and beginning to work out how we could use the house. I had wondered if she would be able to be at ease here, but it seemed it would be no problem.

Twice Mara called me back into a room I had thought clear, to point out something that "didn't look right." Both times she was right, having somehow discovered a hidden trap I had missed. Her subtle powers came in handy many times since then.

After nightfall I summoned several Spirit Servants (for even I didn't want to touch the heads) and together with Mara and the servants we moved the bodies and heads to the catacombs. I had to clean the small room myself; Mara said, "You made the mess, you clean it up," but this time she smiled as she said it.

I wanted very badly to burn a number of evil things I had found in the house, but Mara counseled me that it would be a mistake. We found a box of large trash bags and bundled up everything that we wanted to be rid of, and Mara told me we could rent a truck to transport the more sensitive items to a place where burning would not cause trouble. (In the interest of avoiding legal action I won't reveal that location.)

Exhausted, we decided to sleep. The bedding was among the things we were disposing of, so in the end we slept on the floor. Though uncomfortable, it seemed the lesser of all possible evils.

I won't burden you further with minute-by-minute descriptions of all the cleaning and searching we did that weekend. We found some items of interest, though, including several stashes of paper money, a filing cabinet full of documents, and a library of arcane knowledge. Mara spent a couple of hours that Sunday afternoon counting the money while I puzzled over the books.

They were in Latin, and Spanish, and French; very little was in English. I still didn't know any spells of comprehension so most was useless to me, and the few books in English were puzzling in the extreme. It seemed that the theories of magic used in the writing of those books were different than I had been taught by Ket. It was many weeks before I learned how to interpret them.

The documents in the filing cabinet were as meaningless to Mara as to me, but we could easily see that some were very old. I decided to go over them with Mark; he had a good analytical mind and a better grasp of this era than I, and I hoped he might be able to figure them out.

Sunday evening Mark called Mara to say that he had dropped off Emily, and did we need any help? I said to tell him to rent the truck we needed, and come over. We all climbed into the cab and went shopping.

It was late that night when we finished, ah, "making" our bed. Mara chose a front bedroom which had been used for storage, feeling that Dreamwalker's room on the first floor and the apprentice's room on the second were both "spooky." By then I knew enough to trust her feelings.

The next day Mark joined us again, and we went over the documents. It was evening before we really understood them.

Dreamwalker was using the name "Lucas Brown" when he built the house over a hundred and fifty years before; that would have been just about the time he made himself deathless. Thirty years later he sold the house to a "Caleb Smith," who sold it in twenty-two years to "Jacob Jones." The next owner, in another twenty years, was "Lucas Brown!"

He was selling the property to himself! The names repeated, in cycles; the later cycles averaged about eighteen years.

For each identity Mark found papers appropriate to the era. The last two, Lucas Brown and Caleb Smith, had papers which Mark called "suspicious." Then he came upon a new folder titled "Jacob Jones."

"Look here, Solo! The other identities were all about sixty years old when they 'purchased' the house, but this last one would only be about thirty!" He turned a few pages. "Here, look! This Jacob Jones is buying the house from Caleb Smith. These papers were written this week!"

"As soon as he realized what my ring could do for him, he made plans to be younger," I mused.

"Solo, there's something here which is conspicuous by its absence," he said. I shook my head; then he said "Photo ID. There are no pictures of him here."

"Then..." I began.

"You could be Jacob Jones!" he said triumphantly. Mara heard him raise his voice and looked in, so we explained it to her.

Mark found tax returns, filed faithfully since the United States began charging income tax; he believes that, each time Dreamwalker changed identities, he laundered some of his ill-gotten gains. He found receipts for the sale of stocks, concurrent with the sale of the house, where Dreamwalker made his assets liquid; then he evidently bought new stocks in the new name to provide him income for his new life.

I won't tell you how much money we found, but suffice to say we were able to hire professionals to do much of the repair work without cutting too much into the money. I

called the lawyer who was handling the sale of the property the next day. He complained that the whole sight-unseen closing was irregular, but in the end he just wanted more money. I obliged him.

Mark helped me get a state photo ID card, to make it easier for me to do business, and then I got a bank account, depositing a part of the money there. I invested part of it, and we began to make plans.

After all, the cash would run out eventually. I suspected my needs in that area would be more than Dreamwalker's had been; for one thing, I intended to keep up the house and property.

I decided to hire Mark; he set up my office, in Dreamwalker's old downstairs bedroom, with all the computer equipment a modern businessman needs (to burn music CD's and play games, evidently... I kid him often about that). He created my website, named the business (Solo Jones, Supernatural Investigator), and generally worked out all the real-world details. He decided to remain in his apartment, but with his first generous paycheck he purchased a car. He even promised to teach me to drive.

And of course, Mara and I got married... but that's another story entirely.