

THE ADVENTURES OF SOLO JONES

Book 2

Changeling

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Chapter 1, Interlude, Before Beginning

Mara leaned against me on the back porch swing. Mark and I had found it in the storage room upstairs, the room Mara chose for our bedroom. It wasn't in too bad shape, so we fixed it up and hung it on the back porch.

Two weeks had passed since we took over the house, and it was looking much better. Oh, there were many things still needing our attention, but with the roof and siding work completed we no longer needed much professional assistance.

Just as well, since they didn't like working in the spooky old house.

It was a warmer night than we had been having, and we had no air conditioning; so we sat out in the cool breeze a while, looking over that spooky back yard, before going to bed.

We had been quiet for some time, just enjoying being together. Mara's eyes, in the full moon's light, were truly like deep, dark pools, and I considered telling her that the way lovers do; but she spoke first.

"Solomoriah," she said, "after you were free of your old master, why didn't you go home?"

"Back to my people?" I asked, and she nodded. "Several reasons, I guess. I would have to tell Sol's mother, and Kras' parents, what happened to their sons. I might say they died in battle and leave it at that, but such a lie to people I had known all my life would tear at me." I thought for a moment.

"What about Fresia's parents?"

"I never knew them. She wasn't of my people; Sol met her in another village, where he was apprenticed." I looked off into the darkness. "The most important reason, though, was that I was tainted. I left my people as a headstrong warrior to make my reputation fighting evil; I could hardly return after five years as a necromancer."

"How would they know?" she asked.

"I considered hiding my powers, or pretending to be another type of mage, but almost all my spells were necromancy. Mostly, though, I was afraid they would somehow see it in my eyes."

"I've seen... no, I've felt your coldness, my love. Perhaps they would know."

"Priests and priestesses always seemed to know. They said my aura was impure."

Mara seemed lost in thought. "So you set out away from home, an undesired wanderer who's only love died before your eyes. You must have been lonely."

"I was. I cannot measure the depths of my loneliness, but it was never in me to give up. My will to survive made me Ket's slave, and though I regretted that act I never regretted that power of will which drove me to it." I paused. "I only wish I had been able to confront Ket. That was my ultimate plan, to travel the world gathering power to defeat my old master."

"So collecting the magic books of defeated enemies was not just a quest for power for the sake of power; you had a plan for it." Mara smiled. "A worthy plan. Still," she added, "Personally, I'm happy that your quest brought you to me."

I looked at the moon for a while. "I do regret that I never made it back there."

After another pause, Mara asked "Do you believe in God?"

"God, the One, the Creator? I don't know. Four years with Gruven Ket followed by three years battling the most evil mages of Africa and South America left me with little faith in anything besides my magic, my staff, and my ring." I thought a moment, with Mara staring into my eyes. I smiled. "Recent events have made me reconsider somewhat..."

We kissed, for a time.

Presently she said, "My people are Animists. They believe in animal spirits which guide their fate. When we came here, my father felt that we should try to make a place for ourselves in the neighborhood we were placed in. It turned out to be a mostly Black neighborhood, and pretty much entirely Baptist. So we joined. I think that my mother truly converted; I thought I had too, but I was just a girl. I don't know what I believe, now."

"I've told you of the beliefs of my people, haven't I?" I asked.

"Yes, I think so. Refresh my memory."

"My people believed in a single infinite God of limitless power. He was so far above us as to be beyond our comprehension, so he created beings of great power and set them over us. We called them gods, without meaning insult to God. We were both monotheists and pantheists; we considered the gods worthy of our worship because they were made by our Creator to rule over us."

"Yes, I remember." We resumed kissing for a while, eventually relaxing into an easy, peaceful quiet. I looked at the stars. You think they are unchanging, but they do change, and the sky looked very different than the one my father taught me about.

A while later, Mara said, "You're circumcised."

Puzzled, I said "Yes..."

"So why doesn't the ring make your foreskin grow back?"

I didn't answer right away... I just stared at the heavy silver band.

"I don't know," I finally answered. "I never met a mage or priest who could do with a spell what this ring does. I don't know where the Madman got it, or who made it; the workmanship and design is totally unique, so far as I know. It's really the most powerful item of magic I ever saw."

"Doctors can't do what the ring does either. You could help a lot of people with it."

"I've thought about that," I said. "But I can't help everyone. Maybe it's selfish but I don't want to lose it; I've come to depend on this ring." I looked at my right hand, which had just been regenerated when I got it blown to shreds by one of Dreamwalker's traps. "Maybe too much."

"Could be." Mara sat up, and looked at me. By the gods, but she was beautiful. "Can I ask a favor?"

"I can't imagine anything I wouldn't do for you," I answered.

"I joined a support group for women victimized as I was. I didn't go for very long; sharing the pain helped for a while but eventually it was more like reopening a wound every time I went."

"You want me to heal them?" I asked, certain I was right.

"Yes."

We spent a hour, perhaps, making plans for this mission. Mara wasn't sure how many women would be there; it took about an hour to heal Mara, so that was our benchmark.

Naturally I didn't intend for any of them to see me, or know about me. The plan was to enter the room invisibly and cast a powerful blanket Sleep spell, then simply give each woman an hour of wearing the ring. I would have to cast a Tap spell, but fortunately the location was near a Ley line.

Mara told me that the group sessions took place in a medical office building, and that the therapist always locked up at the end. She thought the cleaning crew was already gone by that time, so barring guards or a security system to defeat, it should be pretty easy.

It'd be nice if things were as easy as they seem.

Chapter 2, *Saturday Morning Cartoons*

As it happened, that was a Friday night, and the support group met on Tuesdays, so I had a few days to think things over before undertaking the mission Mara gave me.

The next morning I slept late; my once-accurate circadian rhythm ruined by too many late nights, I no longer woke with the sunrise. After completing my morning routine in the bath I dressed, then found Mara in the kitchen eating breakfast, and I joined her. I had just begun when the doorbell rang, so Mara went to get it. Shortly I heard Mark's voice, so curious, I went also. He had a key, after all; why had he rung?

I found Mark and Mara in the living room, and Emily was with him. I had not yet met his daughter, and she shied away from me when she saw me. Mara saw, and said, "Emily, this is Solomoriah, my friend."

The little redheaded girl said, "He's your boyfriend, isn't he?" and giggled. Mara waved me over.

I kneeled down to Emily's level and said, "Yes, I am. I'm pleased to meet you, Emily." I held out a hand, and she came out from behind her father and shook it with all the grave seriousness only a little child can have.

"Do you have anything to play with here?" she asked.

Before I could answer, Mara said, "I'll turn on some cartoons if you like." Emily expressed her approval with a happy squeal and Mara turned on the television. As they looked together through the numerous channels for young people Mark led me into the adjoining office, and closed the door.

"I'm worried about Emily, Solo. Valerie is getting meaner; I thought she was gonna hit me last night when I picked up Emily, and Emily was crying. She cried until we got back to my apartment and I got her a snack, and then she watched some television and sort of calmed down."

"So you think your ex-wife is abusing her?" I asked.

"I'm sure of it. When I gave her a bath I noticed some bruises on her back, and when I asked she told me she fell down. She didn't sound like she believed it herself. They looked like handprints." By this time Mara had joined us, and the look of anger Mark's statement evoked from her was fearsome indeed.

"Call the Family Services people," she said.

"I don't want trouble," Mark began, but Mara interrupted.

"Mark, think about it. Who is more important here? You? Valerie? No, Emily is. You must do the right thing. If Valerie is abusing her, Family Services will take Emily away and protect her. You can probably get custody if Valerie is judged unfit."

I was unfamiliar with the laws governing this sort of thing, and really so was Mara, but Mark admitted that it probably was the best thing to do. He promised to take action Monday morning since he had her for the entire weekend. "I'll just keep her Sunday night. Valerie can scream all she wants, but according to the court decree I have the right to keep her that long."

I left Mark and Mara discussing the distasteful thing he had to do, since the legalities and customs were strange to me. I knew something I could do which was much more useful at the moment.

"May I sit here with you, Miss Emily?" I asked. She giggled and nodded, so I sat beside her on the couch. She was watching a strange cartoon depicting surreal undersea creatures who behaved as if they lived on dry land; though demented in appearance it seemed not to be harmful. I watched with her quietly for a time, then I said, "Have you seen my ring?" She turned and looked at the heavy engraved band with obvious interest. I removed it and handed it to her. "Try it on if you like."

She put the much-oversized ring on her index finger and made a fist to keep it on. "Ooh, it tickles," she said, wiggling.

"Where do you tickle?" I asked, and she pointed to her back and then to the backs of her thighs.

After a few moments she said, "It stopped. Make it do it again!" I shook my head and held out my left hand, and after making a face at me she put the ring back on my ring finger. Shortly the strange cartoon creatures captured her attention, and I quietly got up.

Mara was watching me from the doorway. "You healed her," she said quietly. "Now there's no evidence!"

"Mark said he'd call the Family Services people Monday... didn't you?" I asked, walking through the door into the office. He nodded. "In two days she'd be healed anyway."

"True," said Mark. "Guess I wasn't thinking. Now what do I do?" He sounded very frustrated.

I thought quickly. "Let's change plans," I said. "Take her back tomorrow like normal. I'll go along, invisible, and watch over her. I have some spells which might help."

In fact I had gained two new spells since taking over Dreamwalker's library. I had learned the spells of Aura Reading and Dream Contact. What I didn't have, indeed so far couldn't find, was the spell of AntiMagic he used for protection against me. Most of

his books of magical knowledge were in languages other than English, a fact which was most frustrating to me. I shouldn't need AntiMagic for what I had planned, though.

"What will you do?" asked Mara.

"For starters, I plan to adapt a spell of Kinetic Shield to protect Emily from her mother. I may read Valerie's mind, or examine her aura. I don't really have any right, but I suppose I've not let that stop me in the past."

"Emily's well-being is more important than Valerie's rights, as far as I'm concerned," said Mara. Mark reluctantly nodded.

We discussed options for quite a while, until Emily came in and declared she was hungry. Mara and I quickly fixed sandwiches for everyone, and then Mara said, "Emily, would you like to come over tomorrow evening for ice cream?"

"Yes!" she squealed, "yes yes yes yes yes! Ice cream ice cream ice cream!"

"Whoa, sweetie, calm down," said Mark, and eventually Emily remembered the sandwich she was tearing apart and resumed eating it.

"It's settled then," I said. "See you tomorrow around, ah, four o'clock?" Mara nodded, so I knew I had the time right. I was still learning then... it was still easier to think in terms of sunrise, noon, and sunset than in terms of hours.

Mark agreed, then said, "Emily, we need to get going. We don't want to keep the elephants waiting, do we?"

"Ephalants!" she said with enthusiasm. "We're going to the zoo," she said to Mara with extreme seriousness, and Mara nodded, smiling. We walked them to the door and said our goodbyes, and as they drove away Mara said, "Now we can get to the back yard."

Ah, yes, the pleasures of home ownership. Mara had decided that terracing the sloping yard was the only sensible thing to do, and had acquired tools and retaining wall blocks (which we had ordered from a firm which delivered free... I was tired of loading and unloading trucks after removing all the refuse from the house).

So we had work ahead of us. I groaned a little, and Mara made a face which basically said "wimp." Then I had an idea...

Chapter 3, *Adventures in Yardwork*

By late afternoon we were nearly done with the first terrace. Mara and I were doing most of the digging, but the stone and earth moving I assigned to a group of four Spirit Servants I had summoned. I put a lot of power into each of them, so they could do a lot of work before returning to the spirit world.

Mara was bent down arranging the last of the stones, and I was leaning on a shovel and watching. Without looking up, she quietly said "We're being watched."

I cast my eyes over the yard, trying to look unconcerned, but I saw nothing. On a hunch I silently released a Mystic Vision spell, and then I saw him.

He was invisible, of course, but with the Mystic Vision spell I could see his silhouette. He was downslope a ways, probably fifteen or twenty yards from us, skulking along the fence. I tried not to let him know I saw him, but I must have given myself away, because he suddenly became visible and leaped at me, brandishing a sword.

The leap was incredible; he covered the entire distance between us in a single leap, and had enough momentum left to plant his feet on my chest! While he was still in "flight" I reflexively released a Kinetic Shield spell.

It's all that saved me. The Kinetic Shield absorbed his weight hitting my chest, but in the same move he slashed at me with his sword. My defensive spell absorbed only part of his assault, deflecting the sword enough to change a decapitating strike into one which merely cut my throat. My blood sprayed on his dark clothing as I fell backwards and fell unconscious.

I was only out a moment or two; and I saw that my opponent had made the same mistake which many of my enemies had before... he turned away, assuming I was dead. Of course, the ring began immediately to heal me.

I hurt, naturally, and I doubted I could speak. I looked up slowly, and saw that he was drawing back his arm to slash at Mara.

My fury was instantaneous, and I silently released a twofold Force Bolt at him. He was lifted from the ground and thrown several yards away, landing heavily on his face. I slowly stood up, and waved at Mara to go into the house, but she was already going that way.

The dark-clothed assailant jumped to his feet in a single move, spinning around and coming at me again. That Force Bolt should have broken his back; suddenly I was worried.

He was very strong, fast, capable of incredible physical feats, and armed with a sword which, in the view of my Mystic Vision, glowed powerfully. I was weak from blood loss

and half-drowned in my own blood, and I couldn't speak. So, I was afraid. Who wouldn't be? I released a Force Wave as he leaped at me again, and it caught him in midair, knocking him back to the hedges.

The swordsman fell from the hedges and landed running. What would it take to stop him? I released a Paralysis spell, but he began to literally shrug it off as I watched. Before he could resume moving toward me, I followed up with a threefold Lightning Bolt, and at last he fell.

That Lightning Bolt had enough power in it to kill a normal man outright, but as I shuffled cautiously toward him I saw that he was still breathing! Incredibly, he had survived two attacks from me which should have been fatal, as well as avoiding injury from the Force Wave and resisting the Paralysis. As I looked closer I perceived a mystic energy glowing just above his skin. Normal protective magic such as I was familiar with would extend several inches from the skin level; this was a magic I was unfamiliar with.

Tentatively I cleared my throat, and found that I could again speak, though hoarsely. I quickly cast a potent Sleep spell on the swordsman, then called painfully to Mara to find me some rope. She was unwilling to approach him, so when she returned I walked up the steps to get it.

"I'm going to interrogate him in the kitchen," I croaked. She didn't look happy about that. I quickly bound his hands behind him and then bound his ankles. I was still far from healed and didn't feel like carrying him, so I ordered two of the Servants to do it. As I had recently gained a healthy respect for traps, I didn't touch his sword either; rather I had another Servant get it. The last Servant had almost no power left, so I dismissed it.

Mara left the kitchen before the Servants came in with the swordsman. As they put him in a chair I sat down across the table from him, and instructed the Servant carrying the sword to approach me.

Now, at that time I knew little about swords, but there are few things made by humans which have such obvious purpose. I believe that a savage from the deepest jungle, who had never seen a weapon other than spear and blowgun, would immediately heft a sword by the obvious handle, perhaps cut himself on the blade, and quickly realize it was made for killing men.

This one was no exception. It was slightly curved, with the leading edge and a few inches of the back side sharpened. The crossguard curved around into a loop on the side where one's index finger would be; I didn't see the purpose of this, and have since found it to be an unusual design.

The strangest thing about the sword didn't hit me right away. It was clean. I took off my bloodsoaked T-shirt and wrung a few drops of blood from it onto the hovering blade. It ran off the blade like mercury. Even the leather-wrapped hilt repelled the blood.

Mara came in then. "Here, Solomoriah, give me that," she said quietly, taking the bloody shirt. She then handed me a damp towel to clean up with, and I thanked her as I removed the blood from my skin. I felt my neck and found the skin nearly healed, as I expected. "Here," she said, taking the towel and handing me a clean white T-shirt. I put it on.

The swordsman stirred a bit, alarming me, since I expected the Sleep spell to keep him out for at least an hour if not two. It seemed that he was dreaming; so I sent the Servant with the sword to the basement to place it in the room under the stair.

I then studied my assailant. He was tan-skinned and dark haired; in fact, he was colored much as I am. He was a shorter man, though, muscular and blocky in form. His features at first I took for Caucasion, perhaps from India, but then I noticed he also resembled a black man enough to pass as one with his skin darkened. His eyes had a hint of the Oriental in their shape. In short, I found his origin difficult to place.

Now, I often hear that one shouldn't discriminate on the basis of race. Realize that I don't, at least so far as to expect certain things of someone based on his color. I learned long ago (very long ago) that such "profiling" is usually an easy way to eliminate potential allies and overlook new enemies. Remember also that I, a nominally "white" man, fell in love with Mara, a "black" woman, literally at first sight.

But here was a fellow whose origin was cloaked. I found myself wondering if somehow it was intentional.

Well, enough time wasted, I thought. I dismissed the Sleep spell, then said loudly, "Wake up, dead man!" It still hurt a bit to speak, but I was determined to show him no weakness.

He stirred, then sat bolt upright, his eyes open. "What... where?" he said as he looked wildly about. "The sword," he said to me, "what have you done with it?"

"The" sword, I thought, not "my" sword? He seemed less angry with me for taking it than afraid of having lost it. This led to a theory, which I decided to test.

"Who is your master, dead man?"

He straightened up then, seeming to come to his senses. "I have no master."

"He's lying," said Mara, surprising me. I had thought she had gone from the room, but she was evidently standing behind my left shoulder. I tried not to look surprised at this.

"I know," I answered her, turning slightly; then I looked back at him with what I hoped was coldness in my eyes. "What is your name?" I demanded.

"Joseph Green."

"He's lying again," said Mara. I just nodded.

"So, 'Joe,' why did you try to kill me?"

"You're Dreamwalker's apprentice. Do you have to ask? Where is your master, anyway... shouldn't he be gloating over me by now?"

I burst out laughing at that point, which befuddled my "guest" greatly. "Dead man, you are a fool, and so is the master you claim not to serve. I was never Dreamwalker's apprentice. I was his enemy, and I ended his evil life."

"Why do you keep calling me 'dead man,'" he asked. "Do you mean to kill me?"

"You are already dead, so far as I am concerned. You gave up your life when you tried and failed to take mine. I can end you right now if I wish." I sat there a moment, as if thinking, though I already knew what I would do. "Go back to your master and tell him that I will return the sword to him, and only him, when he knocks at my door and asks for it." Then I began casting a spell; Joe began to struggle in his bonds, trying to escape, as I repeated over and over seven times the phrase for power. Usually I couldn't hold concentration for a sevenfold spell, but I was unusually determined this time. He would not resist me.

Finally I released the spell at him... a powerful Compulsion to do just what I had instructed him to do.

I got a sharp knife from the drawer then, and cut the ropes binding him. He immediately got up, pushing by me forcefully, and ran out the door in a blind rush. He leaped over the fence in a single bound and was gone.

"What now?" asked Mara.

I got up and got myself a drink of cold water. "Well, I guess we finish the first terrace. We still have lots of daylight."

"No, about him," she said in a bit of a huff.

"We do what I said. In other words, my love, we wait."

Chapter 4, *Sword and Sorcery*

After supper I went down to the basement, to the smaller room under the stairs, to study the sword I took from "Joe." The Spirit Servant had laid it on the floor, there being no furnishings in that room; so I sat down tailor-style on the floor with the sword in front of me, careful not to touch it.

I cast the long form of Mystic Vision, with the optional parts granting analytical powers included. As I completed the spell, the mystic field suffusing the sword became visible.

Spells of all sorts exist in at least four dimensions of space, so it isn't possible for normal humans to visualize the actual spells "shape" or "structure." The analytical Mystic Vision spell permits the subject to "page" through the spellform, viewing it one section at a time.

I wish I could explain it better, but there seems no way to do so.

I took my time studying the sword, and discovered three distinct enchantments. The first two I had seen before: Sharpness and Durability. The third was unfamiliar, bearing a vague resemblance to my Tap spell. After a while I figured it out... the strange spell was some sort of mystical power storehouse, a "battery" of mystical nature. It seemed obvious after I figured it out, of course. After all, without a means to store a reserve of magical energy, the sword would quickly become useless away from a Ley line.

Magic items of "permanent" nature must recharge themselves between uses. Back when I was an apprentice (about thirteen thousand years ago) magic was so pervasive that charging posed no problem. Now, however, a device such as the magic sword I was studying would quickly discharge its power in the first few strikes and then become no better than if it weren't enchanted.

I was trying to figure out how long the sword could be used in the absence of a Tap or Ley line when Mara called down to me. "Solomoriah, please come here. There's a very strange bird on the back porch carrying a piece of paper." She sounded unnerved.

I took enough time to release a spell of Closing on the door beneath the stairs before I ascended. When I reached the back door, I looked out carefully before opening it. Just as Mara said, a strange white bird with milky, pupil-less eyes was standing on the railing, with a rolled-up piece of paper pinned beneath its feet.

Carefully I approached, and reached out my right hand to take the paper. Suddenly the bird dissolved into a puff of white smoke!

Perhaps I should have been afraid of a trap, but I reached out and grabbed the paper before it could blow away. It was a letter, and it read as follows:

Solomoriah,

My deepest apologies for the attack on you by my apprentice. I assure you, it was done without my approval, for though I have many times expressed my hatred of the Dreamwalker to my students I never authorized any of them to attack him.

For your information, he took my nephew as his apprentice a few years ago. If you killed him, then you must know what he did with his apprentices. Naturally I have intended to take revenge for some time, but that is now unnecessary. I would have liked to do it myself, of course, yet I realize I had no prior claim as he had been killing his apprentices for many years.

As a token of my good will toward you, you may keep the sword. You have earned it much more than the apprentice who carried it.

*Sincerely,
Joseph Green*

"Huh," said Mara, who was reading over my shoulder, "so Joseph Green was his master's name."

"So it seems. Letting me keep that enchanted sword is strange, isn't it?"

"Maybe these people are big believers in honor. Experts in the martial arts often are, aren't they?"

"I wouldn't know," I said, "having been out of action for so long. I have a lot of catching up to do yet."

"What will you do with the sword?" she asked.

"It stays in the basement. I have no particular skill at using it, and it is mainly a killing weapon, unlike staves which are as much about defense and nonlethal attacks as lethal ones." I thought a moment. "Perhaps I need to look into getting a new staff. If I had one hardened by magic I could have used it to defend against sword attacks."

"Would you wander around town carrying it then? How would you have it when you needed it?"

She always has a way of finding the obvious problems before I do. I snorted, and said, "Not such a good idea, then." Mara made a sort of strange face at me, then smiled. I kissed her.

"I have a good idea," she said, and led me upstairs.

Chapter 5, *Valerie and Emily*

I spent Sunday watching television and surfing the Internet. The latter was for purposes of research, and I found some things I wanted to discuss with Mark. I decided not to bring up "work" related subjects until tomorrow, though, as the evening promised to be stressful enough for him anyway.

Mark and Emily arrived late in the afternoon, and we grilled hot dogs and hamburgers and ate them with potato salad (which I found I did not like) and baked beans (which I do like). We made inconsequential conversation, trying to sound happy and carefree before Emily, but the tension in the air felt like a malevolent spirit.

Then we had ice cream and cookies, and the mood did lighten somewhat. We dallied longer than we should have over dessert, but the time at last came for Mark to take Emily to her mother.

We said our goodbyes at the front door. Emily gave me a hug, and as I returned it I silently released the special Kinetic Shield to protect her. Then Emily hugged Mara for an extended period. Eventually Mark convinced her to go, and she walked away crying "I'll miss you Mara" over and over. It broke my heart, as I know it did Mara's.

Well, it was time. I stepped back out of sight of the door, and released one of my Invisibility spells. As quietly as I could I went down the sidewalk. Mark was putting Emily in her carseat in the back of his two-door car, by way of the passenger-side door. As I approached he said "Emily, I left my keys in the house. I'll be right back." He left the door open as he went back, and I slipped into the seat as quietly as I could.

It was a tense and silent ride to Valerie's house. Emily wasn't crying but she was red-eyed and very looked very sad. Mark's jaw muscles worked rhythmically as he tried not to look toward me.

Mark opened the passenger side door for me and I slipped out of the seat as quickly as I could. I brushed past him as I went; he was looking toward the house, as if stopped by a sound. It takes a lot of subterfuge to transport an invisible man.

He turned and got Emily out as the front door opened. Valerie was beautiful, as Mark had said, but the look on her face was unreadable. Mark walked up to the house hand-in-hand with Emily, who just looked at the ground the whole way. Valerie ignored her ex-husband and squatted down to Emily's level. "How's my little girl?" she cooed, and at that moment she appeared the perfect loving mother. Emily smiled a tentative smile, and Valerie took her other hand.

Mark said, "Here's her bag. I did all her laundry, so it's all clean." Valerie took the bag without a word and turned back to the open door of the house.

Curse me for a novice! I had to really move to beat her through the open door, but I made it. Valerie noticed the wind of my passage and looked around, then evidently dismissed it from her mind.

"How was your weekend, honey?" she asked Emily as she closed the door. "What did you and Daddy do?"

"It was good, Mommy. We went to the zoo and saw the ephalants and ostriches and really big snakes like the man on TV has!" Emily had a big grin and evidently was no longer afraid; I relaxed a bit and moved quietly into an out-of-the-way corner.

"You wouldn't play with snakes, would you honey?" asked Valerie.

"No, Mommy, 'cause they might bite me." The little girl turned on the television, which was already on a cartoon channel, and sat down on the floor to watch. Valerie took the bag of clothes up the stairs and out of sight, so I settled down on the floor and waited.

After a while a commercial break came on the television, and Emily jumped up and went to the table at the end of the couch. It had a drawer, and from it she got a small paper bag, much wrinkled, and a handful of coloring books. She took the items back with her to the middle of the floor, dropped the books, and then dumped crayons out of the bag. Finally she sat down and began to color.

Valerie returned shortly, and immediately began yelling at Emily. "How many times do I have to tell you not to dump those crayons out on the floor? Take them out one at a time! And look, you left the drawer open! Are you as stupid as your father?"

"Sorry, Mommy, sorry sorry sorry" Emily said as she quickly began scooping crayons back into the bag. "I'll clean up the mess, Mommy, I promise."

"You better. I'll be right back and I better not see any mess, you understand?" I wanted to jump up and help Emily, but I forced myself to relax; I was here to protect Emily, first and foremost, and to observe Valerie. Emily wasn't in physical danger yet.

It was hard not to jump between them.

Valerie left the room as her daughter worked furiously to pick up all the crayons. She then put away the coloring books and the paper bag, shut the drawer, and jumped up on the couch, where she sat, legs straight out and hands on her knees, and watched the television with a serious but worried expression. She had just begun to relax when her mother returned.

Valerie came in smiling, and said "It looks much better in here, honey..." Then she obviously saw something in front of the coffee table. From my vantage I couldn't see it, but I realized Emily must have missed a crayon when Valerie's face turned to a fearsome angry grimace. Without another word she walked quickly to the couch,

grabbed Emily by the arm and began to spank her hard. As the little girl began to cry Valerie screamed, "You don't pay a bit of attention! You must be stupid! I knew when Mark started seeing you again you'd get this way!" She continued screaming like this, her face a mask of rage, as she struck Emily over and over.

A mage can usually sense the condition of his spells when he is close to them, and in this case I could sense the Kinetic Shield. Just as I had planned, only a tiny part of Valerie's strike force was getting through to Emily; enough to sting, and make her cry, but not enough to bruise her. Valerie began to sense that she wasn't hurting Emily as much as she expected, and this increased her rage. Her screaming became incoherent as she increased the speed and force of her blows. The Kinetic Shield continued to hold, and would for a long time yet.

Yes, it was hard for me not to intervene at this point, but I knew that Emily was not really being hurt and I needed to know more about Valerie's mental condition. I often wonder if I should have stepped in sooner, though.

Valerie's rage was truly awesome now, and she gave up hitting the girl. Instead, she took her by both shoulders and began to shake her.

The Kinetic Shield was no help against that. I stood, made a mystic pass with my hand and spoke a word, and both mother and daughter fell like marionettes with their strings cut. Valerie had been squatting, and fell backwards, hitting her head on the carpeted floor, but I judged she was probably not hurt. I stepped forward and caught Emily as she fell.

They were asleep, of course. I didn't want either of them to know what had happened to them. It was fortunate that the spell worked because I broke my fragile Invisibility spell when I cast it. I laid Emily on the couch, then sat beside her to rest.

My heart was racing and I was drenched in sweat; you'd have thought I had run a race. The scene I had just witnessed had really affected me. I wanted to hurt Valerie, to repay her for what she'd done. I sat there looking at her as she slept. She was moving in her sleep...

That wasn't normal. She seemed to be dreaming, but those affected by the Sleep spell normally didn't dream. At least, I'd never seen it. My interest was piqued... how was this happening?

Then I remembered my new spells. I got up and took Emily upstairs. Though I hadn't been there before, it wasn't hard to identify the little girls room. I laid her on the bed and covered her with a quilt I found folded there.

Back down in the living room, I found Valerie still writhing, her lips moving silently. I probed the Sleep spell with my mind and found it still at full strength.

I looked out the window, releasing my Mystic Vision spell to find the Ley lines. The only line I could see wasn't close, but I had prepared a Tap spell at fairly high power for such a contingency. I released the Tap, then turned to the sleeping woman and began casting the Dream Contact spell.

I hadn't used it before, but I had been the victim twice. I knew that the caster could force the target to remain asleep, and control the images the target saw. When the spell was complete I found myself looking into a diner.

It was night, evidently, and the only people in the brightly lit diner were Valerie and... Valerie? There were two, sitting together at a table, having a conversation. One was spectral in form, the other solid; the spectral Valerie seemed angry, while the solid one looked sad.

The spectre said, "He's a cheating fool! I can't believe you still love him!"

"I do," said the sad one. "Why was he so bad to me?"

"It's in the genes, you stupid bitch. Just look at Emily, she's just as bad!"

Tears ran down the face of the solid Valerie. "I love my little girl," she said weakly. "I hate having to hurt her."

"It's the only thing the silly twit understands!" Suddenly the spectre looked around. "We're being watched!"

How did she know that? I hadn't manifested myself yet, or taken any active part. I was just watching.

"There!" she screamed, pointing right at me. I looked down and saw my body; she had somehow manifested me herself. "It's that new boss of our idiot ex-husband! What's his name?"

"Solo," answered the solid one. "Solo Jones." She sounded... hopeful?

The spectre grabbed the solid woman then, and in a mind-twisting motion they merged. Valerie (the only one there was now) jumped up and pointed a finger at me. "What are you doing here?"

"Trying to understand you, Valerie. You have a problem."

"Bull. You're spying on me!" She reached behind her and pulled out a large handgun. Before I could react she fired it at me, twice. The searing pain felt very real.

I severed the connection, awakening from my trance with a start. I was more sweaty and more exhausted than before, and I felt a phantom pain in my chest. Valerie was still

asleep, but as I watched I saw a self-satisfied smile appear on her face. Then she quieted at last.

What just happened?

I realized I hadn't closed the Tap. Stupid of me; someone using Mystic Vision could trace me by it. I quickly prepared another Tap spell, then an Aura Reading spell, and finally dismissed the Tap.

Unlike the Dream Contact spell, I had actually cast the Aura Reading a couple of times, right after I mastered it. I was able to see Mark's bright aura, which seemed to me to be a bit turquoise, and Mara's was blinding bluish-white. I couldn't see much of my own aura, and I discovered it didn't reflect in a mirror, so I asked Mara to help. I gifted her with the same spell, then cast Mind Reading on myself so I could look through her eyes.

At last I was able to see the taint on my aura which priests and priestesses had been telling me about since I fled from Ket. I could see the dark streaks, like shadows, over my potent greenish aura. I wasn't surprised that my aura was powerful, as any mage will build up his aura day by day just by working magic. The taint, though... I wondered then if it would ever be erased.

I broke from my mental wandering presently, and released the Aura Reading spell. At first nothing seemed strange; Valerie, I saw, had an aura about as powerful as Mark's, though hers seemed to have a peachy cast to it.

Then I saw it... atop her head, just right of center, a roiling darkness like smoke. I walked around her to get a better look, and saw that the darkness emanated from an irregular patch perhaps three inches front to back and two inches wide. It made my blood run cold to look at it.

What was it? What could make such a mark in a specific part of a person's aura? As I thought it over I began to realize it must be a tumor or abscess of some kind, just inside the skull.

With this realization my anger and near hatred toward Valerie faded like fog in the morning sun. She was, truly, a victim here. The pressure of the thing in her head upon her brain obviously was responsible for her erratic actions.

My next thought was, of course, of my ring. Though it worried me to do so, I cast another Tap, and quickly prepared its replacement. Then I took off the ring, knelt beside her, and lifted her right arm. As I did so I saw that she had several bruises on the inside of her forearm, and I realized then just how hard she had been hitting Emily. I slipped the ring on her finger and waited, watching with the Aura Reading spell.

The ring seemed to have no effect on the dark spot, but as I watched the bruises faded quickly. I let the ring have several minutes before I gave up and dismissed the Tap. If it

had been healing her I would have been able to see some change right away, even if the healing would actually take hours to complete.

This left me with no plan of action, so after a short time I got up, found the phone and called Mark. It wasn't the first time I'd used a telephone... it was the second. Her phone was cordless like the one that Mark had purchased for the office, and it worked much the same way, so with little difficulty I got connected with my friend.

"Hello?"

"It's me," I said, trusting that he would recognize my voice. "I need your help. Valerie is very sick, but I doubt we can convince her to see a healer."

"Doctor," he corrected automatically. "Where is she now?"

"Asleep on the floor. Emily's asleep upstairs. They won't wake up for a while."

There was a pause, then: "I'll be right there. Don't go anywhere, and don't touch anything. Let me in when I ring the bell, though."

"Okay," I answered, and there was a click, so I turned off the phone and hung it up. Did he have a plan? I hoped so, because I didn't.

Chapter 6, *Mark's Plan*

Mark arrived quite soon, and I let him in. He looked down at his sleeping ex-wife.

"What's wrong with her?"

"Cancer, I assume. I can see it in her aura. I tried the ring, but it was of no help."

"Can you show me?" he asked. I thought about it. I didn't want to use the Tap again, and draw unwanted attention. The Aura Reading I had already cast was still in effect, though, so as I had done before I adapted a prepared Mind Reading spell and gifted Mark with it.

"See through my eyes," I told him, and I concentrated on viewing Valerie's aura. Mark closed his eyes to concentrate. I walked around to get a better view, making Mark sway from the changing perspective. "Watch out," I said, but he had already regained his balance.

We both took a good look at the smoky place in her aura. I noticed then that the roiling grayness did not mix with her bright peachy aura, nor even shade into it, but remained apart like oil on water. I turned to look at Mark, and realized he was looking at his own aura through my eyes. After a moment he opened his eyes.

"Where's Emily?"

"Upstairs. I placed them both under a Sleep spell."

"Tell me about this spell. How long will Valerie be asleep?"

"About five or six hours," I said, struggling slightly in my mind with the modern concept of time. Nothing else in this age has given me so much trouble.

"Can she be awakened?"

"Certainly, at any time... oh, no, sorry, you mean can anyone else wake her? No, only me, or a mage using a counterspell. Otherwise she'll lay comatose for the full duration."

"Good. Now, what about Emily? Can you wake her without waking Valerie?"

"Yes."

"Excellent. Have you touched anything here?"

"The phone," I answered, "and a quilt upstairs, and I guess I must have turned off the television. I don't remember doing it, but it's off now."

"Okay. Here's my plan, then. I'm going to call 911 and tell them that Valerie called me to come here, and when I arrived I found her unconscious. You keep her asleep at all

costs, so that they will think she collapsed. The ring would have healed any bruises from falling, right?"

"Yes. I saw some bruises heal."

"Good, that'll remove any suspicions of foul play. You'll need to be invisible; I want to be the only person they see or talk to, and the only person whose presence I have to explain."

"I see," I said. "This will get her taken to a hospital then?"

"Exactly. Then I'll make arrangements for Emily."

"Can't you just take her? Her mother is obviously incompetent to care for her."

"Yeah, but Solo, you have no idea what a can of worms that would open." Mark paused for a moment, reviewing his plan I assumed, then continued. "You need to go with the ambulance, or follow it, or somehow get to the hospital with Valerie. You need to let her wake up only after she has been examined by a doctor, because they need to be convinced something is wrong with her. They'll have to run tests to figure out what it is, and then hopefully they'll find what's really wrong with her."

"I can do that. I'll take care of Valerie, and you deal with Emily and your story." He picked up the phone and wiped it all over with his T-shirt tail. Before he could dial it I asked, "Are you seriously worried about a police investigation?"

"If she can find a reason Valerie would turn me in, so, yes, I'm worried." He hyperventilated for a moment, then dialed the phone. "Hello? Yes, I'm at... yes, that's the address. My ex-wife called me and asked for help, then the line went dead, so I came as fast as I could and found her unconscious. Please send an ambulance right away!" After listening for a moment he continued, "She's on the living room floor, and she seems to be sleeping, but I can't wake her at all. No, there aren't any drugs here, or alcohol, as far as I can see. Our daughter is upstairs sleeping in her bed. No, I didn't try to wake her... should I? Okay, I'll wait right here for the ambulance."

His performance was impressive. He sounded flustered and scared. Next he dialed another, longer number. "Hello, Laura. I'm glad I got you. Yeah, this is Mark. Listen! Valerie called me and said 'help me' and I came to her house and found her on the floor unconscious with the phone laying beside her. I called 911 and they are sending an ambulance, and I'm supposed to stay here. Emily is asleep, but she's okay I think. Can you guys come and get her? Great! I'll be here." He then hung up the phone.

"Okay, Solo, I'm going to check on Emily. You make with the fadeout and kind of stay back, okay?" I nodded, then spoke a word and disappeared.

Mark was upstairs for longer than I expected, but he came back just as I heard the sirens approaching. He opened the door for the paramedics. There were two of them, carrying cases of equipment, and as one knelt beside Valerie the other said "Where's the girl?"

"Up those stairs," answered Mark, pointing, "and to the right." I followed the paramedic, and discovered why Mark had been so long. He had dressed Emily in pajamas and placed her under the covers, with a stuffed animal under her arm. I dismissed the Sleep spell on her as the paramedic began to examine her, and she awakened.

"Aaaaah! Who are you?" she cried, and Mark came into the room. I had to dodge quickly to avoid being run down. "Daddy! Who is he?"

"He's a paramedic like on TV, sweetie. He's just making sure you're okay." The paramedic evidently decided she was and descended the stairs; I followed him as Mark sat down on the bed and began trying to explain to Emily about her mother.

Downstairs the other paramedic was discussing her case by radio with their dispatch. "She's comatose but seems stable. We'll put her on a board and bring her in." One went out carrying some of their equipment back to the ambulance while the other remained with Valerie, apparently observing. Shortly the first paramedic returned with a backboard and stretcher, followed closely by an older man and woman. When one paramedic tried to stop them the man said, "I'm her father, and this is her mother. Where's my granddaughter?"

Mark called down from the top of the stairs, "She's up here, Art. Would both of you come here please?" I saw a look of worry on the woman's face; I assumed (correctly) that she was the Laura that Mark had called. Art looked worried, but also angry, and I was torn between following them and going with Valerie.

No. My friend asked me to go with his ex-wife, and I would not fail him. I followed the paramedics out the door, and saw that there would be no way I could ride in the ambulance with them and remain undiscovered. I carefully released my Flight spell, not wanting to break my Invisibility, for it was still daylight for perhaps an hour or so.

At the hospital Valerie was rushed into the emergency room and seen with surprising speed by a doctor. Though young, she seemed competent as she examined Valerie. "I don't understand it," she finally said to one of the nurses, "she should be awake. There is nothing wrong with her otherwise. Is that tox screen back yet?"

"Yes, Doctor," answered another nurse, "and it's clean. Not even any alcohol."

"Well, we'll keep her for observation. Does anyone know her regular physician?"

"According to the info her ex gave John, it's Doctor Harper. I think he's in the hospital tonight... didn't his son just have surgery?"

"Yeah, Friday," said another nurse, "but the boy's okay. It'd probably be alright to call Doctor Harper down here."

They did so, and Doctor Harper was as puzzled as anyone. He instructed that she be admitted and assigned a room, then as she was being taken there he went to the front desk and began scheduling tests.

About this point Mark approached Doctor Harper, and again I had to dodge. "Doc!" said Mark, "How's Valerie?"

"Comatose but stable. I've ordered tests for tomorrow. It's too soon to say, but I am thinking perhaps it's neurological. I don't really know yet."

"What kind of tests?" asked Mark.

"Oh, the usual, blood work, a CT scan; I may do an MRI also." I saw visible relief on Mark's face as he heard this.

"Thanks, Doc." I decided it was time to make an appearance, so I slunk off to the men's room and slipped in after another man went out. The room was empty, so I let the spell go and became visible again.

I met Mark in the hallway and we went to the room assigned to Valerie. Doctor Harper was there; evidently he was fascinated by her case.

As we were about to enter the room, Mark leaned toward me and said, "Hopefully she'll wake up soon." I glanced at him and caught him in a wink, so I took that as a signal and dismissed the Sleep spell.

At first she stirred slightly, and Doctor Harper practically jumped to the head of the bed. "Can you hear me, Valerie?" he asked. Her eyes opened, and for a moment she looked around in surprise.

What I expected to happen, I don't know, but I do know that I was surprised as she threw back the covers and leapt out of bed, screaming obscenities at Mark and then at all present. I decided Paralysis was called for, so I silently formed the word and made the gesture, hoping that all eyes would be on her.

Well, it failed. Casting spells silently requires more concentration than the normal way, and it is possible that I was a bit distracted by the screaming.

Valerie ran from the room, straight to the nurses station, and began screaming something about calling the police. Doctor Harper and Mark followed her, with me trailing. I had another Paralysis spell, so this time I took a moment to concentrate fully, and released it silently.

Valerie fell suddenly, but was caught by an older man I recognized as Art. He must have approached just as I was releasing the spell. Doctor Harper helped Art to carry her back to her bed. Her eyes were open, and she was drooling a little. The doctor examined her eye responses with a light, then said "She appears to be paralyzed, but her autonomous functions are working normally. I think more tests may be required. Valerie, if you can hear me, please try to stay calm. You are very sick, but we are doing all we can for you."

Art took a tissue from a box on the nightstand and wiped away the drool from her face. I could see terrible sadness in his eyes, but then he turned to Mark and his expression changed.

"Get out of here, you idiot! She divorced you for good reason! Why are you hanging around?"

"She called me, Art. I had to come," my friend answered. Mark then turned and walked out the door, and I followed.

"You need a ride home?" he asked when we were away from Art.

"No, I think I need to stay a while. I'll have to dismiss that Paralysis spell; otherwise it will last half a day or longer. I'll make my own way home when I'm ready."

"Okay, then. I guess I'll see you in the morning."

Valerie was calmer when I dismissed the spell. I waited, hovering invisibly outside the window of her room, until it appeared that Doctor Harper was about to leave, then I dismissed it. I wanted someone there for her to talk to when she was released, but on the other hand I wanted her to feel the effects of the Paralysis as long as possible. Even though it wasn't caused by her sickness, she would naturally assume it was, and I wanted her to believe she needed to stay in the hospital.

It was well after midnight when I returned home. I told Mara of all the events of the evening. When I was through she put her arm around me and said, "Why do you sound so sad? You did great! Emily is safe with her grandparents, and Valerie is in the hospital where she needs to be."

"It's just such a foul situation. Art hates Mark for things I'm sure he didn't do, and Valerie has what must be a terrible disease, and Emily has been abused by her sick mother for possibly years."

"You were a statue for most of that time. You couldn't have helped."

I kept repeating that to myself until I fell asleep.

Chapter 7, Staff Meeting

The next morning I awoke fairly late. I looked out the window and saw Mark's car; obviously the late night had not been as hard on him as it had on me. I quickly visited the upstairs bath, then dressed, deciding to go without a shave that day.

I found Mark in the office, randomly surfing the Web with little interest. "Hi, Solo. D'ja sleep okay?"

"Passably. Are you sure you want to be here today?"

"Well, Art made it real clear I'm not wanted at the hospital, and Laura is taking care of Emily at their house; if I wasn't here, I'd be stewing over at my apartment. Might as well have someone to talk to."

I looked around then. "Where's Mara?"

"In the kitchen I think. She hung out here for a while, but when she heard you 'crashing around' upstairs she went to do something in there."

"Did she really say 'crashing around?'" I asked.

Mark grinned, the first real smile I'd seen on him since Saturday. "Yup."

Just then I smelled xocholotl. Mara entered, bearing a steaming mug and a big smile. I carefully took it from her and kissed her on the cheek. "You aren't getting off that easy," she said, and kissed me rather deeply.

Mark cleared his throat, loudly. "Hey, it's your house, guys, but please don't spill any hot beverages on the help!"

Mara took a step away, and stuck her tongue out at Mark. I suppose I smiled, absently, as I took a careful sip of the hot drink. "Mara!" I exclaimed, "where did you get this? It tastes as good as the best I ever had in Ta Charka!"

"Wait," she said. She went into the kitchen and returned with a small, fancy looking box. I read the label: "Authentic Criollo Chocolate from Venezuela."

"It's the original, native cacao, according to what I read on several websites," she said. "Evidently it's good?"

I was too busy sipping to answer, so I nodded carefully. "Mmm." It was hard not to just "knock it back" as Mark would say.

Mara kissed me on the cheek and took the empty cup. "Oh, no," I said, "you're not getting off that easy." I grabbed her and kissed her enthusiastically.

Mark started to say something, but I took a break to say "Hey, no hot beverages here." Then Mara pulled away, smiling, and went back toward the kitchen.

I sat down in one of the office chairs and looked at my friend. I was happy to see him smiling. "I have a project for us, Mark."

"What is it?" he asked, trying to look serious.

"I was attacked and nearly killed Saturday afternoon." His jaw dropped. I know it sounds cliché, but that's what it did. I proceeded to tell him about the battle with the swordsman who called himself Joseph Green, and showed him the strange note from that man's master, who also called himself Joseph Green.

This led to a trip to the basement, where for the first time I lifted the sword by its grip. Mark took it from me carefully and examined it.

"I'm no expert, but I'd say this is an unusual sword. I've never seen a finger-loop like this before."

"Have you seen many swords?" I asked.

He grinned. "No, but I did play Dungeons and Dragons for several years in college." Well, I had to ask, and he explained it to me.

"I would very much like to look at those rulebooks sometime," I said.

"I'll try to dig them up." Mark handed the sword back to me, and I placed it across the remaining shelf brackets left from Dreamwalker's "array" of zombie heads.

We went back up to the office. "So what do you want to do, Solo?"

"Well, I know nothing of the sword. I suppose I could learn to use it, but I'd much rather have a staff. Mara pointed out to me that a staff would be rather hard to conceal, but I couldn't put it out of my mind. Look here," I said, grabbing the mouse and double-clicking a shortcut. The web browser came up and showed a page where a collapsible baton was listed for sale.

"Okay, I see the point, it's concealable, but it's only twenty-one inches long. Won't make a very good quarterstaff."

I grabbed a piece of paper from the printer, found a mechanical pencil and began to sketch. I consulted a ruler for correct modern measurements (well, not metric, but it's all modern to me). When I got done I saw that Mark was nodding.

"I see now. Fourteen inches long collapsed, thirty-two extended, and you are putting the fat ends of two of these together. Metal, I presume?"

"That's one of the places I need your help, Mark. My father was a woodworker; he made all my staves. I'm not familiar with metalworking, though."

"I see two other problems, Solo. First is getting a spring with enough extension to push this out straight. Second is the mechanism to connect two of them together."

"Magic, my friend." I saw Mark smile then, an in-joke kind of smile. Then I saw him look over my shoulder, and I turned to find Mara there, with a tray of three cups.

"I brought you another, and one for Mark to try, and one for me." This made me happy; Mara hadn't cared a bit for the xocholotl I had been preparing. Frankly it wasn't very good.

"So you haven't given up on the staff idea, my love?" asked Mara.

I took a long sip. "No. I need more than this," I said, holding up the ring on my left hand, "to protect myself. I've depended on it for too many second chances already."

After a while our conversation wandered to the terracing of the back yard; Mark wasn't paying attention, as he was busy surfing the web for information.

I was glad he had something else to think about.

"Mara," I said after a while, "I need to do some work of my own. There are several enchantments to be placed in this staff, and I'd like to be ready when Mark gets the materials together."

She kissed me quickly, and said, "I'll just nip off to the kitchen and make like a good little woman." I was about to protest being characterized as a male chauvanist when I realized there was no rancor in her voice. So I slapped her (gently) on the behind as she passed, and she stuck her tongue out at me.

I spent the rest of the morning in the living room surrounded by papers. I hadn't mentioned to my friends that, first of all, I had never enchanted an item before, and second, I didn't know all the spells I planned to use anyway. So I worked as quickly as I was able, roughing out the procedures based on half-remembered theory I learned from Ket, and attempting to replicate some of the spells I had "seen" in the sword.

At noon Mara announced, "Lunch is ready! Come and get it!" Mark looked uncertain as I passed him in the office; he had acted uncomfortable eating with "the boss" ever since I had hired him.

"Come on, Mark! Didn't you hear her?" He smiled and jumped to join us.

Lunch, it turned out, was pork chops, fried potatoes, corn, and some other vegetable which I have forgotten. It was all good. Between bites, Mark told of his successes on our project.

"I think I've found a supplier right here in the Bay Area," he said. "They specialize in steel and aluminum tubing, in a variety of sizes, and they seem real proud that they can fill orders for odd sizes."

"Sounds good. Are we going there?" I asked.

"I was about to call their sales department when Mara called." He took a drink, then said "The only problem I can see is that they want to fill bulk orders only. I think I can work around that though."

After lunch I helped Mara clear away the dishes. I planned to help her wash them (an act I had found could make up for many sins) but she shooed me into the office. "You're only interested in your project!" she said in mock scorn. "You wouldn't get anything clean!"

Mark was on the phone already, and made a disgusted face at Mara for being so noisy. She responded with another display of her tongue and left.

"So, yeah, Bob, we're planning to one-up our competition on this if it works like the engineering department says. If it does work, we'll need regular supplies of tubing." He was silent for a moment, then began to write down numbers. "Sounds perfect! Can I get any samples of that stuff for our chief engineer to look at? If we can build a prototype to show the big guy, well, that'd make the deal."

A bit more listening, then Mark said "Great! I'll be over with our chief engineer, Jake Smith, in about an hour!" He hung up, then began pumping his arm in the air and laughing.

"So tell me already," I said.

"Okay, these guys made extensible antennas for a broadcast hardware company that went bust recently. They have a lot of excess inventory of tubing made just for them... let's see," he said, looking at his notes, "twenty-eight millimeter O.D. tubing, with two millimeter walls, that'd leave twenty-four millimeters I.D., then twenty-four millimeter O.D. tubing with one-half millimeter walls, then twenty-three millimeter tubing with two millimeter walls, that's down to nineteen millimeter I.D., then back to the one-half millimeter wall stuff, then eighteen millimeter O.D. for the last section."

Well, I kept up, anyway. The thinwall tubing was for the "stops" inside the thicker structural tubing. This meant that the thickest section would be twenty-eight millimeters in diameter (about one and a tenth inches) with the thinnest part at the tips about seven-tenths of an inch diameter. Each section of thick tubing would be twelve inches long, but

an overlap of one and a half inches per extension would result in only ten and a half inches of each extension protruding; a total of thirty-three inches per half, or sixty-six for the whole staff. A bit shorter than the staves I had learned with, but entirely acceptable. At full retraction, each half would only be thirteen and a half inches long.

I hope you followed that. The results were pretty much as we planned, at least to this point. Of course this all meant that I needed to get back to working on the enchantments.

"I assume this Jake Smith is me," I said, and Mark nodded.

"Don't worry, I'll do all the talking."

I didn't have much time to work on the enchantments before Mark told me it was time to go. We took his car, of course, and this led me to a question I'd been wanting to ask him.

"Hey, Mark..."

"Yeah?"

"Do you think you could teach me to drive a car?" I asked.

"Sure. It's no big deal." As we drove he explained to me at length about the operation of the car and the rules of the road. In theory it all seemed easy enough, but still I was a bit worried. I'd already seen what a mess a car accident could be (just turn on the television and watch the news). I didn't want that to be me; even if the ring put me back together the car would still be wrecked, after all.

We arrived just a bit early, which didn't seem to bother Bob, the sales manager. "Mark Wells, I presume? Glad to meet you! You must be Jake Smith! I think you'll be very pleased with what we have to offer!"

He really did speak like that, continuously and with almost-audible exclamation marks at the end of each sentence. We hardly had time to get a "hello" in edgewise, and his handshake grip was impressive. We followed him inside.

The factory was small by modern standards but it seemed quite huge to me. I reminded myself that I was supposed to be an engineer, and probably wouldn't be craning my neck in amazement here.

"Here are the items I was telling you about!" said Bob presently. Several racks of tubing in a variety of sizes were arrayed before us. I made a show of inspecting the tubing sizes Mark had asked about as he negotiated for the samples we wanted.

I won't bore you with sales-speak; I'll just say that Mark got me a very good deal on about five times as much tubing as we needed. He signed his name to an invoice, which surprised me... didn't they want to be paid right away? The tubing was too long for the car, but fortunately it was a convertible. I rode in the cramped back seat holding on to the tubing as we went back to the house.

Back at the house, I noticed an expensive-looking black car parked out in front. Mark said, "You better go see who it is. I'll unload this stuff; you want it in the basement?"

"Yes, thanks." I walked quickly to the front door.

Chapter 8, *A Client At Last!*

Inside the house I found Mara in the parlor, talking with a woman who was facing away from me. The parlor, by the way, is to the right of the entry hall, while the living room is to the left. I was glad they weren't in the living room, as I hadn't picked up my papers before leaving.

Mara looked up at me and smiled, and I said "Hello." The woman turned toward me. I was surprised, to say the least, to see that it was Natomi Osaka, the mage whose turf I had invaded at 50 Fremont Center.

"Hello, Solomoriah," she said, standing up and reaching out to shake my hand. "I hope this time we get off to a better start than last."

"As do I," I said, returning her handshake. "What can I do for you?"

"I'd like to hire you. Your website says that you are a 'supernatural investigator,' but I'm hoping you'll take on a rather more mundane investigation for me."

"I told her that you probably would," said Mara.

"Then I probably will," I said. "Come, let's sit and discuss your problem."

Now seated, Natomi began her story.

"My younger sister, Miyuki, married an American man named Walter Burke while he was stationed in Japan over twenty years ago. When he was sent home, naturally she went with him. They now live here in San Francisco. That is why I chose this assignment over several others offered to me; I wanted to be near my sister.

"They have two children, Daniel and Kimberly. It's on her behalf that I have come. You see, she was raped just over a month ago, in her own bedroom. Two men entered her second-floor room sometime after midnight, by way of the window. Her parents were both in the house and neither one knew what was happening."

"Did she tell them right away?" asked Mara.

"As soon as the rapists left. The police questioned everyone. They did find evidence of a ladder being used, but that's about the only clue they have. They took her to the hospital and collected the 'rape kit,' but I have learned that there may be no usable DNA in it."

"The rapists must have used condoms," said Mara.

"I don't think so. The doctor who collected the evidence was sure they had a good sample of semen, but there appeared to be no sperm in it."

"Shooting blanks," said Mark as he entered the room. I introduced him to Natomi.

"You will be discreet, I hope," she said, looking straight at me.

"You can rely on that, Natomi," I answered. "I'm not sure I can do better than the police, though."

"I think you can. They aren't making any progress, and there are elements of the case which seem strange to me. I would investigate myself, as my honor demands, but my position at the Consulate doesn't allow it. So I want you to investigate."

"There are more strange elements to this case?" I asked.

"Yes," she answered, "but I don't want to tell you my opinions. I want you to form your own."

I sat back in my chair and considered her words. "We'll need to talk to Kimberly, and her family."

"Daniel is in college at UCLA. He wasn't home the night of the rape."

"Well, he shouldn't have any useful information then."

"I have told Miyuki I am hiring you," she said. "They will expect you tomorrow afternoon, if that's convenient?"

"I see no reason why not," I said. My mission at the support group meeting was planned for later that night; I expected no conflict. Natomi took out a business card and wrote an address on the back. She held it out to me, but Mark said, "I'll be the one driving, ma'am, so I better have that."

"Now, about your payment," Natomi began. Mark again stepped in, quoting her our planned rate (which we had not yet had the opportunity to charge anyone), and she agreed to it. She stood again, and I held out my hand for her to shake again. Her hand was soft but her grip was strong and steady. "My phone number is on the business card," she said. "If you need my assistance for any reason, call me."

Mara followed her to the door, exchanging goodbyes, as Mark and I adjourned to the office. Again he made that arm-pumping gesture. "We got a client, Solo! We got one!"

"Indeed. Perhaps a new ally, also." Just then the phone rang, and I picked it up. "Solo Jones Investigations, how can I help you?"

"Hello, is Mark there?" The voice seemed familiar. I said that he was, and handed the phone to him.

"Laura? What's happened?" he said. As I watched his face fell. I decided to leave him be, and went out to the back porch. Mara joined me there, and we sat on the porch swing in silence; there seemed to be nothing to say.

Some time later Mark joined us there, leaning against the porch rail. "That was Laura," he said.

"Yes, I got that much. I thought you probably wanted your privacy."

"Solo, Mara... you guys are family, as much as anyone I'm actually related to. My Mom and stepdad live in Kansas, you know, and they never understood why I came here." He grinned a rueful grin. "Robert thinks everyone in this town is gay."

"That's a common mistake east of the Rockies," said Mara.

"Yeah... anyway, Laura told me that things aren't looking so good for Val. Doc Harper ordered a CT scan and an MRI both, and Laura and Art got to see them. She said that the cancer has spread from the top of her right hemisphere all over her brain like vines; most of it is inoperable. The Doc wants to start radical chemo right away, but he has to wait for some test result first. Laura wasn't clear about it, but I remember reading that some cancers don't respond to chemo, so all that happens is the patient gets sicker and the cancer gets bigger."

Mark finally seemed to have run out of words, and I didn't have any either. Mara got up and put her arms around him and held him as he struggled not to cry. Valerie was obviously still very important to him.

"I'm okay," he said at length, gently pushing away from Mara. She rejoined me on the swing. "Anyway, Laura also told me that Valerie had several 'tantrums' today, and then just before she called me Val had a seizure of some kind. Doc Harper is trying low-dose tranquilizers to help her control herself."

We all sat in silence for a while, then Mark began walking toward the door. "Mark, my friend, you don't have to stay if you don't want to."

"Thanks, Solo. I'm thinking about taking a drive to clear my head."

"If you make it back in time, you can join us for supper," offered Mara.

"Man, Mara, you are too good to me. I doubt I'll make it back for supper. Oh, Solo, about your project... I'll need to pick up some tools tomorrow on my way in, so I'll probably be late."

"The way I've been sleeping in, I'd probably never notice," I said. "Good fortune in your wandering."

"Thanks, both of you." With that he left.

At supper that night, I asked Mara "What is chemo?"

"Chemotherapy. It's poison, love. They drip poison into your veins slowly, in the hope that the cancer will die before you get too weak. It doesn't always work and it makes the patient very sick."

"That doesn't sound like a very good treatment."

"It's not. But it's often the only thing that works at all."

Well, there wasn't much else I could do about it, so I helped Mara clean up the dishes and then I resumed working on my project. The enchantments were coming together nicely on paper... I hoped they would work as well in real life.

Chapter 9, *The Interview*

I was already in the office, flipping through one of Mark's science magazines, when he arrived at work the next day. He walked in and tossed me a booklet. "That's the guide for getting your driving permit," he said. "Picked it up on the way in. I've got a carload of tools and stuff; can you give me a hand?"

He wasn't kidding. I summoned a Spirit Servant to help with the load. I saw a drill, a cordless rotary tool, a variety of bits for both of them, numerous hand tools, and an assortment of screws and fasteners. The last item was the largest: a metal-frame workbench, disassembled and packed in a large box. I let the Servant have that one and took an armload of smaller items.

"You want this in the basement?" asked Mark.

"I guess so. Against the wall where we removed the shackles would probably be best."

We spent the morning assembling the workbench. It was surprisingly flimsy feeling; when I commented on it, Mark said "It's a promo. It was cheap, though. I think it'll be alright after we attach it to the wall." We did, in fact, attach it to the stone wall with screws and anchors, and it seemed serviceable after that.

We arranged the hand tools on the pegboard provided, and packed the power tools and sundry other items on the lower shelf. Mark stood back then, and said "Just what every American homeowner should have... a well stocked workshop."

"Indeed. Am I supposed to grunt now?"

"Nah, that's too cliché'." Mark grinned at his own joke, just as Mara came down the staircase.

"Nice workbench. Are you boys ready for lunch yet?" she asked.

We ate at the kitchen table, as usual. I was a bit nervous, thinking about the job I had to begin that afternoon. "Mara," I said, "I have a favor to ask of you."

"Anything, my love."

"I'd like for you to go along today and talk to Kimberly with me."

"Oh," she said, looking surprised and worried at the same time. "I don't know anything about investigating. Are you sure you need me?"

"This young woman has been raped. I think it's likely she would find talking to a woman easier than a man. I'll be there too, of course, but I'd like to remain in the background."

Mara thought for a moment. "I think you're right about her state of mind, but I'm afraid I won't do a good job interrogating her."

"I think 'interviewing' might be a better word," said Mark. "Less of an air of contention."

"Whatever," she said, giving him a dirty look.

"All you need to do is to get her to tell her story in as much detail as possible," I said. "You'll do better than you think."

"Maybe," she said. "How can I turn you down?"

Mark drove, of course. The house was on the side of a steep hill (like so many in San Francisco), one of a row of nearly identical townhouses. As we got out, Mark said "There's a car wash down the street. I'm gonna wash my car, then I'll park down there somewhere and do some reading." He indicated a stack of technology and science magazines in the back seat. "You've got your cell phone, right Mara?"

"Right here," she said, removing it from her purse to display.

"Call me when you are ready to leave. Good luck!"

"Thanks!" I called as he drove off. We climbed the steps to the house. I was about to knock when Mara pushed the doorbell button. Sometimes it's pretty obvious I was raised in the Stone Age.

A well dressed Oriental woman answered the door. The resemblance to Natomi was obvious. "Miyuki Burke, I presume?" I said, holding out my hand. "I'm Solo Jones."

"Mister Jones, yes, we've been expecting you." Her grip was light as she briefly took my hand.

"This is Mara," I said. "She'll be assisting me today."

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Mara," she said. Her accent was faint but always present. Mara shook hands with her, then complimented her on the decor of her home as we entered.

"Thank you very much. I've done it all myself... with some help from my family. My husband Walter is at work right now, but I'm sure you'll be able to meet him there if you need to."

"At this point, ma'am, I'm most interested in meeting your daughter and seeing her room," I said. Miyuki led us upstairs and knocked at a closed door.

The door opened, and a young woman appeared there. She was dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, the latter bearing the logo of a popular singing group. "Yes?" she said to her mother.

"This is Solo Jones and his assistant Mara. They are the people your aunt hired to investigate your... case."

"Please come in," Kimberly said, opening the door wider. There was only one chair in her bedroom, pushed up to a computer desk; Kimberly sat on the edge of her bed, and I pulled out the chair to face her and indicated to Mara that she should sit there.

Miyuki said, "I'll be downstairs if you need anything." Kimberly's face showed a sudden moment of panic as the door closed, but then she regained her composure by force of will.

I sat down on the floor beside the doorway, tailor-style. Kimberly looked at me expectantly, so I began. "We need to know everything you can tell us about what happened. I know it's hard to talk about, and I know you've been made to tell it already several times, but we won't be able to help you without good information."

"I understand," she said, with surprising calmness.

I was about to speak, when Mara took over. "It might be easier if I asked you the questions."

"Alright," said the girl, turning to face Mara.

"Do you mind if I record this interview?" Mara asked. Kimberly shook her head, and Mara took a small tape recorder from her purse. I hadn't thought of taping her, but of course it was the most logical way to do it.

Mara started the recorder, then placed it on the bed near Kimberly. "Now," she said, "tell me what happened that night."

"I was in bed, asleep. We all were. I woke up suddenly, struggling, but I didn't know why at first. Then I figured out my hands were tied to the headboard. There was tape over my mouth, and someone was holding me down while someone else pulled my panties down."

She paused then, tears running down her face. "It's okay," said Mara, "take your time. We need to hear it all, but we don't have to hear it all at once."

Once again Kimberly regained her composure. "I tried to kick but then both of them were holding my legs. They were just too strong. I could see them by the light of my computer." I noticed that her computer had a screensaver running, depicting fish in an

aquarium. "I leave it running all the time; it's like having my own fishtank but I don't have to feed them." She smiled a weak smile as another tear ran down her face.

"What did they look like?" asked Mara.

"I don't know. They were both, like, five-eight, five-ten, something like that, about the same size. They were strong, like athletes, and young I guess. They both had on sweatshirts and sweatpants, sneakers, cloth gloves, and leather masks."

"Leather masks?" prompted Mara.

"Yeah, like those ones the kinky sex shops sell. Slits for eyes and mouth, but nothing else shows. So I don't know what their faces look like."

"So, then they raped you," said Mara.

"Not exactly. One of them raped me. He pulled his sweatpants down just enough, and he did it. The other one helped, holding my legs out of his way."

"The other one didn't rape you?"

"No." She hung her head and cried a bit more, and we waited patiently. "Just the one. He did it, and then he pulled up his pants and they both went out the window. It took me a while to get the tape off my mouth, and I screamed, and Mom and Dad came and untied me and called the police."

Natomi was right, there were strange elements to this case. I decided to step in at this point. "So neither one of them spoke? To you or to each other?" She jumped a bit at the sound of my voice.

"No," she said. "I guess they must have planned it completely. They didn't even use hand signals, at least after I was awake."

"I'm sorry to get this personal, but... did either of them... fondle you, or take advantage of you any other way?"

"No," she said, shaking her head.

"There's something you are hiding, Kimberly," said Mara. "What aren't you telling us?"

Kimberly burst out crying for all she was worth. Mara went to her, sat down beside her, and hugged her close. "There, there," she said, "you know you need to tell us. Hiding it is killing you, isn't it?"

"Yes," she sobbed. "I'll tell you." She hugged Mara, hiding her face. "My brother is the one who held me down."

Well, I was shocked. Mara didn't seem as surprised as I was. "How did you know?" she asked.

"His face was hidden, he never said a word, but I heard him breathe, and I smelled him. It was him, I know it was! But I can't prove it, and it would kill my Mom and Dad if they knew."

That, to me at least, explained why the second man didn't rape her. Her own brother might well not be attracted to her.

I was wrong, of course, and right too... but it would be a while before I really understood.

Mara said, "Tell me about your brother. His name is Daniel, right?"

"Yeah. He's nineteen now. Back when we were both little I looked up to him. He was always good to me. About the time he started middle school he got kind of... withdrawn, and angry all the time. He started hanging out with a bad crowd.

"Then when he was a junior in high school he told Mom and Dad he was gay. In a way it was a relief. He said he had a boyfriend. Dad didn't like it too well, but Mom convinced him to accept it. She said she didn't want it to drive us apart.

"So anyway, Mom told him to invite his friend over. His name is Joel. He came to dinner a couple of times, and eventually even Dad seemed to like him."

"So Daniel's attitude improved after he announced his sexual orientation?" I said.

"Yeah. He was, like, the brother I remembered from when I was little. Anyway, he and Joel both arranged to go to UCLA together when the time came. They got an apartment off campus, and everything seemed, you know, okay."

"It was a Friday night when you were attacked?" asked Mara.

"Yeah."

"And was your brother supposed to be home?"

"No. He didn't come home that weekend, or at least that's what we were supposed to think. Dad called him right away to tell him what happened so he wouldn't hear about it first on the news, and he answered his apartment phone."

Mara said, "That could be faked. He has a cell phone, right?"

"Digital PCS. I thought of that, too, and his phone is so good you usually can't tell it from his regular phone. He must have been parked, or in a motel or something though, or Dad would have heard road noise." Kimberly seemed almost back to normal emotional

stability at this point, but then she realized what she was talking about and began to cry in earnest again.

As Mara tried to comfort her I thought about the situation. It was no long jump to assume that Joel was the rapist, if in fact Daniel was the one holding her down.

When Kimberly seemed to be calm again, I asked "Where are Daniel and Joel now? Still at UCLA?"

"Joel is visiting his family in North Dakota. They don't know he's gay, so he didn't take Daniel with him. He's spending time with us this week, but he's not in the house right now. It's so hard not to act different around him, but so far I don't think he knows that I know..."

I was thinking of other questions when Mara said, "There's something else, isn't there?"

Kimberly looked at her. "How do you know?"

"You feel like you're holding something inside," answered Mara.

"I'm pregnant."

Wow.

"I shouldn't be pregnant, though," she said. "I'm on the Pill. Mom insisted, even though I told her I plan to wait for the right man. She said she understood how powerful new love was, and that she wanted me to be ready. She even gave me condoms to carry in my purse."

"So were you..." began Mara.

"No, it's just like I told Mom, I'm waiting. The only man who could be the father is the rapist. But even without the Pill I shouldn't be pregnant! They did a D&C at the hospital after they collected the rape kit."

I had to wait until later to get that explained to me; but after Mara explained the procedure I had to agree with Kimberly. She should not be pregnant.

At that moment, though, I filed my questions for later and silently activated my Aura Reading spell. Sure enough, there was a second aura within Kimberly's golden one. The tiny aura, low in her abdomen, was distinctly orange in color, and though small seemed healthy.

Mara looked at me. Kimberly's face was again hidden, so she didn't see me slowly nod at my beloved.

We waited again for Kimberly to regain her composure. Truthfully, I felt like crying for her myself, or screaming in anger at her brother and his lover (for I was sure by then that they were the culprits).

Presently she calmed, or at least quieted, and I asked, "Have you any pictures of Daniel and Joel?"

She got up then, went to her unruly bookshelf, and got down a photo album. Shortly she handed me a picture of the family, with what I later discovered was the Grand Canyon behind them.

Something about the tanned, dark-haired young man was familiar in some strange way. I couldn't put my finger on it...

"I'm sorry, I don't have any of Joel," she said. "You can have that. I'm not sure I'll ever want to look at it again."

"Do you know when will Joel will be back in town?"

"I think Daniel said Friday afternoon."

"Kimberly," said Mara, "can you give me the address and phone number of your brother at UCLA?" She agreed, and Mara made careful note of the information.

I thought for a moment. "Well, Kimberly, we have enough to begin our investigation now," I said, standing up. Mara retrieved her tape recorder and turned it off, then hugged Kimberly again.

"We'll call you as soon as we learn something," Mara said.

"Thanks. I really mean it. You don't know how good it feels just to talk about this with someone." She thought for a moment. "You won't tell anyone without asking me first, will you?"

"We'll be very discreet," answered Mara. "If we can prove it was your brother and his friend, will you be prepared to press charges?"

"I don't know. I think so. He may be my brother, but he can't be allowed to get away with this." She was quiet a moment. "If you can get proof I'll do something with it, I promise."

We went back downstairs. I told Miyuki that I would be in touch soon, as Mara called for our ride home.

As we rode back to the house I asked Mara about the D&C, and she explained it to me. It made me sore just hearing about it.

"So what do you think?" I asked her.

"I think it was Joel," she answered. "Kimberly never said it, but I'm sure she thinks so too."

"Your sensitivity is astounding," I said. "I would never have learned so much by myself."

Mark said, "Did you tape her?"

"Yes," answered Mara. "You can listen for yourself back in the office."

It was late in the afternoon when we got back. I went into the living room and began rearranging my prepared spells, to get ready for my busy evening.

You haven't forgotten the support group, have you?

Chapter 10, *The Support Group*

Mark stayed for supper that evening, then drove me to the medical office building where the support group meetings were held. The building was largely empty, save for the cleaning crew and the psychologist who was hosting the meeting. I was invisible, of course.

I saw from her nametag that she was "Dr. Elizabeth Richmond, Ph.D." She was short, but of medium build, in her forties. Her hair was blond and she had permanent laugh lines; I felt sure she smiled often.

The room was labelled "Multi-Purpose Room." There were six folding chairs arranged in a circle; other chairs and folding tables were folded up against the wall. The room had large windows nearly covering one of the long walls, opposite the door, but I was not worried about discovery as this was a second-story room.

The doctor was arranging her notes, seated in one of the chairs; I took up a position away from the circle, and away from the doorway. Shortly the support group members began to arrive.

The first was an older woman, in her fifties or sixties I guessed, plainly dressed. She was black, of course, as I expected all the group members to be. As she entered the doctor looked up and said, "Kamaria! How are you today?"

"I am well. I'm doing better." She sat down, just as another woman entered. This one was tall, young, and athletic; her face had a darkness to it that had nothing to do with her skin color.

"Hi, Doc." She sat also. Her clothing was casual, worn jeans and a T-shirt with frayed edges and a few torn spots, and sandals. I took her for perhaps eighteen.

"Hi, Japera. Are things going any better for you?" asked the doctor.

"No. I'm trying hard to ignore the talk, like you said, but it ain't easy." Just then two more women walked in together; one was very pregnant.

"Marjani, hey, you are looking good!" said Doctor Richmond.

"Good?" said Japera. "Girl, you look like you gonna pop!" I was pleased to see the tall girl could smile if she wanted to. Marjani made an unladylike snorting noise, and everyone giggled. It was hard not to join in.

The other woman, who was of average size, had very dark skin. She helped Marjani into a chair and sat down beside her.

"So, Raziya, how are you feeling?" the doctor asked.

"Better, Doctor Elizabeth." Her accent was pronounced, but I didn't find her hard to understand. "You have all been so helpful to me. I still don't think my husband approves of these meetings but he no longer complains."

Small talk ensued for perhaps ten minutes; the clock on the wall said they were at least five minutes late starting, unless the small talk counted as a start. I was pondering this when a large woman entered the room and took the last chair with some difficulty.

"Kengi, hey, have you lost weight?"

"Yes, I have, isn't it wonderful? Forty-two pounds since I started treatment!" She must have been heavy indeed then, I thought. "My self-esteem is so much better that I don't desire to eat so much!"

Their conversation became more structured then, as Doctor Richmond took over and began guiding the women through talking about their problems, and their goals, and so forth. I listened for perhaps half an hour; it was enlightening.

Finally I decided it was time. I had already looked through the still-open door into the hallway and concluded the building was empty. All the women were sitting back in their chairs except Japera. I took up a position right behind her, made a slow, careful pass with my hand and formed a word silently, and they all fell instantly asleep.

I had to move quickly to catch Japera. Though not fat, the tall girl was much heavier than I had expected, and I could not convince her limp body to remain in the chair, so I lowered her slowly to the floor. The rapid movement following the spell casting had broken the fragile Invisibility spell, but that shouldn't matter for a while. The Sleep spell I had prepared was powerful enough to keep them all asleep all night.

I turned out the lights, and locked and closed the door. It had a window of frosted glass, so I knew we would not be seen. I was worried about the families of these women coming for them when they were late arriving home, but that was a problem I could not control.

I released a Mystic Vision spell, stepped to the window and Tapped the nearby Ley line. Before starting the healing process I replaced the Tap spell and prepared another Sleep, not the powerful blanket version but an easier single-target one.

Marjani, the pregnant woman, would be first, I had decided. I put my Ring of Regeneration on her finger and "tied" the Tap to it. I began watching the clock then, in the uncertain light from the parking lot outside, and had passed fifteen minutes that way when suddenly I had an idea. I released an Aura Reading spell, which I had replaced almost as an afterthought earlier.

Sure enough, the scars hidden under their clothing were visible as distortions in their auras. I found I could see the healing progressing, and I was able to remove the ring

and move on to Japera in just about forty minutes total. At this rate I would get done much earlier than I expected.

I progressed in this fashion to Kengi, then to Raziya. I was watching her scars healing, by means of her aura of course, when I realized she was looking at me!

"Who are you?" she said uncertainly. "What am I..."

I didn't let her finish before I spoke the word and activated the Sleep spell. In the poor lighting I wasn't sure how well she had seen me; this could be trouble. I used the second Invisibility spell I had prepared earlier, then sat there pondering how she woke up from the spell-induced sleep.

There were no further surprises, and I was done by midnight. I put on my ring, dismissed the Tap, and unlocked the door. I chanced a look down the hallway, only to see two men striding toward me. I left the door ajar and stepped back inside.

One of the men was Hispanic, I believe, and dressed in a security guard's uniform. The other was black, tall and muscular, with a determined look on his face. The guard opened the door, turned on the light, and said something in Spanish. The other man went straight to Raziya, saying something in another foreign language. He seemed to be trying to wake her, so I dismissed the spell on her, then after a moment on the others. They all began to awaken.

At first there was confusion. Kengi, in particular, seemed about to panic; she was talking continuously in her native language and her eyes were open wide. Doctor Richmond stepped in and took control, saying "Ladies, ladies, calm down. Is anyone hurt?"

"My head hurts," said Japera. "Feels like I been sleepin' on a floor." She grinned, then said "I had two or three beers and a latte' before I came here, and now I need to go!" She pushed past the other women and the security guard at the door and went down the hall to the ladies room.

"I also need to visit the ladies room," said Kengi, and the security guard (who I could now see was named Hererra according to the nametag on his shirt) gave way this time.

Frankly, by now I was getting impatient. None of them had noticed the change.

Hererra approached Doctor Richmond, with a notebook and pen in his hands. "What were you ladies doing here tonight?"

"This is a support group for women who have been circumcised," she answered.

"Okay, Doc, I know how men get circumcised when they are babies. I'm Catholic, okay? But how do you circumcise a woman?"

So she told him.

"Man," he said at length, "that's some crazy shit! Why would anyone do that?"

"Well, they claim all sorts of strange reasons. It makes the face more beautiful, or prevents women from growing penises, or whatever; but the real reason is, if a woman suffers pain from sex, she will hardly look for it with men other than her husband."

"Hell of a way to keep her faithful, man. I believe in keeping a woman satisfied, you know?" His grin was half leer, but Doctor Richmond was evidently not offended.

She was about to speak further about the subject, when we all heard a scream from the ladies room. Hererra ran quickly to investigate, followed by Raziya's husband and then everyone else. Invisible, I had to remain in the back or be discovered.

Japera came out the ladies room door just as Hererra arrived there. She was having some difficulty getting her pants buttoned, mostly because she was excited. "I've been HEALED!" she yelled. "It's all there, I got it all back! It's a miracle!"

Doctor Richmond pushed to the front. "Now, what happened?"

Japera calmed down a bit, finally getting the last button to work. "I've been healed! All my scars are gone, my body is whole again!"

"I, also," said Kengi, opening the door. She was fully dressed, and not jumping and laughing like Japera, but the smile on her face was huge. "I don't believe it. I must be dreaming, but you must not wake me!"

Japera said, "I got me a man in my bed right now, an' he don't know it, but he ain't gettin' any more sleep tonight!" She trotted down the hallway, turning once to say, "Doc, I love ya, but you won't be seeing me Tuesdays anymore!"

All the other women, including the doctor and Kengi, piled into the ladies room. From what I could see of it, it was going to be a tight fit. Shortly I heard squeals of delight from within.

Hererra and the black man stood outside, of course. The guard said, "Man, that must be a miracle! Jesus himself must have been here tonight!"

"More like the work of demons," said the black man. "The natural order of things has been upset."

Hererra looked at him with suspicious eyes. "Yeah, whatever. I think it's a good thing."

At that moment, Raziya came out and wrapped her arms around her husband. "I am also healed, my husband!" she cried. She looked like a child hugging him, for though

she was of average size he was tall, broad shouldered and muscular. I noticed he did not return her hug.

"Come, my wife, we must return home." He turned and walked toward the elevator, and she followed behind him.

Doctor Richmond came out then, and behind her came Marjani, who looked with a worried expression at the receding form of her friend. "Doc," said Hererra, "I don't know what to do here. I should write a report on this, but who's gonna believe it?"

"Write that we had a hypnosis session and I overdid it, causing everyone to fall asleep. We both know it's a lie, but you're right, who would believe the truth?" She looked so happy you'd almost think she herself had been healed.

The other two women came out of the rest room shortly, and after saying their goodbyes they all started for home. I followed, though I had to wait for a separate elevator to avoid detection. Hererra went down with the women, and as I stepped off the otherwise-empty elevator he seemed to be looking straight at me. That's always a weird sensation when one is invisible.

"Huh," he said, coming over and looking around the empty elevator. "I'll have to mention this to maintenance."

It was after one in the morning by now, according to the clock in the entryway. Hererra exchanged a few words with Doctor Richmond after the other women were gone, and I had to wait for them as they were blocking my exit. Shortly Hererra said goodbye and turned to continue his rounds, and I followed Doctor Richmond out the doors as closely as I dared.

It was a foggy night, and I was tired. I decided to walk home, for though flying would be faster I was unsure I could find my way in the dark and fog. I would just have to sleep in tomorrow.

There was a smile on my face as I began to walk.

Chapter 11, *Discretion*

As I have said, it was a bit of a foggy night. Visibility was perhaps thirty or forty yards at ground level in the business district where I found myself walking. As I was still invisible, the homeless people on the streets did not accost me, and I felt I was making good time.

There were few cars parked at streetside there, and I had seen only one on the street. As I walked by one parked car, which I took for a derelict, I saw something reflected in the windshield.

I had dropped to the ground and rolled left, toward the nearest building, before it fully registered what I had seen: a man in black, with a sword, coming at me from out of the sky. I leapt to my feet, my invisibility shattered, in time to see him land. He turned toward me, smiling an evil smile, and for a moment I looked back at him.

He was in close-fitting black clothing, wielding a straight-bladed sword with a finger-loop in the hilt. He looked enough like the man who attacked me on Saturday to be his brother, or perhaps a cousin.

I saw him beginning a leap toward me, and I spoke the word and activated the Flight spell I had prepared. I ascended as fast as I could, flying up into a nearby alley to avoid being seen by anyone on the street.

Well, that was a mistake. I looked back to see my assailant bouncing back and forth across the alleyway, kicking off first from one wall, then the other, and he was keeping pace with me. Several times during the ascent he hacked at my feet with his sword, brushing the sole of my shoe once.

I had not prepared a fast Flight spell, but only one with a long duration, and so outrunning him seemed out of the question; however he definitely was leaping, not flying, so I still had hope of avoiding his blade.

Do you ask yourself why I fled? The last of his kind I had fought had nearly killed me, but my ring saved my life. This time I was nowhere near a Ley line; if he hit me in a vital area with his sword I would surely be dead. So I flew upward as fast as I could.

I cleared the top of the roof of the building; it was only ten stories, and its neighbor only nine. I continued up as fast as I could, but I saw that he was making his most powerful leap from the rooftop. This time he would hit me for sure...

I stopped, waiting for his approach, and I saw him smiling in triumph as he drew back his sword. At the last moment I dropped straight down, adding gravity to my spell's power, and though he hacked down as far as he could he couldn't quite reach me. Leaping, you see, he couldn't change direction until he hit something solid, but flying I could.

Now behind him, I ascended to an altitude where I could still see him, but he could not reach me; or so I thought. It was dark, but not so foggy up there as ground level, and I yet had a Mystic Vision spell in effect, making his defensive magic glow in my vision. He landed, turned, and shook his left fist at me. "Solomoriah," he yelled, "beware. You are meddling with things you do not understand! Stay away from the girl, do not pursue her case, or next time I will not fail to kill you!"

"Always have I sought vengeance against those who prey upon the innocent. I will not be turned so easily!" As I spoke these words, my attacker tossed his sword in the air, reversed his grip, and threw it at me. It flew at me, straight and true toward my heart, but I quickly dodged aside and let it pass.

It was now descending toward the roof of the shorter, neighboring building, and I turned to pursue it, thinking to leave him disarmed; then as I flew after it I realized it was probably a trap. Without looking behind me to confirm it, I dived down into the alleyway. His curses as he passed overhead were like music to me.

The shorter building was, in fact, an open parking structure, and I flew into the second tier from the top, dodging the numerous concrete pillars by narrow margins. What had seemed a slow Flight spell in open space now seemed faster than prudent in close quarters, but I did not dare slow down. I executed a hard right turn, rolled onto my back and flew out the front of the building.

In that position I could see my attacker leaping at me; he had already retrieved his sword. He seemed to know where I was, or somehow he could anticipate my movements; but as I had successfully dodged him twice I knew his power wasn't perfect.

As he approached I allowed myself to hover and released my most powerful Force Bolt at him. I don't know how much harm it did to him, but it knocked him back toward the parking structure. He hit a solid exterior pillar with a loud thump and then began to fall the seven or so stories to the ground. I lost sight of him in the low-lying fog.

Given a breather at last, I released my Kinetic Shield. It was as powerful as I could make it, and I hoped it would be strong enough. Then I began to fly straight for home.

Well, to make a long story shorter, I made it without further trouble. I found and followed the correct Ley lines to the junction where the permanent Tap descended to my house, and landed with time to spare on my Flight spell. I went around the house, casting spells of Closing on the exterior doors and windows, arriving at last in the master bedroom.

As I cast the Closing on the windows there, Mara sat up in the bed. "How did it go?"

"At the support group, it went well, but on the way home someone tried to kill me." I allowed her a moment of shock as I undressed. "In appearance he resembled the man from Saturday's attack, but this one threatened me if I didn't drop Kimberly's case."

I must have looked pretty bad, because Mara said, "You can tell me about it in the morning, my love."

I took a quick shower and collapsed into bed. Mara kissed me, and I said "Ah, all the doors and windows have Closing on them..." and I told her a word to dismiss it. She repeated the word for me, I think, but I was already asleep.

Chapter 12, *The Investigation Begins*

The next morning I slept late, as you might imagine. When I awoke I smelled bacon, so I quickly visited the bathroom, dressed and got myself downstairs.

Bacon, eggs, toast, and orange juice greeted me, along with a lovely smile and a kiss from Mara. "You know, modern American women don't cook like this for their husbands all that often anymore," she said.

"So I've heard. I'm glad you like to cook, because even magic can't make a good cook out of me." I began to eat in earnest as Mara sat down across from me with her own plate. "Where's Mark?" I finally asked.

"In the basement, working on your staff. He came in this morning carrying a power saw." This piqued my curiosity, so I quickly finished and started for the stairs. "Wait," she said, and I turned around. "You want this?" she asked, holding out a mug of hot *xocholotl*.

"Thanks!" I said, and "paid" with a kiss. Thus armed I went down the stairs.

The small workbench was entirely occupied by a power saw with a rotary blade. Mark was aligning a section of the thickest pipe in the saw, then as I watched silently he engaged the blade with a deafening roar and drew it down onto the tube. In a shower of sparks it was severed.

Mark noticed me then, and turned around, removing a pair of clear glasses from his face. "Pretty cool, isn't it?" he asked, showing me the very clean cut end of the tube. "I just couldn't get a straight clean cut with handtools."

"What do you call this thing?" I asked, indicating the saw.

"Compound miter saw with a metal-cutting blade. It has way more features than I needed for cutting tubing, but it was all they had." I looked it over, and then he smiled and said, "Don't worry, I didn't buy it, it's just rented. Most of the tools I picked up for you are pretty useful for many jobs, but you don't need something like this gathering dust down here." He rubbed absently at his right ear. "Basements aren't a great place for this kind of thing."

"I can fix that," I said, and quickly adapted a Silence spell to cover just the saw. "That should last for hours."

"Thanks!" he said. I remained, watching, as Mark cut out enough tubing pieces to assemble three staff sections. He told me that he didn't want to have to keep the rented saw any longer than he had to, so he cut extra pieces in case we screwed one up.

That done, we moved the saw to the floor and began to "dry-assemble" a staff section. It looked as if it would go together properly, so Mark got out the powerful epoxy he had chosen to assemble it with and began mixing up a batch.

I called Mara down and told them of my night. As I recounted the names of the women present, Mara nodded at them all except Japera. "She must have joined recently," she said.

"I assume so. She spoke English with an African-American accent; it sounded a bit strained to me though."

"Fake?" asked Mark.

"Perhaps. Like she was trying too hard to fit in." I proceeded with my story, and when I got to the part where Raziya's husband arrived Mara frowned.

"He is very traditional," she said. "He never approved of Raziya going to the meetings. She needed corrective surgery because of frequent infections but he wouldn't allow that. I bet he's beside himself now."

I had to have that expression explained to me; then I went on to tell about my eventful trip home.

"How did he know which way you went?" asked Mark. "Was he reading your mind?"

"That was probably it," I said. "The two times I dodged him, I hadn't decided which way to go until he was already airborne. However he was able to jump around like that, he couldn't change course in the air."

"Nice to know that magic doesn't negate physics," laughed Mark.

Our conversation turned to the case then. "Why do these apprentices of Joseph Green care about Kimberly Burke's rape?" I wondered aloud.

"Maybe this Joel is one of them," suggested Mark. "Or even Daniel Burke."

"Could be," I said. "The other puzzler is, how is it possible she is pregnant? Did she lie about having had sex with anyone else?"

"No," said Mara, "I'm sure she didn't lie to me." She said it like there was no chance she was wrong, and I have learned since then that she rarely is when the question is lying.

"Then how? The D&C procedure sounds pretty effective at preventing pregnancy."

Mark was carefully inserting one of the thinwall inserts into the thickest tubing. He wiped away the excess epoxy, then said "Did the doctor fake it?"

I was struck dumb for a moment. "Is that possible?"

"She's what, sixteen? Has she ever had the procedure before?" he asked.

Mara said, "Most women don't have detailed sensation that far inside. The doctor would just have to make her uncomfortable and maybe make her bleed a little, and she might not know the difference."

"But why?" I asked. Then I knew. "Joseph Green. For some reason he's interested in this girl. Maybe he's related to this Joel, father or grandfather perhaps."

"That doesn't make sense, Solo. If the baby is born, or even aborted as a fetus, DNA testing could establish the father's identity. He should want the pregnancy stopped, not continued."

"There's more to this than meets the eye, that's for sure. We need to talk to the doctor who did the procedure."

Mara said, "I'll call Miyuki Burke and ask her who it was. No offense, love, but you are a bit too blunt sometimes."

"Thanks, Mara. Then we'll see if we can meet him this afternoon."

By lunchtime Mark had finished assembling two sections. The high-strength epoxy would take hours to reach full strength, so we left them there drying and went upstairs.

Mara met us in the kitchen, where I noticed that lunch was conspicuously absent. "His name is Doctor Farim Rado," she said, "and I got us an appointment to meet him at one o'clock sharp, so it's fast food for lunch or we'll never get there on time."

The hospital where Doctor Rado was employed was not the same as the one Valerie was being treated in. (If you have noticed that I avoid using the names of the facilities, there is a reason... I don't want them to sue me.)

We went through a drive-through and ate enroute. I'll tell you this: No matter how much fine cuisine I eat, I'll always have a special place in my heart for the Big Mac. I wiped the special sauce from my mouth with a napkin just as we arrived at the medical center.

As Mara and I got out, Mark said, "Same drill as yesterday; call me when you want a pickup." I agreed, and we went inside.

Doctor Rado's receptionist let us in immediately, and he arose from his seat to greet us. "Hello, come in, come in. You are investigating the unfortunate rape of Kimberly Burke, correct?" He had an accent, which Mara later told me was Indian.

"Good afternoon, Doctor Rado," I said, shaking his hand. "I'm Solo Jones, and this is Mara, my..."

"Assistant," she said, with devilry in her eyes. Doctor Rado shook her hand also, then indicated by gesture that we should both sit.

He sat down behind his desk, and said "How can I help you?"

"We interviewed Kimberly Burke yesterday. She told us something we don't understand, so we have come to you for an expert opinion."

"You have my fullest attention," he said.

"She says she is pregnant."

"Impossible! I... wait," he said, looking through files in his desk drawer. "Oh, yes. It was over a month and a half ago. She could have had another ovulation since then. How does she know?"

Oops. I couldn't say that I used Aura Reading... Mara jumped in at this point, saving me. "She said she felt strange, so she used a home pregnancy test. It was positive."

"Indeed. Still, those are hardly conclusive. As I was about to say, I did a D&C on her after collecting the samples for the rape kit. Are you familiar with the procedure?"

"It's been explained to me. Seems pretty simple."

"Exactly. Also very effective. The embryo, if in fact there is one, is not the fault of the rapist."

I found his assertion strange, since Mark had said that DNA testing could verify the parentage of the child. He should be worried, I thought; what did he know that I didn't?

I closed my eyes as if in thought (for indeed I was) and formed the word to activate my Mind Reading spell; then I stood up. "Well, Doctor, this meeting has been very illuminating. I'll call you if I need more information." I turned to leave, waiting a moment for Mara to precede me. At the door I turned back quickly. "Oh, by the way, Doctor, do you know a Joseph Green?"

He looked shocked, and for just a moment I saw in his mind a face. I made an effort to commit it to memory. He recovered quickly. "I suppose I might. There must be many Joseph Greens in the Bay Area."

Mara called Mark after we got outside. On the way back to the house we discussed what I had learned; I adapted my remaining Mind Reading spell so I could gift both my friends with it, and I showed them the image I had plucked from Doctor Rado's mind.

The face was of an older man, one whose face seemed to radiate strength. It seemed familiar to me, and as I looked at Mara we both figured it out at the same time. "He could be Daniel Burke's grandfather!" she said.

"Or grandfather to both men who have tried to kill me. What does it mean?"

"Daniel Burke isn't Walter's son, that's what it means," Mark said. "That family photo you got from Kimberly makes that clear. Daniel looks more like this Joseph Green dude than he does Walter Burke."

"I think we need to talk to Miyuki Burke," I said.

Chapter 13, *Family Reunion*

Mara called Miyuki Burke on her cell phone, but as fate would have it Walter answered. He informed Mara that we could meet with Miyuki in the morning, but that she would not be available that evening.

Well, that struck me as strange; what could be more important than talking to the investigator of your daughter's rape?

Back at the house, I decided to begin work on the enchantment of my staff, even though I didn't have it all planned out on paper. Sometimes experimentation is the only way to figure things out. I took the staff sections into the small room under the basement stairs and laid them on the floor. Next, I got a rug to sit on, and I sat down and began the enchantment process.

An enchantment is like a spell, in that it has a multidimensional spellform powered by magic energy. The spellform of an enchantment is much more durable than a spell, though; when power is unavailable, the enchantment ceases to function, but is not dispelled. It is possible to dispell an enchantment, but it usually isn't easy.

By the time I had completed the first enchantment, Power, I was exhausted and dripping with sweat. I went upstairs to take a break and get a drink; I hoped there was still hot xocholotl in the pot. It was lukewarm, I found, but better than nothing. Then I heard Mark talking to someone in the office.

"I'll be there right away," he said as I walked in, and I saw that he had been talking on the phone. Mara was there also, and they both looked concerned.

"Good, you're done," she said, looking up at me.

"No, just taking a break. What's going on?"

"That was Art," said Mark. "He said that Valerie is asking for me. Doctor Harper put her on tranquilizers to control her outbursts, and Art says she's rational now."

"I thought Art hated you," I said.

"I thought so too. Are you coming with me?"

"If you want us," answered Mara for both of us.

"Hey, we're family, right?" We piled into Mark's car, and he drove like a madman to the hospital.

In case you are curious, I always ride in the back seat when the three of us are going somewhere. It's a courtesy to Mara (don't call me old-fashioned just because I am), but

also, in Mark's convertible it's the easiest place to get out of in a hurry. Perhaps I've been fighting too long, but I'm almost always on the lookout for a tactical advantage.

It seemed that the trip to the hospital took half the usual time, but I'm sure Mark wasn't driving that fast. When we got to Valerie's room, Art and Laura were just walking out with Emily between them. All had been crying, and Emily still was. She ran to her father, who dropped to one knee to hug her. "Oh, Daddy, Mommy's real sick. She wants to see you. Hurry, Daddy, hurry!"

Mara and I remained in the hallway as Mark entered the room. We couldn't quite hear their voices, but the tone of sadness came to us clearly.

Art stuck his hand out to me, and as I took it he said "Arthur O'Donnell, but you can call me Art. You must be this Solo Jones who Mark works for."

"Yes, sir, I am. This is Mara, my girlfriend."

He put his hand out to shake hers, saying "Mara..."

"Just Mara, please," she answered his half-formed question. "No last name."

"Another young person ashamed of her heritage," he huffed, and Mara gave him a withering look. Laura stepped forward quickly, and seemed about to speak, and I was afraid that Mara would also.

I beat them all to the punch, as they say. "Art, don't judge what you don't understand. Someday if you are lucky you may learn some things that'll give you a new perspective on heritage." He visibly backed down, and Mara cooled a bit, and then Laura stepped in front of her husband and took Mara's hand.

"I'm Valerie's mother, Laura. I'm pleased to meet you both."

"Can you tell us anything about your daughter's condition?" I asked.

Laura looked at Art, then she said "It looks bad, I'm afraid. The tumor in her brain has spread branches all over, and most of it is inoperable. The doctor says that chemotherapy probably won't save her, since the cancer has spread too far already. He had a specialist, Doctor Marsh, look into her case, and he agrees. They are going to transfer her to a hospice..." Her voice cracked. "Oh, what am I going to do," she cried, her composure lost, "my little girl..." Mara went to her, put her arm around her, and led her to a seat.

Emily had been quiet through all of this; I realized we had forgotten her only when she too began to cry and went to join her grandmother. Art and I were left standing there together; it was a very uncomfortable moment, and I could think of nothing to say. He

was a disagreeable sort, it's true, but he was also a father facing the impending death of his child.

After a long moment of sadness he spoke. "How was I to know?" he asked me, and I shook my head, not understanding. "How could I know that my daughter was lying to me, or that a... thing... was growing in her head, killing her? I hated Mark, I wanted to see him ruined, I jumped for joy when the judge gave Valerie everything. How could I have known that my only daughter wasn't telling the truth?"

"You couldn't know, Art. You did the best you could." It was small comfort, but it was all I could think to say.

Mark came out then, and told us that Valerie wanted to see us all. So, we entered the room. I was more than slightly puzzled why she included me in the group, as she didn't know me, or Mara for that matter, but I was called so I went. Mara and I remained in the back row, out of the way of the family.

Valerie looked bad. The cancer had obviously progressed rapidly in the last few days; I wondered why, but being no healer I had no idea. Her eyes were sunken and dark, and she looked very frail.

"I wanted to apologize to all of you for the terrible things I said... and did." I saw that she was looking at Emily at that moment, and in response the little girl ran to her mother, climbed the metal rail of the bed and lay down beside her.

"It's okay, Mommy, I'm okay. Please stay with me." I could almost see Valerie's heart breaking, and there wasn't a dry eye in the room. Valerie hugged her daughter with all her fading strength.

After a long moment she looked at me. "You are Solo Jones?"

"Yes."

"I'd like to talk to you, please... alone." Art made a surprised sound, but everyone respected the sick woman's wishes. Laura picked up Emily, and shortly the room was empty of all except Valerie and I.

I approached the bed. "How can I help you?" I asked.

"You already did, didn't you? That was really you in my nightmare, I know it was."

I considered lying, but I've never been very good at that. "Yes, it was me. There were two of you, in a deserted diner, and the... other one was like a ghost."

"It was you!" she said with the most strength I had yet heard from her that day. "Are you psychic?"

"Sometimes," I said. "You couldn't see me, but I was there. I saw the way you were treating Emily, so I made you both to sleep. I entered your dream and saw the other you goading you into evil; and I saw in your aura that you were sick. I made the call to Mark, and he took over from there. I just wish we could have figured this out in time..."

"Don't be sad, Solo. I'm going to die, but I will die with a clear conscience. I will leave behind a daughter and husband... ex-husband who will know that I loved them dearly, and I won't leave a rift between my parents and Mark. You can't save me; no one can. But you have given me a great gift."

I turned my head away, wiping my tears on my sleeve. I couldn't face her, nor speak, for a long moment.

Finally I said, "You're welcome. If there's more that I can do for you, you need only tell me."

She reached her hand out to me, and I took it. She was so weak, she could only hold my hand a moment. "Please call everyone else back in."

I did so. Valerie looked at her father. "Dad, I know I told you this before, but I need to again, with Mark here. All the things I told you he did, all the awful stories, were lies. In some way I think I believed them, but they never happened. I drove a wedge between the two of you, and I'm sorry."

Art nodded, then turned to Mark. "If you have some bad feelings, Mark, I'll understand."

"No, I don't. I might have done the same in your place." They shook hands.

"Now," said Valerie, "I don't know how long I'll be sane before this... thing in my head takes over again. Please don't believe any evil things I might say then." She waved to her mother to approach. "I've already signed a power of attorney for my mother to handle my business, and make medical decisions for me. I want you all to hear that I want Emily to stay with her father from now on... if you want her?" That last bit, of course, was directed at Mark, and he quickly stepped forward.

"Of course I want her," he said. He picked up his daughter and hugged her.

"My last request is that you not keep me on life support. No heroic measures. Let me die when my time comes."

I don't know how she did it, but Laura held on to her composure. "Of course, my dear. We'll do all we can to let you keep your dignity."

"Thanks. Thank you all." She yawned then, and I could tell she was completely exhausted. Having said all she needed to, she let go and fell into a deep sleep.

We all filed out of the room. We hung around the waiting room for a while, then Mark said to Art and Laura, "I'll need to get Emily's stuff. We should go now, before it gets dark."

Art said, "You stay here, Laura. I'll go with Mark and Emily, and then after we're done I'll come back." She nodded her head absently, lost in sadness. Mark looked at Mara and I, a question in his eyes.

"Go, Mark. We can walk home from here, or take the bus." He smiled, relieved, picked up his daughter and went with Art to the parking garage. I took Mara by the hand and we went to the elevators.

"Are we really going to walk home?" she asked. "I'm not wearing walking shoes." Indeed, she was wearing sandals, with heels just a bit too high for comfort on a long walk.

"Not if I can avoid it," I said, leading her into an empty elevator. I pushed the button for the top floor. After the doors closed, I said, "We're going to fly home, invisible. I hope you don't mind."

"If this was a happier day, I'd be thrilled. I don't think I'll enjoy it today." She smiled a weak smile, and I nodded my agreement.

I had not intended to carry a passenger when I prepared the Flight spell, but I had increased the "thrust" capacity. I didn't intend to be hunted down by someone leaping again just because my spell was too slow. Thrust can just as easily lift extra weight as provide extra speed, so I was confident I could carry Mara with me.

So I released my Flight spell, then just before the doors opened on the top floor I made us both invisible. That spell, at least, I had prepared two of. I held Mara's hand (since I could not see her) and led her out into what turned out to be the Obstetrics department. Fortunately they weren't very busy, so we didn't have to dodge much to reach the door to the roof.

As always, that door was locked. There was no one around, so I took my time and formed the word carefully, and the door opened before us.

"Why don't I hear you walking?" I asked Mara as we climbed the stairs.

"I'm carrying my shoes."

"Clever," I answered.

"Well, invisibility isn't much good if they can hear me walking. Besides, you're going to carry me flying, aren't you?"

"Yeah," I said, puzzled.

"Well, I could lose a shoe in the wind, couldn't I? These are my favorites."

"I see," I said with an invisible grin.

I picked up Mara with some difficulty. I was (and still am) quite strong enough, and she isn't heavy; but did you ever try to lift a woman, even one who is cooperative, when you can't see her?

We took flight slowly and flew off unseen into the dusk.

Chapter 14, *Dreams and Nightmares*

I worked late into the night on my staff. I needed to keep my mind occupied. I was able to complete the second enchantment, Strengthening, which in truth was rather a simple one.

In the days of my youth, the most advanced people were able to work with copper, silver, and gold by means of magic. Everyone else had only stone tools and weapons. Yet, we built an entire civilization that way. One of the secrets was the enchantment of Strengthening; we used it to give hardness and resilience to weapons and tools made of soft metals, weak wood, and brittle stone. I have toured many museums, and seen with my Mystic Vision that some of the oldest stone items still bear dormant enchantments.

When the magic went away, and the Ley lines appeared, those tools became weak again. The valuable metals eventually would have been melted down and reformed, breaking the enchantments on them and leaving no trace of my culture's metalworking arts.

So I used the ancient enchantment, the only one I ever learned from Gruven Ket. It's good that I did learn it, for if I hadn't I wouldn't have known the basic principles of enchantment. I would have found it rather hard to puzzle out the other enchantments without that theoretical grounding.

Finally, exhausted and sweating again from the constant concentration, I finished the second enchantment on both halves of my staff. I climbed the stairs slowly, to be greeted as I entered the kitchen by the smell of hot xocholotl. Of course I poured a cup, downed it rather quickly, and poured another. It was late at night by then, and I didn't know where Mara was; so I went looking.

I found her in the master bath upstairs, lights out and lit candles arranged around the room. She was in the bathtub relaxing; I thought she was asleep. The scent of roses was in the air.

Then she opened her eyes, and with a smile she arose.

Much later, we lay together in the bed. I had thought myself exhausted when I came up from the basement, but Mara had kindled new fire within me. Now that fire had run its course and we were both tired together.

"Solomoriah," she said, "I have something to ask you." She sat up then, the blanket falling away, and I wondered if she could again fan the flames within me.

"Ask, my love," I said, reaching out to touch her.

"Will you marry me?"

I could not have been much more surprised. For a moment I lay there, my mind reeling; then I realized that there could be only one answer.

"Yes. Yes! I will marry you, Mara!" I sat up and embraced her, and then we kissed for a long time.

Finally we parted, slowly, looking into each other's eyes. I said, "How shall we do it? My people's customs and religion are long forgotten. Will we have a Baptist wedding?"

"We could, my love, but they really aren't my people. I don't have any people of my own, save for you and Mark." She thought a moment, and I just sat there, my hands on her shoulders, savoring her beauty. "I suppose," she said presently, "we might have a civil ceremony."

I had to have that explained to me. We talked for a while longer about our options, but no truly satisfactory arrangement could be discovered. Finally I kissed my frustrated bride-to-be, and said "Let's sleep on it. Perhaps in the light of morning something will present itself. Believe me, we will find a way to make this happen."

She smiled at me then, a warm and rich smile, and we made love again.

I opened my eyes to find myself in the doorway of Gruven Ket's sacrificial room. I was disoriented, and confused, and then I heard his cruel voice. "Apprentice!" he called, and I saw him standing before the stone altar. There was a nude woman shackled there, obviously to be sacrificed to Ket's dark gods, but I could not see her face because Ket stood in the way.

"Apprentice!" he called again, "Approach me! This is the day you complete your training! This woman is yours to sacrifice." I began to walk toward him, though every fibre of my being screamed at me to run away. "You shall slay her not with a knife, but with your necromancy. You need a spell to sever the spirit from the body." With that, he moved aside so I could see the woman.

It was Mara. She looked at me, with not fear but love in her eyes. I said, "Master, I cannot kill her!"

"You will need a spell to sever the spirit from the body," he said again. "Do you know the spell?"

"Master, please, no, don't make me do this!" I cried out again.

"Do you know the spell?" he asked insistently.

On the stone slab, Mara opened her mouth to speak...

I sat bolt upright in the bed, my body drenched in cold sweat. Mara was sitting beside me, and I embraced her desperately for a moment as tears of relief ran from my eyes.

After I regained control of myself I said to her, "I had a nightmare about my old master."

"I knew you were having a nightmare, and I tried to enter it as I had before, but it didn't seem to work."

"Your entrance woke me, I think. Remember, the previous time you entered my nightmare, Dreamwalker was forcing me to remain asleep." I kissed her briefly, then got up out of bed and went to the large window, which faced east. As I was still naked, I peeked carefully around the blind to see the sun beginning to rise.

"Are you coming back to bed, my love?" she asked me.

"I don't think so. I don't feel like sleeping now. I think I'll take a shower, then go down to the basement and continue working on my staff until Mark comes to work."

"If he does," she added, and I remembered the events of the previous evening. "I think I'll stay here until the alarm rings."

I went to her and kissed her, then as she lay back down I went to the bath and took a long, hot shower. As the sweat was cleaned from me I felt as if the phantom presence of my former master was washed away also.

A bit later I resumed my work on the staff. I had completed the simplest enchantments, and now it was time to work on the complex multimodal enchantment that would actually make the staff work. There's no name for it, as I invented it just for the staff.

The staff's enchantment consists first of force-magic to extend and retract the segments, then another force-magic to bind and release the halves, then third a durable enchantment of invisibility which can be turned on or off, and last a controlling enchantment to make the others work in unison.

I completed and tested the first enchantment on one half of the staff in about two hours. When I held the staff-section and spoke a magic word in the old language, the segments extended suddenly with a hiss-click-hiss-click sound. I put the tip on the floor and leaned my full weight on the butt, but the enchantment was much stronger than that (as I had planned) so the staff did not collapse.

Another magic word, and the staff collapsed hiss-click-hiss-click. I tried to pull the small end out, but again the enchantment worked correctly and I could not.

I decided it was time for a break, so I laid down my work and went up the stairs. Enchantment was still tiring, but I noticed I was not as sweaty as I had been after the previous session.

Upstairs I found Mara having a bowl of cereal in the kitchen. I told her of my progress as I poured myself a steaming mug from the pot of xocholotl she had prepared for me, then I also got a bowl and spoon and joined her at the table.

As I began to eat she said, "Have you had any thoughts about our marriage?"

"No, I haven't," I answered. "I would be happy with the civil ceremony you described to me."

"It would be okay," she said in a tone that said it wouldn't, "but I'd like something more special than that."

"I understand," I said, knowing nothing else to say. We ate our breakfast in silence for a while then, and just as I was finishing the phone rang. I got up and went to the office to answer it.

"Hey, Solo," came the voice, "I need a favor."

"Anything, Mark."

"I need to skip work today. I've got to make some changes in my apartment if I'm going to be keeping Emily indefinitely, and I think we're going back to the hospital around lunchtime anyway."

"Take all the time you need, my friend," I answered. We said our goodbyes and hung up.

Back in the kitchen I found Mara cleaning up after breakfast, so I helped what little I could as I told her of the phone call. She looked at me, annoyed, and said "Now how are we getting to the Burke's this morning?"

Oops.

"I guess we'll have to fly," I answered.

Chapter 15, *Clues and Confusion*

I quickly prepared spells for the day, then I cast Flight from scratch on myself and on Mara, followed by Invisibility and Mystic Vision for each of us.

"How does this work?" she asked as we stood, invisible, on the front porch. "What do I do?"

"It's hard to explain, but I think you can do it. It's like walking; you don't really think about it." I rose off the ground a foot or so, to show her. I was invisible, of course, but the Mystic Vision would allow her to see me glowing faintly, just as I saw her. "Just relax, and then take a step off the porch."

"Oh!" she cried, as I saw her spectral form step into the empty air. "It's working!" she exclaimed. "I'm floating! I can fly!"

"Take my hand, you beautiful ghost," I said, and we flew off together into the sunrise.

Romantic, eh?

We arrived at the Burke residence about nine-thirty. That early in the morning, the front door of their west-facing house was in deep shadow, so we stepped into the recessed entrance and I dismissed our Invisibility spells.

Once again I was poised to knock when Mara, grinning, rang the bell. I smiled sheepishly at her.

The door opened after a moment, and Miyuki Burke beckoned us inside. "Come in, please. I understand you want to speak to me this time?"

"Yes," I said, "we do. Are any other members of your family here?"

"Well, Walter is at work, of course, and Kimberly spent the night at a friend's house. Daniel is in his room upstairs, probably still asleep."

She led us into the living room, and offered us tea. Mara and I both accepted a cup, and I sipped at mine once out of politeness. I don't see how anyone can drink such a flavorless beverage; even coffee is better.

Mara and I took seats on the couch, while Miyuki sat down on an adjacent overstuffed chair. "Now, how can I help you?" she asked.

"Miyuki, there's no easy way to ask this," I said, bracing myself for all sorts of responses. "Is Daniel Walter's son?"

"Oh," she said, surprised. "I wondered if you would ask that." She took a long sip at her tea. "No, he isn't," she answered quietly.

She opened her mouth to speak, then thought twice, and quietly she went up the stairs, waving at us to remain there. After a moment she returned.

"He's asleep. I wanted to be sure." She sat down again. "I was raped," she said.

"Tell us all you can, please," Mara said. "I know it's not a pleasant thing, but it may be important."

"Yes. Well... Walter and I had just come to San Francisco, after he left the Air Force. He took a job for an import firm, in the sales department, and he had to go on a lot of business trips. They were never more than a few days, and I spoke English fairly well, but I was lonely when he was away.

"One night I awoke to see a man in a ski mask standing over me. Before I could scream, he had covered my face with a pillow. I tried to fight, but he was too strong and heavy for me, and I passed out.

"When I woke up again, I was in my bed, lying on my back, just as I had been before, but my panties were gone and I could tell I had been... used." Here she paused, drinking her tea and pouring another cup for herself. Her composure was amazing, but I sensed she was working hard to hold on to it.

"I did all the wrong things then. They didn't talk much about rape in those days, so I didn't know what to do, and I just wanted it all to go away. I showered, and I threw my nightgown and panties in the washing machine along with all my bedding. I checked every door and window in the house, and found one on the first floor which didn't latch properly; I was sure he had entered the house there. I couldn't leave it that way; but Walter was something of a handyman, so I got his hammer and some large nails and I nailed it closed.

"After I had done all that, I remade the bed, found new nightclothes and went back to bed.

"In other words, I tried to believe it had never happened. For the most part I succeeded; I had terrible nightmares a few times, and several panic attacks, but no one would have known, except for one thing.

"You see, we had decided to start a family, Walter and I. When I told him I thought I was pregnant he was so happy. He could see I wasn't, and he asked me what was wrong... well, I told him everything.

"I was afraid he would think I had cheated on him, but Walter trusted me. We had no way to know if the child was the rapist's, or Walter's, but he told me he didn't care. He said, 'no matter who the father is, this child will be your child, and I will love it as I love you.'" She poured herself the last cup of tea then, and drank it slowly.

"When did you know it wasn't?" I asked.

"When he was born. It was obvious to everyone that he wasn't, but our family and friends were too polite to mention it." She paused a moment, then said "We never told Daniel he wasn't Walter's. Maybe we should have."

"Miyuki, tell me, please... did the rapist raise your nightgown," said Mara, gesturing to indicate that she meant, "did he expose your breasts" without actually saying it.

"No," she answered quickly. "It seemed to me that he hadn't done anything but remove my panties and commit the act."

Mara spared me a glance. It fit with Kimberly's rape.

"Do you think that my rape had something to do with my daughters?" Miyuki asked.

I didn't dare to voice my true suspicions yet, so I said "Possibly. There may be a connection, or there may not."

"Solo Jones, I must tell you that I trust you. My sister is very wise in many ways, and she has recommended you to me. Please do your best for us."

"I will," I said, rising. As I walked toward the door, I saw Daniel at the top of the stairs. How much had he heard? I moved toward the stairs, but he turned away quickly and half-ran back to his room. I looked at Mara, and I suppose I frowned.

A thought came to me then, so at the door I turned around. Miyuki, of course, was following her guests. "One more question," I said. "The police have been investigating this case for more than a month; I should like to talk to the detective in charge of the case. Can you tell me who he is and where to find him?"

"It's a lady detective, Mister Jones," Miyuki answered. "Her name is Moretti." She told us the precinct's address, which Mara took note of. (My handwriting in English was still terrible, and in fact has never become much better to this day.)

Outside, we began a leisurely walk toward the afore-mentioned police precinct office. We both still had the Flight spell in effect, and I had two Invisibility spells prepared, but I thought we might be being watched. I leaned close to Mara and told her so.

We walked, more like strolled, hand in hand down the streets. There were people walking, jogging, skating, and driving all over, and once again I remembered how many people lived in the world these days.

"I think we need to talk to Daniel, probably before Joel comes back," I said.

"He didn't want to talk to us," she answered, smiling as if we were sharing a secret joke. It seemed a good cover, so I tried to emulate her.

"Maybe we need to wait until he leaves the house, then surprise him somewhere," I said. It was impossible not to frown then. "I don't know if this was such a good idea."

"What do you mean?"

"This role that Mark has created for me, an investigator, may not be the right thing for me. I am a warrior, and a mage; most of all I'm a man of action. The strategy and tactics of fighting or of magic, I know them pretty well. This business of puzzling out what happened... I don't know if I can do it."

"Your accent is getting thicker."

"Ah, well, perhaps when I am frustrated trying to tell my feelings I revert. I've been speaking English less than a month, you know." I looked off into the sky.

"You can do this, my love. You are smart, and you have the best help." I saw the impish smile on her face, and I kissed her, right there on the sidewalk. A young woman in gothic dress passing by whistled at us, and I gave her a wink and resumed kissing Mara.

At least, I assume it was a woman. San Francisco often surprises me; but I had no idea what strange surprises I would soon face.

Fortunately it wasn't far to the precinct office. We went inside, making way for two uniformed officers guiding an orange-uniformed man out to a waiting police car. Inside, things were much more orderly than the police departments shown on television, which of course was the only way I knew anything about police departments.

I am smart enough not to believe everything I see on television, by the way...

The desk sergeant told Mara that Detective Moretti was out on a case. Mara turned back to me and we started for the door, but just then a dark-haired woman in business attire came in. "Moretti!" called the desk sergeant, "these folks want to talk to you."

"Yeah, what can I do for you?" she said, approaching us.

"I'm Solo Jones. I was hired to look into the rape of Kimberly Burke. I'm told you are in charge of the police investigation?"

"Yeah, I am," she said, making a face. "Come with me." We followed her back to a desk in an adjacent room. There were several desks there, some with detectives behind them, and there were a few people scattered around talking with the detectives. No one was very close to Moretti's desk, which I considered fortunate.

"By the way, this is Mara, my assistant." Detective Moretti nodded at her, and we all sat down.

"There's not much of an investigation at this point," she said. "Forensics managed to find a few hairs for comparison, but we don't have any suspects, or any leads."

"There are some things about this case which are strange," I said. "Only one of her assailants actually raped her, and neither one of them really seemed... interested in her otherwise."

"You mean like, they didn't play with her? I know what you mean. Rapists do it for power; they like to talk to the victim, play with her, inflict as much fear as they can. These two didn't." She sat looking at me, as if debating something with herself. "I bet you know some things I don't," she said.

"Probably, but I don't know what to make of them." I decided then to tell some of what I knew in the hopes she would reciprocate. "Kimberly Burke is pregnant, and she insists it's by the rapist."

Moretti leaned forward. "Pregnant? That's like, impossible! Didn't the doctor do a D&C at the hospital after the rape kit was collected?"

"That's what he says. I'm inclined to think he's lying. We spoke with Doctor Rabo, and he insisted that her pregnancy must be by some other man, and that it had been enough time for that to happen. It's a stretch."

Moretti made a perplexed face. "Even if the D&C was a fake, she still shouldn't be pregnant. The Forensics team downtown had a hard time finding any sperm in the rape kit, or on the sheets. The rapist's sperm count was almost zero."

I had heard that before, and now I had confirmation; but what did it mean? I decided to take a different approach. "Did you know that Daniel Burke is the result of the rape of Miyuki years ago?" She shook her head. "There was a single rapist in that case, but he behaved much like this one did... he didn't play with or talk to Miyuki. He overpowered her, smothering her with a pillow until she was unconscious, then removed her panties and did what he came for. She told us that she didn't report it because she wanted to forget it, but she told her husband when she found out she was pregnant."

"I thought there was something strange about that boy." She absently chewed her lip, thinking. "I'm going to tell you some things I probably shouldn't. I think you probably have a better chance to solve this case than I do, but if you don't mind I'd like you to call me before you approach any perps."

I nodded my agreement, and she opened a desk drawer, retrieved a stack of file folders and handed them to us. As Mara and I began to look through them, Moretti said, "I'll save you a lot of time here. Those are all unsolved rape cases from the last twelve months. There are lots more before that. All of them have one or two perps, but just one actually performs the rape. The rapist doesn't show any other interest in the victim,

doesn't even talk to her. In a couple of cases where there are two perps they talk to each other. It seems to be strictly business to them."

She took a sip of her coffee as we looked briefly through the folders. "The strangest thing to me is, almost all of these rapes resulted in a pregnancy. People usually aren't that fertile. It seems real unlikely to me that all of these women were ovulating at the time; several were on the Pill, and one even had her tubes tied."

There were eight folders here; if there were eight reported cases, how many went unreported?

"How did you find all these?" asked Mara.

"Well, I was telling one of the older detectives what a strange case this was, and he told me he had worked one like it a few years back. I went looking for that case file, and once I knew what I was looking for I found all these also."

Mara said, "Some kind of serial rapist, then."

"The chief says no. There are too many discrepancies between the cases. Look, in this one there's just one man, in a T-shirt and shorts, with a bandana around his hair and another over his nose and mouth. This one has two men, wearing ski masks and sweatsuits. This one here has one man in a Halloween monster mask, and this other guy wore pantyhose over his head like a bank robber." She sat back, looking disgusted. "I called an old friend who joined the FBI, and asked her about this kind of case. Once she went looking she found a lot of similar cases in New York City, plus at least a few in every major US city she examined. She had a profiler look at a few of the case files, and he couldn't even guess at a profile."

"That's strange," said Mara. I didn't know what a profiler was, but I nodded in agreement anyway. (Mara explained it later.)

"So I took what I had to the chief, and he said he thinks it's just a fluke. There's no way it could be the same guys all these times, and he just laughed when I suggested it was some kind of club or something. Told me to forget it." She looked disgusted.

"Detective Moretti, I promise, if we come up with something you can use we'll let you know." I stood then, and shook hands with her. "You may be hearing from us," I said as we walked away.

"Good luck, Solo Jones."

Chapter 16, *Thursday Afternoon*

We stopped at a local deli for lunch. There were a lot of police officers there; it was close to the station, after all.

As we sat there eating I was going over the case in my head. I needed to talk to Daniel, I knew, but I also would have to interrogate this Joel. I would have to be cunning in my approach...

Mara left me to my thoughts until we were nearly finished eating. We must have seemed a dour pair to any onlooker. At last, Mara finished off her sandwich and said, "Have you figured out how to get Daniel alone to talk to him?"

"No." I frowned, and Mara mocked my frown, then smiled.

"Wait until he's asleep," she said, "and use what you learned from Dreamwalker."

Ah. As usual Mara saw the obvious thing I was overlooking. I didn't need him out of the house to catch him alone. I could catch him alone in his own mind.

"Joel is supposed to be back in town tomorrow afternoon," Mara said.

"Yes. I'd like to have some evidence on him before he gets here. Something Moretti can use."

"What about his phone bill?"

"Huh?" I said.

"Remember, we think that they forwarded their apartment phone to Daniel's PCS phone. You pay airtime on both inbound and outbound calls on wireless phones, and besides, the forwarding would also create a charge for a long-distance call." She took a sip of her soda as I thought about this. "Either bill should give away that they weren't home, but the PCS bill might tell where they really were when the call came in."

"Great. So how do we get this?"

"I don't know. The police could if they had some other evidence. Probable cause would let them get a warrant for that information." Mara frowned then. "I don't know how we can get it, though."

"Maybe we'll see Mark later and he'll have an idea," I said. We got up, cleared our table and walked out.

We still had quite a walk ahead of us. Mara was just suggesting we take the bus when I heard a voice from the street. "You guys need a taxi?"

It was Mark. Emily was in her carseat in the back of his car, asleep. "I was just heading toward your house, but I guess I won't find you there unless I take you."

"Thanks, Mark!" said Mara as we both got in. "Were your ears burning?"

"Were you talking about me?" he said.

"Yes," I said as I buckled myself in beside the sleeping child. "Mara suggested that the phone bill for Daniel's PCS phone might give away where they really were when Walter called him."

Mara picked it up at this point. "We talked to Detective Moretti today... she's the police detective who is assigned this case... and she told us that they have hair from the rapist for DNA matching. If we can get them proof that Daniel and Joel may be involved that would allow them to get a warrant and try to make a match."

"Hair?" said Mark. "What about semen?"

"That's the strange part," I said. "Moretti confirmed that they found almost no sperm in the rape kit samples. It seems that we have yet another reason why Kimberly Burke should not be pregnant."

We went on to tell him all we had learned that morning; we weren't done when we arrived at the house. Mark pulled in and parked, and as he was coming around to get Emily Mara picked her up. "I'll lay her on our bed," she said. It was the only bed in the house; we hadn't yet gotten around to redecorating and furnishing a guest room.

"Thanks!" said Mark. He picked up the bag of clothing and necessities which seemed to follow Emily everywhere. As we walked up to the house he produced a videotape from the bag. "Got something you might like to see."

It was a movie, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. It's likely you've seen it, as it was a popular movie and an award winner. I hadn't seen it yet, but I was in for some surprises.

Mara and I prepared drinks and popcorn and brought them into the living room, where Mark was waiting, remote control in hand. "I've already seen this movie like, twice, but it's really good. It's subtitled, so I hope you read pretty quickly."

It turned out that I did read fast enough to follow the storyline. If you haven't seen the movie, I'll just say that it's a kind of Chinese mythological tale of warriors. The early parts were engaging drama, but then there was a fight scene... well, I was standing up suddenly. "That's it!" I said. "That's what the swordsmen do! They leap around like they are weightless!"

Mara grabbed my belt and compelled me to sit. "It is, my love, it's just what the man did on Saturday."

"I thought you'd find this interesting," said Mark.

I did. I watched entranced for a while. Eventually, though, my several late nights caught up with me in the darkened living room, and I fell asleep.

They let me sleep. I awoke near the end of the movie, sorry I had missed it but not at all sorry I had slept. I felt, well, brighter.

Just as Mark was rewinding the tape we heard the pounding of little feet coming down the stairs. "Emily, sweetie, use the handrail!" called Mark.

Emily came in and ran to her father, hugging his legs. Then she turned her big smile toward Mara and I. "How did you sleep?" asked Mara.

"I slep' good. You wanna hear a joke?"

"Sure," I said.

"Why did the chicken cross the road?"

"To get to the other side," I answered, and she squealed.

"How did you know?" she asked.

"When I was a boy, the joke was, why did the squirrel cross the trail." I smiled. "It's really a very old joke."

"No kidding," said Mark. "I had no idea."

It was midafternoon by then, of course, and Mark decided to call the hospital and see how Valerie was. He came back from the office looking worried.

"She's had a couple of seizures, Laura says. The doctor has increased her medication and she's pretty much out of her head most of the time." He hung his head a moment. "This thing really took off once we found it."

We decided to go to the hospital, at least for a little while. I won't describe the scene, as it was a sad one. Valerie didn't even recognize Emily at first.

Standing outside her room, Art, Mark, and I spoke in low tones about what would be done after she was gone. It seemed imminent. Mara hung around for a while, then wandered off, to the restroom I presumed. Shortly she returned and led me away by the arm.

"Raziya is here," she said, and it took me a moment to place the name. Then I remembered her from the support group; her husband hadn't seemed as pleased as she was with her healing.

"Why is she here?" I asked, afraid that I already knew.

"Her husband had her circumcised again."

You have heard of "gut-wrenching" events, I'm sure. I felt it. I felt deep sadness and dark anger mix into a toxic brew within me. For a moment I didn't speak, but only wrestled the demons within me.

"Where is she?" I asked after a time. Rather than answer Mara took me by the arm and led me there.

Raziya lay in the bed, sleeping. This room was not a private room, but the other bed was unoccupied. I did not see her husband, either in the room or in the nearby waiting area. Mara led me into the room, moving confidently as if she belonged there.

I looked at her; she looked frail, as would anyone who had suffered such pain and loss of blood. The only medical equipment I saw was an IV bottle. I seethed inside with anger at her husband.

She opened her eyes. "Mara? Is it you? How did you know I was here?" Her voice was very weak, and slurred.

"Yes, Raziya, it's me. We were visiting a friend, and I happened to see you."

"Who it that with you?" she asked, looking at me intently. "Sorcerer! You are the one who healed me!"

"Yes," I answered. "I can do it again." I walked to the window. My Mystic Vision from the morning had already faded away, but I had one prepared which I now released. I was about to release my Tap spell when she spoke.

"No," she said with surprising strength. "If you heal me, my husband Ghedi will insist I be mutilated again. If I refuse he will leave me, and tear our family apart." Tears ran down her face. "He's not a bad man, he just believes in the traditions of our people. No, sorcerer, you must not heal me again."

"As you wish," I said, barely able to control myself. Mara came to me and put her arm around me, and I felt a little better.

Raziya said "Thank you" and faded into sleep. As I stood there looking at her a plan came fully formed into my mind.

"Mara, do you know where they live?" I asked her quietly.

"No," she answered, "but I can find out. I'll call Marjani." She took out her cell phone and dialed the number from memory; obviously they had been friends. After a few moments

of quiet conversation she handed me a slip of paper with an address and phone number on it. I didn't need the phone number.

It was the work of moments to ascend to the rooftop. I left Mara with Raziya; this was a job for me alone. I released my prepared Flight spell, and then the Invisibility. I was not worried that anyone might be looking; in fact I didn't really care.

It was a powerful spell of Flight, and the wind tore at me as I flew along above the rooftops following the streets. Shortly I was at the house. I considered blasting down the front door (which would have been very satisfying) but I didn't want to attract the police. What I had in mind would take some time.

I landed in the back yard, which was entirely fenced in. The back door was the sliding glass sort, and I found it unlocked. Inside the house was Ghedi, calmly watching a comedy on television. I blasted the TV with a Force Bolt, losing my Invisibility in the process.

He leaped to his feet with an incomprehensible outcry, and once again I was impressed by his size. He was enraged, but before he could act I released my Sleep spell. He fell hard onto the couch, then slipped onto the floor. I threw the coffee table aside and rolled him on his back.

I did not have prepared the spells I would need, but I did have a Tap. I walked to the window and looked for the Ley lines; one was close enough, and I released the Tap. Then I stepped away from the window, and cast Dream Contact.

I reached out my mind to the hospital, to Raziya, and found her in a dream of her childhood. I left her alone, not making my presence known yet, for I was not done. I cast Dream Contact again and reached into Ghedi's mind. Under the influence of my Sleep spell he was not yet dreaming, but he would be...

Raziya, I said in her dream, appearing as myself. Little girl, it's time to grow up. She stood up and then quickly grew into a woman.

Sorcerer, what are you doing here? she asked.

It is time that your husband learned a lesson, I said. Remember what he made you suffer. Remember! Suddenly we were in a room in a house in a poor part of the city. Raziya stood beside me looking at herself, naked and bound hand and foot to the top of a table. We seemed to be invisible to the bound Raziya.

An old woman entered the room, closing the door behind her. At this moment I said to Raziya, *Start at the beginning. You are arriving at this place.* The scene changed, and now I was seeing from her point of view. We were at the door to this small, poor house, and I felt Ghedi's strong hand on my... her... upper arm, holding it forcefully.

I reached my mind to Ghedi again, and then he was with me, inside his wife's dream. I spoke, only to him. *Ghedi, you will now know what your wife suffered for you. I hope you enjoy it.*

In a strange sort of way I stood aside, guiding Raziya as I channelled her dream-memories to Ghedi. In the dream he took Raziya's place, feeling her body as if it were his own. I watched as they went inside, and the dream-Ghedi told the old woman what had happened. I could not understand their language, but I didn't need to. Raziya was taken into another room by the old woman as the dream-Ghedi waited in the living room. The old woman spoke, and Raziya disrobed, lying on the table passively as the old woman bound her in place. Then the old woman left for a moment, and when she returned she was carrying a scalpel. It had been washed, but I could see dark dried blood in the crevices of the handle.

Through all of this Raziya remained passive. I took the remembered emotions... betrayal, fear, anger... and passed them all to Ghedi, and when the scalpel descended I gave him her remembered pain as well. I made Raziya take her time, for I wanted him to see and feel the entire operation. When it was done the old woman crudely bandaged Raziya and told her to dress. It was agony, and I made him experience that also.

I followed the memories all the way to his car, and I was in the back seat for the ride home. I wondered where the children were, for I knew she had a son and a daughter. Sitting on the seat was painful for her also, and Ghedi felt it all. When she got out the seat was covered in blood, and her skirt was drenched. Raziya collapsed, aware now that she might die, and her husband came around the car yelling at her for bleeding on his seat!

Pain, fear, and betrayal again surged in her, and again I made Ghedi feel it. Reluctantly the dream-Ghedi took her to the emergency room, then left as she was taken into surgery. I realized then that he was embarrassed.

Raziya, I said only to her, *you were whole for a day. Did you... test yourself?* I felt rather than heard the affirmative, and the memory that followed was very personal. She had approached her husband that evening after she was healed, and he had refused her. She was, well, aroused, for the first time in her life, and she went into the bathroom...

I won't say more. All these memories I gave to Ghedi also, so that he would understand what he had taken from her. She had said he was not a bad man, but I was finding it hard to believe.

There were more memories I could have asked for. I could have shown him how she felt as a little girl, mutilated in ways she could not then understand. I realized that more would not help; if he could be turned he already would be.

In the dream I stood before Ghedi. He was in his own body again, his head hung low. I adjusted the dream to make him less imposing, to make myself appear larger. *Ghedi*, I said to him, *how do you feel?*

I am evil. You are a sorcerer, you should be the evil one, but I am more evil than any sorcerer or demon. What can I do?

I will heal your wife again, I said. Do not undo what I have made right! Commit this evil no more, or you will wish I had killed you!

I understand, he said.

I was about to bring Raziya into the dream when suddenly I felt a terrible pain in my chest. I opened my eyes to see a double-edged sword blade sticking out there, six inches of blade exposed and covered with my blood.

My last thought as I fell was to avoid falling on Ghedi...

Chapter 17, *I Die Again*

Well, I died. I remember floating free of my body. I could see myself, lying face down on the floor, my assailant's sword protruding from my back, a spreading pool of blood around me.

I had died before. In particular, when Zam Nar and I were attacked in his cave, I died. I recovered from death because of my ring, and because the weapon was not totally fatal. That is, in that case a spear was used, and I died of a gut wound. The ring literally healed me around the spear, then worked it out of me.

This sword, however, was jammed into my heart.

My spirit watched, helpless, as the swordsman bent over to inspect my body. Truly I would have no chance if he removed the ring. He reached toward my left hand even as I felt myself pulled away from the earth. Then I saw movement behind him...

It was Ghedi! He had a wooden chair in his hands, and like in an old Western he brought it down on the swordsman's head. The chair shattered into dozens of pieces and the swordsman was driven to the floor.

Ghedi obviously thought he had achieved victory, but the swordsman was much tougher than that. Probably he was protected by magic besides. He stood up and savagely kicked at Ghedi, but the large man was swifter than he looked as he dodged the kick and smashed his huge right fist into the swordsman's chin, spinning him around.

They fought thusly for some time, though I could not say how long. I fought the power pulling me from the material world, fought with all my spiritual might, but it was a losing battle from the start. I saw the light that so many speak of, and I began to move toward it...

In a sudden, painful rush I was back in my own body. What had happened? I raised my face from the floor and looked up, to see that the swordsman had withdrawn his sword from my back. Even as I watched he slashed through another heavy chair which Ghedi was using for defense, and hacked the big man's right arm off at the elbow. Blood sprayed as Ghedi screamed and the anonymous attacker laughed in victory.

After my battle with the second swordsman, I resolved to be better prepared. Well, I was a fool again, for I had not thought about the Tap attracting unwanted attention. I tried to release the powerful Paralysis spell I had prepared for my next battle with Joseph Green's minions, and discovered that I had no spells prepared!

Death sucks, as Mark would say.

The Tap was still in effect, though. This was a good thing, for after all I would not have recovered from death without it. The swordsman was still standing there laughing,

facing away from me, as Ghedi slowly slumped to the floor. He was trying to staunch the flow of blood, and evidently the swordsman was enjoying his pain and panic.

In my mind, slowly, I began to chant the words to the spell of Paralysis. I immediately began to sweat as the effort of concentration wore away at me. Over and over I chanted the phrase of power, boosting the spell fivefold before I let it fly. I had only one chance, and I didn't mean to fail.

As I released the spell the swordsman turned toward me. He struggled against the power of the magic, raising his sword high to behead me. I still lay on the floor, physically almost powerless; he would surely kill me this time.

Down came the sword, and the swordsman. The magic took hold of him just in time, and though he fell across me the sword did me no further harm.

I would have liked to lay there, and regain my strength, before struggling out from under him; but Ghedi lay as one dead already, and it was my fault. It took all my strength and will to pull free, and I crawled to Ghedi's side. First I put my ring on his left hand; it barely fit on his little finger. I tied the Tap to the ring, then I found his arm and dragged it over. I didn't know if the ring would reattach it if I held it there, but I tried it anyway, and it worked!

Shortly he regained consciousness. I removed the ring and put it back on; I wanted the upper hand, just in case, and I was in marginally better shape than he was.

"You... are the sorceror, the one who healed my wife," he said. "Have you now healed me?"

"I have. Ghedi, though in my heart I despise you, I must apologize for this. You were not supposed to become involved in my battle."

"It is alright," he said. "I deserved much worse punishment than that. I have not been punished enough this day." His accent was strange, stiff and choppy. His wife had a more musical tone.

"You should go to your wife, Ghedi, and beg her forgiveness."

"I will." He sat up slowly. "Sorceror, there is another who owes you a debt of thanks, though she knows it not. When I took my wife to be circumcised I arranged the schedule for my daughter. Now I know what I was about to do, and it will not be."

I had by then recovered much of my strength. I prepared my spells anew. At the end I cast Flight, a powerful one with great load capacity, then Invisibility to cover the swordsman and his sword, and a second one for myself. I picked up the invisible attacker and threw him over my right shoulder, then picked up the sword in my left hand and went out the back door.

I put the invisible swordsman down atop the roof of a shop on the waterfront. He would just have to wait for the paralysis to expire; he had tried to kill me, and that gave me the right to his life in return, by the laws of my day. The sword I took with me, back to the house.

There was no one there when I arrived, which was as I expected. I put it in the small room below the basement steps, taking time to renew the spell of Closing there. I was about to leave when I remembered my bloody clothes, so I quickly showered and changed. I then cast a new Invisibility spell and returned to the hospital.

I walked into an empty room and dismissed my Invisibility, then quickly went to Valerie's room. Mara met me in the hallway nearby. "Solomoriah, I was worried! Where were you? What happened?"

"I'll tell you the whole story later. Come..." I led her to Raziya's room, where we found Ghedi kneeling on the floor beside her bed, crying. He held her hand, and she was speaking softly to him, telling him things would be alright.

I walked into the room. "Solomoriah!" said Raziya. "You have returned!"

"Didn't you know I would?" I asked. I walked to the window and released a Tap spell, then I went to the bedside and put the ring on her. "I am only going to heal you for five minutes," I said, "just enough so that your doctor will send you home. When you are home, call me and tell me so, and I will come and finish the job."

"Why not do it all now?" she asked.

"Too many people already know about me. I don't want your doctor asking too many questions. I'd appreciate it if you changed doctors soon."

"Of course," she said with renewed strength. I watched the clock on the wall until the time had elapsed, and then asked her if she felt any better. "I do," she answered, "I feel pretty well now, just sore. I'm sure I'll be calling you tomorrow."

We said our goodbyes. I thought that Ghedi would break my hand shaking it; he was a changed man. Forcing him to walk along her trail a while made him see things differently.

The view was not so pretty back at Valerie's room. She had not been herself all afternoon, and the cancer was worse yet. Presently she was sleeping, under the influence of drugs, and Mara whispered to me "This is better. When she's awake, she screams at us, fights the nurses... see, they put her in restraints."

Eventually we went home. It was nearly midnight, and Mara began getting ready for bed. I sat down in the darkened living room and cast Dream Contact, trying to reach

Daniel, but it failed; most likely he was not in bed yet. I decided to work on my staff and try again later. I kissed Mara goodnight and went down to the basement.

I finished the second half of the Actuator enchantment (as I had begun to call it) and tested it in less time than the first half. It worked perfectly; but as it was after two AM at that point I decided to defer the next part until later.

I secured the magic workroom, that is, the small room under the basement stairs, and went back to the living room. Again I cast Dream Contact, and this time was rewarded with success.

I found myself viewing from Daniel's perspective. I (he) was nude, lying on his stomach on the bed, and there was an air of anticipation about him. I guessed what was in store, and quickly chose a separate vantage point for myself.

Now I could see Joel (for I was sure it was him) and sure enough, they were about to "do it," so to speak. I am not gay, as I have said, and it made me more than a bit uncomfortable to be there, in that explicit dream, watching; but I felt that there was something important to be learned.

I was right. Suddenly I had the answer to everything... all the strange parts of the case began to fall into place. I took over the dream then, dismissing Joel's image as well as the room itself, replacing the dream with one of Daniel dressed and sitting at a table in a deserted diner.

I didn't consciously choose the diner, but it was the same one I had experienced in Valerie's dream. I entered and sat down in the seat I remembered the spectral Valerie using. "I am Solo Jones," I said, as he stared at me open-mouthed. "I was hired to look into the rape of your sister, and I know you are involved."

"What's going on here?" he asked angrily.

"It's simple. We're going to have a discussion here, and illuminate some dark spots in my understanding." I paused a moment, but he didn't speak; his sullen look told me that he didn't plan to say anything.

"You aren't gay, are you?" I asked. "You're what's called a hermaphrodite, half male, half female."

"No," he said forcefully, "all male plus half female. We are more than human."

The way he said that, it wasn't just a statement, it was a slogan. "We. There are many of you, aren't there? Don't try to hide it. I have seen a large stack of very suspicious police reports. You interbreed with each other, but you need a normal woman to carry the child... isn't that right?"

He looked away, and I knew I was right. "Joseph Green is your father, isn't he?"

"Grandfather, I think," he answered, a resigned tone in his voice. "He is our leader." So that was why he wanted me dead... he was afraid I'd discover what they really were. Now I had... was I truly marked for death?

I had a thought. "Your secret is very important to Joseph Green, isn't it?" He nodded, so I said "Remember that. Under no circumstances may you reveal it to normal humans." He nodded again, looking puzzled. Then I smiled at him, and ended the spell.

I took a shower and generally made ready for bed. Too many late nights in a row were beginning to take a toll on me; for it was almost three in the morning, and I still had to get up in the morning to go to work.

At least the commute wasn't too long, I thought as I climbed into bed.

Chapter 18, *Healing, and Other Dangerous Activities*

I was in the castle of Gruven Ket, hurrying down a corridor I half remembered. I opened a door and found him, standing before the sacrificial altar, with a woman bound there. He said "Welcome, apprentice! The time has come!" I already knew the woman on the slab would be Mara before he moved aside.

"Apprentice, you must sacrifice this woman by magic. You need a spell which severs the spirit from the body. Do you know the spell?" I walked past him, horrified, and saw that Mara seemed unafraid, as if being bound nude to a bloodstained stone altar was perfectly normal. Again he said, "You need a spell which severs the spirit from the body." He grabbed my arms with his icy hands and turned me to face him. "Do you know the spell?" he demanded.

Mara began to speak then, and I turned my head to look at her. "Listen to him," she said, and I turned back to him. It wasn't him, though; it was Valerie, her face twisted in rage, her hands holding my arms with a still-icy grip. "Do you know the spell?" she demanded. Then as I watched I realized I could see her aura, and I saw smoky tentacles reach over the top of her head forming a cage before her face. "Do you know the spell!" she screamed again, and I awoke in a cold sweat.

What did it mean, I asked myself. I saw that Mara was already out of bed, and in fact it was nearly ten AM. Quickly I showered (to remove the sweat) and dressed and went downstairs.

To my surprise, Mark was in the office. I heard Emily laughing in the living room, and assumed that she was watching cartoons. "Good morning, boss," he said. "How did your night go?"

"Well enough, I guess," I said. "Where is Mara?" I got my answer instantly as she walked in with a sausage sandwich on a plate and a cup of xocholotl for me; I took what she offered and kissed her. "There are things I need to speak of which Emily should not hear," I told them.

Mara went into the adjacent living room and told Emily that we would be having a meeting, then closed the door on her return. I told them everything, from when I left the hospital through my Dream Contact with Daniel.

"Wow," said Mark. "How many of them do you think there are?"

"I have no idea," I answered, "but there must be many. Remember all the cases Moretti showed us?" I asked Mara. She nodded, and I said "How many more went unreported?"

She shook her head. "What do we do now?"

"Joel and Daniel can be arrested and charged and even convicted without the true secret being revealed. Joseph Green is powerful and secretive; I don't even know where to find him. I can't challenge him yet, so for now we'll keep his secret."

Just then the phone rang; Mark answered it. "Solo Jones Investigations, how may I help you?" He paused, listening; then he said "I'll be there soon," and hung up.

"Valerie?" I asked.

"Yeah, they don't think it'll be much longer. Mara, can you take care of Emily for me? I don't think she should be there for this."

"Sure," she said, and they went into the living room. Mark said goodbye to Emily, giving her a big hug, and then headed for the door. I followed him.

"You don't have to come, Solo," he said.

"You're family," I answered. "Let's go."

At the hospital, things were much as they had been the night before. Mark went to Valerie's bedside, and she opened her eyes and seemed to know him. As he held her hand, speaking quietly to her, Art and Laura stood together in another corner and tried not to be seen crying.

The entire scene tore at my soul. Then I remembered the dream...

You will need a spell that severs the spirit from the body. Do you know the spell?

and then I remembered what Mara had told me about chemotherapy... that it was poison, and it was hoped that the poison would be more deadly to the cancer than to its host.

There was one spell I did not rewrite into my spellbooks. It was taught to me by my old master Gruven Ket, and it was a hateful thing. He called it Death. Just as it was described in the dream, the spell severs the spirit from the body.

When he taught it to me, he instructed me to find "something living" to slay with it, so that he could see that I understood it. Reluctantly I sent some zombies into the catacombs to capture rats, and after a time one returned. It was a male zombie, and it had a rat held in its right hand. The rat, undefeated in its own mind at least, was gnawing at the zombie's thumb. Given time it might get free.

"Very good, apprentice!" said Ket. "The spell, as you should realize by now, will slay not much more than a rat at the first tier of power. It would require at least the third tier to slay a human; most would require at least the fourth tier."

I spoke the words, the dark and hateful words of the spell of Death, and I laid my hand on the rat's head. In an instant it was dead.

At that moment I promised myself I would never say those words again. I tried to put them out of my mind, and I did not even remember the spell when I was rewriting my spell book. Now I hoped I could remember it.

I inclined my head against the wall, feeling the cold hardness of it on my forehead, and focused myself on the past. I tried to put myself in that moment, casting the spell to slay the rat; slowly the words and gestures came back to me, and I ran over and over them, trying to ensure they were all right.

Finally I thought I had it. But I couldn't just cast it... I needed to prepare. Ket had drilled into me that you don't play with unknown spirits without protection; unfortunately he hadn't gotten around to teaching me protective spells for that purpose when I left him. The only thing I could think of was my Spirit Guardian spell, but I had none of them prepared. The Death spell would also need power, and that meant a Tap, and a Tap meant attack by the swordsmen of Joseph Green.

I went to Mark, drew him aside, and said quietly, "I may be able to save her."

"What!" he said, too loudly. I held up my hand and repeated myself. "How?" he said, more discreetly now.

"Remember the smoky patch? How it seemed not to mix with or even touch her own aura? I think the cancer has its own spirit."

"Yeah, I remember. How does this help?"

"I have a spell, a spell of necromancy, which severs the spirit from the body. I think if I tune the power level carefully and touch the cancer's aura I can slay it without harming her. I'm sorry I didn't remember it sooner."

"You must need help, or you'd have just done it," he said. "What do you need me to do?"

I laid a hand on his shoulder and spoke two words, gifting him with the fourfold spell of Kinetic Shield I had prepared for myself. "You are now covered by my Kinetic Shield spell, which will protect you from weapons in motion such as bullets or swords. I will have to create a Tap to power my spells, and that may draw a swordsman." I released another spell for him, one of Mystic Vision. "You'll be able to see him as a transparent, glowing figure using this spell. Don't approach if you see him... just quietly tell me, and keep the door blocked."

"You got it," he said, and went to the door. He leaned against the doorframe as if waiting patiently for someone, which I suppose he was. I went to the window and

released my Tap; though I did not myself have Mystic Vision active, I knew perfectly well where the Ley line was from here.

The Spirit Guardian spell requires a source of smoke or mist, but of course smoke isn't allowed in the hospital. Valerie's room had its own bathroom, of course, and I went in there, closed the door and started the hot water running. Shortly, in the cold conditioned air of the hospital the water began to steam. I chanted the words to a twofold spell of Spirit Guardian, and was rewarded by the sight of a winged serpent of steam arising from the sink. It was perhaps a yard long if it were stretched out, and I instructed it to protect me from spirit creatures.

As it took up a position beside my right shoulder, I decided that a second might be called for, so again I chanted the spell and again a serpent of mist arose. I turned off the water and opened the door, and heard a double sound of amazement from Art and Laura. "Don't worry, they're with me," I said.

I released my spell of Aura Reading, and just as in the dream I saw that the cancer's aura formed a cage over Valerie's face. I walked to the head of the bed, looking carefully for the center of the effect, and then I began the Death spell.

I chanted those hateful, evil words. The room seemed to darken somewhat as I did so, and as I chanted the power phrase the second time the sense of darkness and foreboding increased. Finally I reached the end, and as her parents watched I touched the smoky aura's center.

The "cage" tore free of her face, causing Valerie to draw a deep, surprised-sounding breath in her sleep. As the rest of the smoky malevolence pulled free of her it seemed to shake itself, then dart faster than I could follow at my face!

The Spirit Guardians intervened, wrapping their wings and tails around the monstrous thing. Art and Laura couldn't see the dark spirit, but the Guardians were clearly visible and obviously fighting. Art raised an arm before himself and his wife, a useless but touching defensive gesture.

I instructed the Guardians to escort the dark thing to the spirit plane, and the three entangled forms faded from my sight. I looked then at Valerie, and saw that her aura had a strange empty blankness where the cancer's aura had been. Naturally the cancer wasn't gone, but now it was a mass of dead flesh within her.

I removed my ring and put it on her, then held her hand as the power flowed through the Tap, into me, and on to the ring. I could see the blankness slowly fading...

"We've got company," Mark said, as calmly as if it were only the paperboy. "The hallway is pretty busy, he's sure having to dance around a lot. I think he just figured out I can see him. He's got a straight sword I think... can't see clearly."

As Mark continued the play-by-play it became obvious the swordsman didn't want to attack me here. Too many people, perhaps, or maybe it was the security guards I saw from time to time. True, he was easily a match for any of them, but multiple weapon fire might break down his shield.

Finally I saw the last of the blankness disappear. I put my ring back on, and walked to the door.

"Where is he?" I asked, and Mark pointed. I saw nothing where he was pointing... evidently Aura Reading didn't help one to see the invisible. I put a hand on Mark's shoulder and gifted him with a Spirit Servant, then I released a threefold spell of Paralysis in the direction Mark indicated.

"He fell down, went boom." said Mark, smiling. I hoped so; I was down to just the noisy spells, and not many of those.

"Send the Spirit Servant to collect him," I said. "I can't see him, and I don't want to waste time casting any new spells right now." Truthfully, I was tired. Casting spells takes something out of you, and the less you have used a spell the harder it is to cast. I did prepare a replacement for the Tap before I severed it.

Mark and I walked as nonchalantly as we could to the elevator, but the first to arrive was half full. The riders looked at us strangely when we motioned them to go on; how could they know it was more than the two of us? The next elevator was empty, and we rode it to the ground level. Outside we found the dumpsters and put in the swordsman. Mark instructed the Spirit Servant to get the sword, which became visible when removed from the swordsman's hand, and I took it and became invisible myself.

"Where are you parked?" I asked, and he told me. It wasn't hard to find his convertible, and a spell of Opening opened the locked trunk where I deposited the sword. A passing pedestrian looked very strangely at the trunk opening itself, and more strangely yet when it closed, but truthfully I didn't care.

I rejoined Mark at Valerie's room, where she had regained consciousness. Mark, Art and Laura stood at one side of the bed, as Doctor Harper stood on the other, checking her vital signs. He walked away, shaking his head, and ordered an MRI. The MRI machine was available, so we went immediately. I sensed the technician was not used to having so many people in the control room, but Doctor Harper took no note of us; he was too busy comparing her scan from just two days ago to the perfectly clean scan of that moment.

At last he spoke to us. "I'd like to keep her for observation, if for no other reason than to flush the drugs from her system."

"It's up to her, Doctor," said Laura firmly. We met Valerie in the hallway, where she was being wheeled out of the MRI room by a nurse. She consented to stay until evening, then asked to see Emily.

Mark said, "I'll have to go get her... Mara is taking care of her." He called her on his cell phone to tell her he was coming, then turned to me. "She says Raziya called, to tell you they are home," he told me in a puzzled voice.

"Mark," I said, "I'll need your help this afternoon, if you can spare me the time."

"After what you did here today, Solo, you can have all my time you want." We followed Valerie back to her room, and he told her, "I have some work I have to do this afternoon. I'll bring Emily by on the way." Then they kissed, for the first time in years.

Chapter 19, *Street Fighting Men*

We returned to the house for lunch (bologna sandwiches, chips, and soda... we were in a hurry) and I prepared new spells. First I prepared a Compulsion spell of fivefold power, then a Paralysis of sixfold power. I cast a Kinetic Shield of threefold power over myself, and a Mystic Vision spell as well. I hoped the spells I had placed on Mark would last long enough; I thought they should, but magic isn't an exact science.

I returned to the office (for I had done my preparations in the living room) and told Mark, "Bring your pistol today." He looked surprised, but retrieved it from the back of the bottom file drawer, along with two magazines.

"Let me see that," I said, and he handed me the gun. It took me fourteen extra words to shape a spell of Silence to closely follow the gun, but I was sure it would be worth it. Compressed so small, the spell would last much longer than normal.

"This gun should be silent the rest of the day," I said. "Now, Mark, don't hold the gun like this," I said, showing him a pose I had seen on television. I had the gun beside my face, pointing skyward. I said "See?" but of course he couldn't hear me. "Hold it down like this," I said, pointing the gun at the floor, "so I can hear you, and you can hear me." I handed it back to him, and he experimented with the Silence.

Incidentally, this spell proved so useful that I formalized it with the creation of a custom (and much shorter) Silencer spell; but that was later, of course.

"Say," I asked, "can you get armor-piercing ammunition for that gun?"

He smiled. "This is San Francisco, dude, you can get anything if you know where to go."

"Can we get the armor-piercing rounds and still get to Ghedi and Raziya's place in reasonable time?"

"I think so," he answered, and in fact we were only a little late. As Mara and I disembarked, I told Mark, "Stay here a bit. I'll be back."

Ghedi answered my knock, and inside we found Raziya in a long bathrobe reclining on the couch. I won't bore you with the small talk, but rather I'll say that I put the ring on Raziya and bound a Tap to it. As she began the healing process I told Mara, "Stay with her, please. Joseph Green's man will be here soon, and I plan to meet him outside."

"Be careful, my love," she said. We kissed, and I made for the door.

Ghedi followed me. "I will help you," he said.

"No, Ghedi. You must remain here, and protect Mara and your wife." I felt that appealing to his masculine instincts was the best way to save his life, for though he was huge and powerful he was no match for an expert with an enchanted sword.

Back in the car, Mark and I parked up the hill a ways, where we could easily see the house. One of the spells I had saved was a blanket form of Mystic Vision, which I cast over both of us, and we sat there for a while in silence watching the power flow through the Tap. I was quite worried about fighting a swordsman now, without my ring, but I tried not to let Mark see it.

At last I saw a transparent glowing figure approaching the house. I said quietly, "There he is," and pointed.

Mark pointed to the back fence of the house, visible from our higher position. "There they are," he corrected, and I saw a second figure bounding over the fence.

"Oh, hell," I said. We got out of the car and ran down the street. It was a quiet residential neighborhood, as I have said before, and there were few people on the street at this time; those that were there scattered at the sight of Mark waving a handgun.

"Looking for me?" I yelled, to get the attention of the nearest swordsman, for I didn't want him getting into the house. Sure enough, he realized I could see him, and leaped at me, becoming visible in flight. This one had a straight-bladed sword also, I noticed.

Thwip! Thwip! Mark fired twice at the leaping man, and hit him once in the leg. I was right! Armor piercing ammunition allowed the bullet to puncture his mystic protection. I stepped aside and the leaper crashlanded, rolling head over heels up the hill. He tried to jump back to his feet, but the bullet had taken him in the knee, and he fell again.

Mark levelled his gun at the prone swordsman. "Stay down!"

I turned just in time to see the other swordsman leap over the entire house! He was now visible, his wicked curved sword drawn back to take me out. I waited until the last minute to release the powerful Paralysis spell I had prepared. I ducked, and he flew over me, landing in a heap beside his disabled brother.

"Take a message to Joseph Green," I said. "Tell him I know why you think you are more than human. I plan to keep your secret, for so long as you leave my friends and me alone. Tell him I won't be sending any more of you home alive if you don't back off." Then I spoke a word, and released the Compulsion at the Paralyzed swordsman; as before, he was compelled to do just as I had said, that is, to go to his Joseph Green and deliver my message.

"You," I said, pointing at the injured one, "slide your sword over toward me, and your friend's also." Mark put a bullet in the pavement at his feet to punctuate my order, and the swordsman reluctantly obeyed. I picked up the swords, perhaps foolishly, but I was

unworried about traps this time; I can't tell you a good reason why. I dismissed the Paralysis spell, and the uninjured swordsman immediately got up and began bounding away; I took careful note of his direction of travel.

"You are free to go, as best you can," I told the other swordsman, and with enormous effort he got up and began walking away. That he could walk at all on that shattered knee was a testament to his physical toughness; though as I thought about it, I wondered if it was actually carrying his full weight...

Quickly we put the swords and the handgun in the trunk of the car. The battle had been very quiet, but I assumed that the police had been called. Mark drove away at a casual speed, turning into a driveway at one point to avoid a police car. He must have heard it coming, for I'm sure he couldn't have seen it. Soon we were out on more major streets and feeling fairly safe.

A cold chill went through me as I wondered if anyone had turned in Mark's license plate number...

I borrowed Mark's cell phone and called Mara. "Hey, love, where are you?" were her first words, before I had time to speak.

"Around. Call Mark when the smoke clears and we'll come pick you up."

"No need, Ghedi already offered to drive me home."

"I suppose I don't have to tell you not to forget the ring," I said in what I hoped was a half-joking tone of voice.

"What ring?" she answered brightly, and hung up.

Mark dropped me off at the house and returned to the hospital. I sat down at the computer, intending to kill time until Mara arrived; but I happened to notice the note with Daniel's address and phone number on it. An idea, a "hunch" as they are called, came to me, and I picked up the phone and called Miyuki Burke.

"Hello?"

"Miyuki? This is Solo Jones. I have a few questions for you."

"Well, I'll do my best to answer for you," she said.

"Where are Daniel's bills mailed?"

"I think they all come here... he and Joel changed apartments twice, and he almost missed a car payment, so he has them all coming to the house."

"Including the bill for his PCS phone?"

"Yes. Actually that phone is mine; I never used it, so I just loaned it to him when he left for college."

Now we were getting somewhere! "So the bills come to you, and you pay them?"

"No, I just give them to him and he pays them." Oops... that was less hopeful.

"Did you give him the most recent bill yet?"

"Yes, just last week. He really wanted to get it paid." There was now a note of suspicion in her voice. "Was there something important on it?"

"I think so, yes."

"Then I'll call the phone company and request a duplicate. Do you want me to have them fax it to you?"

"Yes, please. It's on the same line as our office phone." I repeated the number for her.

"I'll call them right away, Mister Jones. Is there any other way I can help?"

"No, thanks, not just now. Miyuki, I appreciate your trust in me. I must say, considering that you must know my suspicions by now, I'm surprised you are being so helpful."

"Daniel did something wrong, I'm sure of that. He has been acting very strangely since you were here. Mister Jones, I don't even want to think about it; but Kimberly is my daughter, and no matter who it was who used her, I want them brought to justice. I know quite well how she is feeling right now, and she deserves justice."

"Thank you again," I said, for I could think of nothing else to say. "I'll be calling you again very soon, I think."

Mara and the fax arrived at almost the same moment, so she got to see me fumbling with the unfamiliar device. Calmly she walked up and pushed the bright green "Start" button, took the receiver from me, hung it up, and kissed me. The kiss lasted longer than the fax reception...

"Nice to see you too," I said after a while. Mara picked up the fax.

"What's this?" she asked.

"The phone bill for Daniel's PCS phone. It's in his mother's name; she arranged for us to get a copy."

"Here it is!" she said triumphantly. I looked at the date and time, and it did appear to match. I'd only been using the modern calendar for a few weeks though, and so I was relieved to hear that I was right. The line item she indicated showed that the phone was

in a small community just to the south when the call was received, and that the call was from a phone number in the Los Angeles area, and that number matched the one given by Kimberly for her brother's apartment phone.

"This isn't enough to prove they were both here, is it?" I asked.

"No, one of them could have been in LA. This shows that one of them was nearby, though."

"Do you suppose we should send this to Moretti, or do we need more information?"

"Have you talked to your client recently? Maybe she should decide."

Ah. Natomi Osaka. I suddenly realized I hadn't exactly been keeping in close contact with her. Mara picked up Natomi's business card, dialed the number, and handed me the phone.

"Japanese Consulate, Ms. Osaka's office, how can I help you?" came the voice at the end of the line.

"This is Solo Jones. I was hired by your boss to do some work for her, and I'd like to speak to her about it."

"One moment please," she said, and then the hold music came on. The wait was brief.

"Solomoriah," came a more familiar voice. "I was wondering when you might call."

"Sorry," I said. "This customer relations business is rather new to me. When can we meet to discuss my findings?"

"You have solved it, then?" she asked.

"Yes. I think you will have no problem with my evidence; I could have come to you this morning, in fact, but I was waiting for something the police can use. I think I may have it."

"I'll come there," she said, "right away if that's acceptable to you."

"Yes, excellent. We'll be waiting."

It took two big pots of xocholotl and about as many hours to tell Natomi all that had transpired in the preceding week, even with most of the tale of Valerie omitted.

"Wow," she said at the end, "you've had a difficult week." I nodded. "I once heard a story about people such as you describe, the children of Joseph Green. I thought it just an old tale."

"Evidently, from what Detective Moretti told us, there are many of them. They can't all be Joseph Green's children, either. I wonder if Doctor Rabo is one of them... he doesn't resemble the 'family.'"

"You promised him that you'd keep their secret," she pointed out, "but you've told it to me."

"Yes. Can I count on you to keep it secret also?" She nodded, and I continued, "Someday I will have a reckoning with this Joseph Green, but I'm not ready for it yet. I wanted you to know because of Daniel, and the baby Kimberly is carrying."

"Another secret you've told me that you promised to keep," Natomi said.

"Are you questioning my judgement?" I asked, half joking. "If she has this baby, it will be one of Green's grandchildren. I thought someone in the family should understand what that means. I trust you implicitly to be discreet."

"I'm glad you told me," she said in reply. "Walter is very much against abortion, so I think it's likely she will have the child. I just hope she tells someone soon, so I don't have to keep this bottled up inside too long."

"So what do you want to do with this evidence?" I asked.

"Well, you indicated that you think Joel and Daniel can be tried and convicted based on this phone bill and a DNA test. I think you're right, and we should take it to Detective Moretti. First, though, we should talk to Kimberly."

So we did. Natomi drove Mara and I to the Burke residence, where Mara spoke alone with Kimberly while Natomi and I made small talk with Miyuki. I kept an eye open for Daniel, but if he was there he didn't show himself.

After a short time Mara came downstairs. A discreet nod told us that Kimberly had agreed, so we took our leave of Miyuki and headed for the police department.

We found Detective Moretti outside the precinct office talking to another detective, but when she recognized me getting out of a Japanese Consulate car she broke it off and led us inside.

"I should tell you, Detective," I began, "that this is Natomi Osaka of the Japanese Consulate. She is Kimberly's aunt, and my client."

"I see," said Moretti. "I wondered if she was the person paying your bills. Pleased to meet you, Ms. Osaka," she said, putting out her hand.

Natomi shook it warmly, then said "Call me Natomi. Now, I must ask Solomoriah to tell you what he has learned."

"Solomoriah?" said Moretti, rolling my name around in her mouth. "So that's what Solo is short for."

"No one ever called me that until I met my friend Mark, and he talked me into using the short form on my business cards." I grinned a rueful grin, then handed her the phone bill. "This is the bill for the PCS phone which Miyuki gave to Daniel. If you look at the night in question you will see that a call was received from Daniel's apartment phone to this phone while it was in the Bay Area. He asserted they were in Los Angeles at that time. I think if you get the bills for the apartment phone you will find a call was forwarded automatically to this PCS phone. They arranged things pretty well."

"I see," said Moretti. "It should be no problem to get that bill, and a copy of the Burke's home phone bill to round out the story. What does this prove, though? Do you suspect Daniel?"

"Kimberly told me that she thought the man who held her was Daniel. She based this on the sound of his breathing and his scent; I didn't think that kind of testimony would hold up well by itself in court, so I looked for some way to discredit Daniel's story. This is it."

"You can get a court order for a DNA sample from both men, can't you?" asked Natomi.

"Yeah, I think that'll fly with the judge. I'm going to ask the chief, and if he says yes we'll go arrest them both on suspicion. Do you think Kimberly will testify against her brother?"

Mara said, "I think so; she told me she would. She has a lot of repressed anger at him; she feels he betrayed her."

"Miyuki will help, I'm sure," I added. "She told me as much on the phone today."

"Walter might be a problem," said Natomi, "but he's never liked Joel. I think I'll pay them a visit today, after you arrest Daniel and Joel."

We left shortly thereafter. Natomi dropped us off at the hospital, at my request. There we found Valerie up and around, if a bit shaky, making plans to return home. She threw herself at me, hugging me until I thought my ribs would break. "Mom told me what you did. I don't know who you are, really, or how you did it, but I want you to know I'm grateful."

"You're welcome. I'm just sorry it took me so long to see the answer."

I hadn't even noticed Emily being in the room, but suddenly she was, well, climbing me. "I wanna thank you too, Mister Jones!"

I laughed, a laugh of joy I was almost unfamiliar with, as I picked her up and hugged her. "Call me Solo," I said.

Chapter 20, *The Wedding*

There's not much more of this story to tell. Daniel and Joel were arrested that afternoon at the Burke residence. I know that, in stories at least, the detective is supposed to confront the villain in the last chapter, but in fact I didn't even go. It wasn't my business anymore. I didn't see Joel in person until the trial, which was much later.

He was convicted, of course; but the surprise was that Daniel was convicted of rape also. The jury evidently felt that his direct involvement in restraining his sister was just as bad as if he'd done it himself.

But that was the trial, and it happened months later. The secret... Green's secret... never came out, at least not then. One thing that did make it into evidence is the fact that Daniel and Joel were related genetically so closely they might as well be brothers.

Maybe they were.

That evening, Doctor Harper decided that no more observation was needed, and discharged Valerie. The five of us went out to eat, to a family restaurant of course, and afterward Valerie invited us all back to her house. After Emily was in bed I told my story.

"That is the most outrageous story I ever heard," she announced at the end. "I guess I have to believe it, considering what Dad told me, but... it's just too much."

"Too many have learned at least part of my secrets. Besides my enemies, Joseph Green and his 'children,' and all of you, there is Natomi Osaka, and Raziya and Ghedi. Lots of other people have at least seen me work magic. I'm surprised my face hasn't already been in the papers."

"It has," said Mark, and I was reminded of the picture of me as a statue that ran right after I "awakened."

"I wasn't exactly the picture of health then, though. Recall I was missing most of my nose." Mark seemed to think that was funny, and then I was laughing too, and Mara was left to explain it to Valerie.

"I think you can trust Natomi to be discreet," said Mara. "I don't think Raziya and Ghedi will be any problem either."

"I'm glad you feel that way," I said. "I really am. Your hunches are worth more than most people's facts."

She just smiled in response to that. Then the conversation turned to more mundane topics for a time. I must admit I was surprised when Valerie announced, "Mark and I are getting remarried."

It does seem obvious in retrospect, but at the time it surprised me.

Mara spoke up then. "Solomoriah and I are also planning to be married!" The two women took over the conversation then, and before I knew it Mark and I had agreed to a double wedding in a month's time.

As Mara and Valerie made plans, Mark filled my wineglass and motioned me toward the back porch, and we adjourned there to relax.

I slept in the next day, which was of course Saturday. I spent the rest of the weekend enchanting my staff, with the enchantments of Binding and Invisibility, and then the Control enchantment to coordinate the others. By Sunday evening I was mentally wiped out, but the staff was done.

I came up from the basement with the invisible staff sections in my hands, and found Mara reading a magazine in the living room. She looked up and said, "I thought you would spend the entire weekend down there. Get much done?"

"Tell me what you think," I answered, and brought the staff sections together in front of me. *Clack-hiss-click-hiss-click* it extended to full length, becoming visible at the same time. Mara literally jumped out of her seat.

"Wow, that's what I think. Why doesn't it stay invisible?"

"It would flash into visibility each time it hit something. I couldn't see the point."

"How do you put it away?" she asked.

I said "Shirak" and the staff broke in two, *hiss-click-hiss-click*, and disappeared.

"Oh, a magic word," Mara said.

"Not exactly. A real 'magic' word would require the speaker to know the mental disciplines. I could write down the words to one of my spells, and teach you the gestures, and it would do nothing for you without the mental disciplines."

"So this doesn't?" she said. I held out my hands to her, giving her the staff. She fumbled a little with the invisible objects.

"Strike the butt ends together, and be sure there's room for it to extend." She did as I said and the staff extended and appeared again.

"What was that word again?"

"Shirak. It means 'stand down.'"

"Shirak," she said, and the staff folded and vanished. "Cool!"

I was too worn out to practice with it that evening. The next morning I showed it to Mark, teaching him how to work it; he also called it "cool." I went out to the back yard and began to practice. It didn't feel like my old staff, but it seemed quite serviceable. I, on the other hand, needed practice rather badly; I resolved to practice each morning for an hour.

The month passed quickly; we had two 'cases,' if you can call them that... both times were merely overactive imaginations. I didn't get paid for the first one, as the client asserted, "If it wasn't supernatural, I don't have to pay. Supernatural Investigator is what your card says, right?" The second time we hashed out the details of the contract a little better beforehand, and I did get paid.

Mark calls such jobs "Wolf Calls" after the old story about the boy who cried "wolf." He was surprised to learn just how old the story really was...

A few days before the wedding, Mark's parents arrived. It was my first visit to an airport, and I must admit to being impressed that ordinary men and women built such massive machines, without even a touch of magic.

Mark's mother, Mary, and his stepfather Robert Barton, met us at the baggage claim area. Robert was thin, and balding, and made me think of any number of scholars I had known in my previous life; Mary was short and round and possessed the most joyous smile. I immediately liked them, as did Mara, to Mark's obvious relief, and Valerie apologized to them for her treatment of Mark as soon as she saw them.

It seemed that the day of the wedding arrived very quickly. Valerie, it turned out, had joined the Palm Branch Church, one of many small Protestant groups that dot the landscape of California. Their church building was much too small for the ever-growing list of guests, and so Valerie imposed upon her parents for the use of their spacious back yard.

Of the early part of that day, I remember very little clearly. One thing does come back quite well, though. I had added the Burkes (well, Miyuki, Walter, and Kimberly) to the guest list, along with Natomi Osaka, and they all attended. Of course Mara and Valerie were in the house getting dressed; so when I saw Kimberly sitting by herself, I sat down beside her.

I noticed as I did so that she was showing, just a little bit; her dress fit her a bit tightly around her middle. One might not see it if one didn't already know.

"How are you doing?" I asked her.

"Fine, I guess. It's been very hard for all of us." She paused a bit, but I knew she had more to say. "Daniel got out on bail, did you know that? He wasn't supposed to come back to the house, but he did. I was scared when I saw him on the stairs, but he convinced me to listen to him." Again she paused.

"He told me everything," she said, "all about the Changelings. That's what they call themselves, you know."

"I didn't know that," I said. "but I think I know a lot about them otherwise. There's one thing I don't understand... why aren't they discovered as babies?"

"He told me about that," she said. "His... female parts didn't develop until he was eleven. Before that, he didn't even know he wasn't just like all the other boys. They know each other, by smell I think; he started hanging with a pack of other young Changelings. I told you about that time, didn't I? We just thought they were, you know, misfits."

"I see," I said. There were other questions I would have liked to ask her, but just then Miyuki came over, and we changed topics pretty fast.

Emily was our flower girl, and Art agreed to give away both brides. Mark and I stood there waiting before Brother Whitacre as they came down the aisle. Both were beautiful, of course, but they couldn't have looked more different otherwise... Mara tall and dark, Valerie petite, pale skinned and redheaded.

It was a beautiful ceremony... but I must admit that much of it is now a blur. It's a good thing that Mark's stepdad was recording it all on videotape.

Unfortunately, Mara and I didn't get a chance for a honeymoon, at least not right away... but that's another story.