

THE ADVENTURES OF SOLO JONES

Book 3

Magus

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Chapter 1, *The Summons*

I awoke with the dawn. For a moment I was disoriented, but then I rolled over and saw Mara lying beside me asleep, and everything came back to me. The night before had been our wedding night.

So I was surprised to find myself awake at dawn; for we had been up quite late. But I was awake, and I didn't want to return to sleep. I wanted to wake up Mara.

I lay there looking at her beautiful face for a long time before I decided that the right thing to do was to let her sleep. I got up as quietly as I could and went about my morning business in the bath; then I dressed in T-shirt, sweatpants and sneakers, picked up my staff (which I left assembled against the wall in the bedroom when not carrying it) and went downstairs to practice.

In the preceding month we had finished the second terrace, which was much larger than the first. We built a patio of sorts from square concrete blocks, some gray and some red, which I laid out in a pattern I remembered from the city of Gharu many, many years ago. This was where I went to practice with my weapon.

I worked out for perhaps an hour in the cool morning air before I heard the back door close. As I turned I saw Mara, dressed much as I was, coming down to me with two steaming mugs of *xocholotl* and a huge smile.

"Good morning, love," she said as she approached.

"Good morning to you. I didn't know how long you might sleep." I took the mug she offered and drank the hot liquid quickly. It was good, but for once I would rather have had water.

Mara sipped at her mug, looking over the rim at me with an unreadable expression. I was about to ask what she was thinking, but she spoke first.

"Teach me," she said, pointing at my staff, which I had laid on the concrete.

"You want to learn to fight with the staff?"

"It's been quiet the last month or so," she said, "but I remember the first weeks after you awoke, how many men and monsters you fought. I was there for some of the fights, remember? I want to be able to protect myself."

"How can I deny you?"

It was, of course, a rhetorical question, as I immediately picked up the staff and handed it to her. Mara is nearly as tall as me (and I am six feet even), and she is strong and reasonably fit, so this training seemed promising. I taught her the stances and the basic moves, which she learned easily; I was encouraged, but it's a long way from the basics to becoming a warrior.

Very quickly I found myself hampered by the fact that we had only one staff. I had to take it, show her a movement, then give it back over and over. I briefly considered making her a staff just like mine, but for training purposes a regular staff would be better.

Mara was practicing a sweeping movement, designed to trip one's opponent, when we both heard "Married a day and already fighting!"

Mark was standing on the back porch, soda in hand, watching us. We had both been so wrapped up in what we were doing that we didn't notice him.

"Good morning," we called out in harmony. Mara giggled, and I had to smile.

"You obviously can't hear the phone out here," he said. "There's a message on the machine to call Natomi Osaka."

"I guess I'd better do that, then," I said.

"Do you mind if I practice a while?" asked Mara.

"Go ahead," I said, and then I kissed her.

After a few moments I heard Mark clear his throat. "I'm coming, I'm coming," I said, pulling away from Mara. At the door I turned a moment and watched her. I think I could have done that all day, but a call from Natomi could only mean business.

Mark was dialing the phone as I entered the office. He handed the receiver to me, and I heard "Japanese Consulate, how may I help you?"

"This is Solo Jones, returning Natomi Osaka's call."

"One moment please," she replied. The hold music barely had time to begin before Natomi was on the phone.

"I need to speak to you in person," she said. "Something I promised you is weighing on me now. Can you come this morning?"

"Yes," I answered. "I'll be there right away."

I went out and told Mara where I was going. "You'd better change clothes," she said, reminding me that I was wearing sweaty exercise clothing. I went up to the bedroom to change, with Mara close behind; she sat on the edge of the bed and watched me silently. "Do you want this?" she said, holding out my staff after I finished dressing.

"I suppose I should go prepared for anything," I answered. I opened the top drawer of "my" chest of drawers and felt for the invisible clips Mark and I had

engineered to hold the staff. We had thought to put them on my belt, but it turned out they worked better in the outside corners of my front jeans pockets.

"Shirak," said Mara, and *hiss-click-hiss-click* the staff collapsed and disappeared. I took the invisible sections from her and secured them in the clips. Then she kissed me. "See you later, husband," she said with a grin.

"I look forward to it, wife," I said, grinning back.

"Are you driving this time?" asked Mark when I made it outside. Mark had been teaching me to drive for about a month, and I had my learner's permit.

"No, we're in a bit of a hurry, so I suppose you'd better do it."

"Next stop, 50 Fremont Center," he said as I buckled my seatbelt.

The trip was uneventful. After doing some driving myself I found that Mark's driving didn't worry me so much; I discovered I was more afraid of my own driving.

We parked in a nearby parking structure and went in. The receptionist at the desk marked "Information" looked familiar, but I couldn't be sure if she was the same one I had seen before. We entered the elevator and I pushed the button marked 23.

The Consulate was something of a madhouse; there were people going in all directions. The only other time I had ever been here was well after hours, and now I wasn't sure which way led to Natomi's office.

Then Mark said, "There she is!" We plowed through the crowded entry area to where she stood talking to a distinguished-looking older Japanese man.

"Are you gentlemen looking for me?" he said as we approached, and Natomi, who had been facing away, turned and saw us.

"No, sir," she said, before we could speak, "they're here to see me."

He looked a little perturbed. "Take them back into your office, please. It might be best if they left by the back elevator." She bowed to him, and then led us to her office.

We sat in the indicated chairs as she closed the door, shutting out the noise and confusion of the hallways. "There is a visiting dignitary on his way," she said as she sat down. "I would have come to you otherwise. Thank you for coming, Solomoriah."

"It's no problem," I said. "What did you promise me which is weighing on you now?"

"You made me promise to keep the secret of Joseph Green's people. Now it seems they have killed an important mage, John Harkin, and the Conclave doesn't know who did it."

"The Conclave?" I asked.

"Remember I told you that there were a handful of mages in the Bay Area? They are all members of the Conclave, or apprentices to members. It's sort of a club, I guess; mostly they seem to bicker and fight under the cover of polite social interaction. The thing is, they do take care of their members when there are threats from the outside. Now they want to know who killed John Harkin, and I think it was Green's people."

"I've learned they call themselves Changelings," I said. "Tell me about this John Harkin."

"He was the chairman of the Conclave; a pretty good leader overall. His apprentice, Franklin Evans, found him decapitated in his study with no sign of who did it. He called the police, of course, and then he called the vicechairman, Ron Harris. He is the chairman now, and he has called a meeting of the full Conclave for tonight."

"This does sound like a Changeling murder, but why would they care about him?" I asked. "Do you think he knew their secret?"

"I don't know, but what other suspect is there?"

"I wouldn't know. I've only been in town two months."

"That's another thing I'm curious about, Solomoriah. You seem to have a lot of secrets... I hope you trust me with them someday."

"Someday, perhaps," I answered. "So you want to tell the Conclave about the Changelings?"

"I think it would be prudent. I'd like you to come along, and bring one of those swords you said you captured from them."

"The meeting is tonight, you said. Where, and at what time?"

"Eight PM, at the office of Ron Harris. He has a nightclub down in the SOMA area, near the Bay Bridge." She wrote the address on the back of one of her business cards and handed it to me.

"Ah, near the Ley line junction I've seen there," I said. "What can you tell me about the Conclave members?"

"They all wish to be called Magus, a title they were given when they joined the Conclave. With Harkin gone, there will only be four of them... Moses Rook, Phillip Silva, Schuyler Norton, and of course Ron Harris."

I sat back in my chair as Natomi continued. "Moses Rook and Phillip Silva are both professors. Moses teaches African History at Berkeley, and Phillip teaches Philosophy at Golden Gate University. Schuyler Norton is a musician, but he really lives off his generous inheritance; he is also very skilled at magic. Ron Harris owns a nightclub, as I told you, and it is very popular; he also has a hand in more local businesses than you can easily count. Ron is a master of magics of influence, control, and domination, and it is easy to understand why if you know his personality."

"Doesn't sound like you much like him," said Mark.

Natomi shivered slightly. "He worries me, but of all the remaining Conclave members he's the one most suited to leadership."

"Very well, I will attend the meeting," I said, looking at the business card. "Should I meet you at this address?"

"Why don't I pick you up?" she asked.

"Fine," I answered. I was about to say more when Natomi's phone beeped at her. It was someone informing her of a minor disaster she needed to attend to. Quickly I shook her hand, then Mark and I left, by the back way as the older man had asked. I wondered if he was the Consul?

Chapter 2, *Risky Shopping*

The meeting with Natomi hadn't taken very long, so I decided to do some shopping. "Mark, do you know where I might be able to buy practice staves for Mara and myself?"

"A martial arts store, I guess," he answered. "I drive by a place on the way to work every day that sells stuff like that." A few minutes later he had found not only the store, but a streetside parking space as well. We went in.

The establishment was much larger than I expected; evidently it was once a warehouse, and few interior walls had been added. Besides a fully stocked (as far as I could tell) weapons and equipment shop, there were also two large spaces outfitted for practice and training sessions. One such space was occupied by a group performing Tai Chi exercises, and the other was unused.

"Over here," called Mark, and I stopped gawking about and went to him. He was pointing out the varieties of bo staff on display there. The bo is tapered slightly at the ends, making it very similar to my extensible staff; so it seemed a natural choice.

I picked up one of a length similar to my extensible staff, and examined it, feeling its weight and balance in my hands. "This staff feels pretty good," I said. "Much more natural than my metal staff. I like it." As Mark nodded absently I picked up a second staff of the same size and headed for the checkout.

I saw then what had Mark's attention. A short, muscular Oriental man was leaning on the checkout counter, obviously trying to flirt with the pretty blonde clerk. She was just as obviously ignoring him, and she gave me a big smile (of relief I'm sure) as I approached. "Did you find everything you needed?" she asked brightly.

"Yes, I think so," I said as I handed her the staves. She quickly rung them up as I fumbled for my wallet.

"You any good with those?" asked the smirking stranger.

"I am," I answered. "I was trained in the use of the quarterstaff, but I also know the use of the bo."

"Bet you can't take me," he said. "A hundred dollars says you can't."

"You're on," I said immediately. I was looking forward to the workout.

"Hey, that's against the rules here, Cheng," said the clerk. "I could get in a lot of trouble!"

He turned to her. "Hey, it's just practice if you don't see the money, isn't it?" he asked. "I'll even pay his rental." He pulled out some cash and paid her, and reluctantly she rang it up.

It turned out that Cheng had his own staff there already; I later learned he was an employee. He led me to the unused practice area, and I sat down to remove my shoes and socks before stepping onto the mat. "What are the rules of this contest?" I asked him as I did so.

"Three falls. The first to put his opponent on the mat three times wins." He waited less than patiently for me to get up, twirling his bo like a baton. It was a longer model than I had selected, but that didn't worry me. Maybe it should have.

I picked up one of the staves I had just purchased, and faced off against him. He bowed, and I emulated him; he assumed a defensive stance, and again I did likewise. Then we began in earnest.

He was *fast*, far faster than I ever expected of such a muscular man, and it was all I could do to keep up with him. I'd like to say I let him take the offensive, but he took it whether I wanted him to or not. In a few moments I was on the floor, tripped by a very unfamiliar move.

He stepped away, smirking again, as I stood up. Again he came at me, but this time I was more aggressive, and the match became more even.

Shortly I was on the mat again. Mark called, "Hey, no fair!" as I fell. I had not considered that he might use his feet as well as his staff, so I fell easily when he swept behind my knee with his foot while bearing his staff down against mine.

Only my pride was bruised. I got up slowly, taking his measure as if seeing him for the first time. Behind that arrogant smirk was a true warrior, and I had to treat him that way.

As I stood up I saw that some of the other customers had gathered around and were watching us; it made me a bit self-conscious, but then I realized I couldn't afford to let anything distract me.

A third time we went at each other, and this time it was obvious that no quarter would be asked or given. I avoided the tripping maneuver this time, and he said a word in Chinese (I assume) which I took to be a curse word. We battled on for what seemed an eternity, with every strike by either of us blocked or avoided by the other.

Finally I saw a chance. He seemed weak on the left side; The more we fought the more obvious it became. I began to concentrate my attacks to his right, then just as he began to fall into a rhythm of block, attack, block, attack I ducked low and swept my staff to his left. I hit his leg just above the knee and he fell.

I stood up, and waited for him. He came to his feet with a maneuver I had seen on television and assumed was fiction; but by now I was ready for anything, so he did not surprise me. His pride was bruised now, I could tell, for he came at me like an angry lion. I decided then to play a game with him.

I pretended I was tired, and that his attack was so fierce that I could not deal with it. I let him drive me backward, and we circled the mat that way, with him savagely striking at me and me barely blocking his strikes.

This time I waited until he swung at me with the right end of his staff at a high angle, an attack he used infrequently but with bone-jarring power. Instead of blocking it I deflected it with the right end of my staff, stepping to my left as I did so, and then I turned and brought the other end of my staff into his legs.

Again he fell. Now the score was tied.

This time he got up slowly, taking my measure. In that long moment I realized I had learned several maneuvers watching him fight, maneuvers I would have to practice later. Now, though, it was time for the endgame; he came at me again.

He fought more thoughtfully now, his smirk forgotten, as we probed at each other's defenses. I didn't have to pretend to be tired anymore. To list all the strikes, blocks, and dodges would be tedious in the extreme, and it was more by chance than skill that I found an opening and felled him again.

I offered a hand to help him up. His smirk stayed away as he counted out the twenties to me, the clerk's view blocked by Mark. I folded the bills in my hand and looked him in the eyes. "Cheng, you are a true warrior. It could have been either of us on the floor that last time. I cannot take your money." I placed the folded bills in his seemingly nerveless hand, stepped back, bowed to him, and quickly walked into the now-dispersing crowd.

"What did you do **that** for?" asked Mark, looking irritated. "He cheated!"

"This was a battle, Mark, not a game. He fought cleverly."

"Whatever," he said, unconvinced. I sat down on a chair near the practice area to put my shoes and socks back on, and carefully checked my invisible staff to ensure the sections were not loose in the clips. Careless of me to forget them.

Before we left, I approached the clerk. "Say, miss," I said, "do you sell those practice mats here?"

"Yes, sir," she answered. "How many do you need?"

"Well, I have a patio fifteen yards square; I'd like to cover at least a ten by ten area of it." She worked some figures on paper, then consulted her computer.

"I'm sorry sir, we don't have anything in stock that will work. Would you like to custom-order?" I agreed, and made arrangements to have the large mat sections delivered. She told me that I could expect delivery in about a week.

As I turned around to leave I saw that Cheng was gone. I wondered if I had embarrassed him by returning the money; sometimes even now I forget how much customs change in thirteen thousand years.

Chapter 3, *All The Right Moves*

When we got back to the house it was almost lunchtime. Mark, as was now usual, was planning to eat with Valerie, so he let me out at the front of the house. "Gotta go," he said. "See you at one!"

I found Mara in the kitchen preparing our meal. I came in carrying the staves, and she said "Oh, good, now we don't have to pass yours back and forth. But why did you get two?"

I kissed her and said "Hello to you also." She returned my smile, and I said "I want to practice fairly with you. We'll be beyond practicing moves and into actual sparring pretty quickly."

"We need to find a different place to practice then," she said, "or we'll bust our butts on that concrete."

"Already taken care of, my love. I ordered some large practice mat sections, enough to cover a ten by ten yard area." She smiled, and kissed me again, then noticed the pork chops she was frying needed her attention. I put the staves in the utility room (which is across the hall from the kitchen, directly behind the office).

As we sat down to eat, Mara said "Tell me about the meeting with Natomi. What did she want?"

"She told me a mage has been killed, beheaded to be exact, and she suspects the Changelings. I have to say I agree in principle, for I have never fought a more dangerous opponent than the Changeling swordsmen, but there are so many things I don't know yet about this age... I don't feel safe saying it couldn't have been anyone else."

"Who was this mage?"

"His name was John Harkin, and he was the leader of a group called the Conclave. Evidently all the mages in the area are either members or apprentices to members, as she put it, except for me. The new leader, their old vicechairman, is a man named Ron Harris. He owns a nightclub near the Bay Bridge." I pulled out the business card and showed the address to Mara.

"AJ's Place. I've heard of it; it's supposed to be pretty popular. I wouldn't call it close to the Bay Bridge though."

"Close enough; a Ley line junction is in easy tapping range."

"What does the Bay Bridge have to do with the Ley lines?" she asked, looking perplexed.

"I don't know, but both the Bay Bridge and the Golden Gate are directly under the lines."

"Wow. I wonder why?"

"I don't know; it's a puzzle I'd like to solve someday. Perhaps even people who can't see the lines are still attracted to them?"

Our conversation wandered off into other areas as I helped clear away the dishes. Mara shooed me out of the kitchen when she heard Mark coming in the front door, and I met him in the office. After a brief discussion of the upcoming meeting I went outside to try the moves I had seen Cheng perform; most turned out to be within my ability.

I was looking away from the house when I heard "May I join you?" I jumped a bit in surprise.

I said "Some warrior, eh?" as I turned toward Mara (for that's who it was). "If I don't pay better attention than that even this ring won't save me." I toyed with the Ring of Regeneration on my right hand; I still wasn't comfortable with it there, but tradition demands the wedding ring on the left hand.

I put aside my metal staff and took one of the practice staves from Mara, and then I spent the rest of the afternoon teaching her. It was a warm afternoon, warmer than I prefer for practice, but I was enjoying it too much to complain. I hoped that the exercise mats would arrive soon so we could actually spar with each other.

At least Mark didn't surprise me. "Quitting time, boss!" he called down from the back porch. "Gotta go home!"

I walked toward the house. "Any calls I need to know about?"

"Just the usual cranks and telemarketers. I'd come get you if it was important."

"Thanks, Mark," said Mara.

"For what?" he replied.

"Giving us the afternoon off."

As Mark left, Mara and I went upstairs for a much-needed shower. We took rather longer than necessary.

Though she had not said so, I expected to see Natomi around seven to seven-thirty. After I was dressed (finally) I went down to the small room in the basement to select a sword. I chose a straight-bladed sword, mainly because it seemed to have the most powerful enchantments.

I returned upstairs with my prize, and found Mara in the living room. "Are you going to walk into a crowded nightclub with a bare sword in your hands?" she asked.

"I didn't have the sense to take one of their scabbards, any of the times I fought them." I replied. "Have you a suggestion?"

"Invisible?" she half-answered, half-asked. I shook my head.

"No, I need to cover the blade. It's incredibly sharp, you know."

"Wait a moment," she said, and left the room. She returned with a piece of heavy drapery fabric left over from our renovation, a yard and a half by two and a half yards in size. Mara laid it out on the floor, and I folded it in half and then rolled the sword up in it. The blade could still cut the fabric, but the multiple layers at least made it safe to hold.

"Thanks, Mara," I said, kissing her. "I don't know if they are going to feed me or not at this club; perhaps I should have a sandwich?" Mara agreed, and followed me into the kitchen.

I can't cook, unless you count roasting game on a spit over a campfire, but at least I can assemble a cold-cut sandwich.

At seven sharp the doorbell rang. I picked up the wrapped sword and cast Invisibility on it, as Mara answered the door. "Natomi, welcome! Please come in!"

"Good evening," I said as she entered. She had changed from her business clothes into more fashionable clothing, and once again I was reminded that I didn't know how old she really was. Natomi is one of those women who ages so gracefully that you can't tell if she's twenty-five or forty-five. Her poise and bearing are such that I always assumed she was much older than I, but now she was in a sexy blue dress and more aggressive makeup, and she looked more like the twenty-five end of the spectrum.

In my usual dark jeans and button shirt, I felt a bit like a beggar next to her. Mara smiled a mischievous smile, and I knew she saw it in my face. "Don't worry, love, you'll be fine," she said, and kissed me goodbye.

"See you later, Mara. I don't have any idea how long this will take."

"I'll be waiting," she answered, and closed the door slowly behind me. I got into Natomi's car and we left.

On the ride to the nightclub I caught myself looking at Natomi's leg, exposed by the long slit in the side of her dress. As I made myself look away I realized she had caught me too.

She smiled a disarming smile, then said "I assume that thing you are holding is a sword?" Of course it was invisible, but I was still holding it in my left hand; I noticed how strange my fingers looked where they were pressed against the invisible fabric.

"Yes," I answered, relieved that she had not been offended by my attention. "I didn't think to collect a scabbard for any of the swords I captured, so Mara found some heavy fabric to wrap it in. I thought it best to carry it invisibly."

"I tried to think of anything I could tell you to make this meeting go smoothly, but all I can say is that I'll be with you all the way." She seemed lost in thought for a moment, then said "I've never had trouble with the Conclave before, but then I always got along well with John. I hope Ron is as easy to deal with."

"Aren't you a member of the Conclave?"

"No. I am already a member of a... parallel group. In my home country, that is."

"Ah. I didn't know." She didn't offer more details, and if I started asking questions she might expect me to offer answers also; so I left it alone. "You have said that Ron Harris is not your favorite person. Should I expect trouble?"

"As long as he gets his way he's no problem. I doubt you have anything to say that he doesn't want to hear, at least not right now." Her attention was commanded by traffic for a moment, and then I realized we had arrived. She pulled up in front of the building, and as we both got out a young man in a mostly purple tie-dye T-shirt approached us. I was puzzled, but when Natomi gave him her keys I realized he must be a valet.

The bouncer at the door wore an identical T-shirt, but he filled his with muscles. He was not as tall as Ghedi but he looked as if he could arm-wrestle him. He looked over his dark glasses at us, then said "Ms. Osaka, good evening. Is he with you?"

She hooked her hand around my right elbow and smiled, and the bouncer took that for an answer. He motioned for those at the head of the waiting line to move aside for us to enter, and I seemed to feel eyes stabbing into me from behind like so many daggers.

The noise (well, music) inside was deafening, and I had never seen so many people crowded into such a small place before. They were young and "hip" for the most part, and I felt even more out of place. True, many were as old or older than I, but most of my adult life has been grim and serious; as a consequence I often feel much older than my "peers."

A waiter in yet another purple tie-dye T-shirt met us. "Mister Harris told me that you should wait a while," he yelled. "The others aren't here yet." He led us to the

bar, and told the tie-dyed, bald-headed bartender that our drinks were on the boss.

Natomi leaned close to me and said "You want to drink, or dance?" I looked at the dancers crowding the floor; it was no style of dancing I had ever learned. As I looked a moment longer I realized the traditional and tribal dances I was taught in my youth were really much more difficult.

A twinge of guilt stopped me; I had never taken Mara dancing, so how could I do so with Natomi? But I had to do something, or stand around looking foolish, so I nodded toward the dance floor.

As we moved toward the dance floor I suddenly remembered the sword; what would I do with it? I realized then that no one would hear me casting spells over the cacophony of the music, so I released a Spirit Servant spell. The Servant carried the sword aloft at my bidding, where it would remain until its energy ran out or I recalled it. Doing so little work, the Servant would last a long time, so I could forget about it for the moment. Just in time, I thought, as Natomi suddenly turned toward me and began to move and sway.

Let me say that I'm glad no one else I knew saw me. At least to start with, I was pitiful, and Natomi was so natural and graceful that I must have seemed even worse by comparison. I was just beginning to get things figured out when the waiter approached us, pushing through the dancers like they were so much underbrush in the jungle. "Mister Harris says it's time," he yelled, and we followed him out.

Chapter 4, *The Meeting*

The office was up a flight of metal stairs; the view over the dance floor made me even more aware just how many dancers there actually were. I recalled the Servant as we climbed, and took the sword from it at the landing. The door at the top opened into a reception area, though there was no receptionist present. As the "outer" door was closed, the sudden cessation of the loud music left my ears ringing. I chilled slightly as the cool air hit my sweaty skin, and I saw Natomi shiver also.

The waiter knocked on the inner door, and then opened it. He waved us in, and closed the door behind us; and I got my first look at the Conclave.

The room beyond was large and opulent, with an oak desk in the far corner and a large oak conference table closer to the door. Around the far end of the table were arrayed the men (why only men, I wondered) of the Conclave. The man at the head of the table stood, motioning us toward seats at the closer end.

"Welcome, Natomi. I assume this is Solomoriah Jones?"

"I am," I answered for myself. "I assume you are Ron Harris?"

"I am," he answered with a slightly forced smile. "This is Moses Rook," he said, indicating a distinguished, older black man with salt-and-pepper hair; "Doc Silva," waving toward a similarly distinguished, balding white man; "Schuyler Norton," a long-haired "rock star" right down to the torn jeans, boots, and tight black T-shirt; and finally indicating a casually dressed younger man, "and this is Franklin Evans, John Harkin's apprentice. Please, be seated."

Ron leaned back in his chair. "Now, Natomi, please tell the Conclave what you told me on the phone today."

"About a month ago I hired Solomoriah to investigate the rape of my niece. The circumstances of the rape were strange... she was held by one man while another raped her, but neither of them spoke, nor did they show any other interest in her."

"No taunting, fondling, or physical abuse?" asked Doc Silva.

"None," she answered. "As I said, it was very strange. I would have investigated myself, but you all know that my position doesn't allow for that sort of activity. I had... encountered Solomoriah earlier and was aware of his defeat of the Dreamwalker, and when I learned he was billing himself as a Supernatural Investigator I decided to hire him."

Moses Rook leaned forward, a puzzled look on his face. "So you thought there was something supernatural about the rape?"

"Not really; but when I encountered Solomoriah I did a favor for him. I hoped he would reciprocate, and he did."

"And what did he tell you about the rape?" asked Moses.

"I should let him tell you his story now," she answered.

All eyes were on me. I had laid the sword across my lap when I sat down, and now I laid it on the table, dismissing the Invisibility. I turned down the end of the wrapping and drew out the sword, and heard a sudden drawing of breath from several of those present.

"It was two weeks, about, since I defeated the Dreamwalker," I began. "I was in my backyard, doing maintenance to the grounds I had taken from him."

Doc Silva interrupted me at this point. "How did you defeat him? And how did you manage to legally acquire the house?"

"All I'll say," I answered, "is that his reclusive nature made the latter problem easy to solve. As to the first question, I must decline to answer."

"I see," he replied. "Go on, please. I believe you were telling us about your home improvement project?"

"Not the project, but rather the interruption. I was made aware of activity in the yard, and as soon as I released my Mystic Vision spell, I saw the outline of an invisible man sneaking about the yard. He must have been able to see the magic, for he dropped his cover and attacked me with a sword like this one, though it was a saber rather than a straight sword."

The members of the Conclave were passing the sword around as I spoke, examining it. All were impressed by the fine edge of the blade. Moses said, "So tell us, why did he attack you?"

"After I defeated him, which was no small matter due to his weapon and his magical protection, I interrogated him. I learned little. He claimed to believe I was Dreamwalker's apprentice. He lied a lot, so I was unsure of much else at that time. Natomi hired me later, and I didn't really think there was a connection to the case she hired me for, but I found myself fighting them repeatedly after that. I collected four more swords, of which this is one."

"So what was the connection?" asked Doc.

"I discovered them to be a different species than us." I watched as all present leaned in, looks of disbelief on their faces. "They call themselves Changelings, and they claim to be all male and half female. In other words, they need human females only when one of them produces an egg which is fertilized by another; they need a normal human female to implant it in."

"So they aren't human at all?" said Ron Harris. He hadn't had much to say up to this point, which struck me strange; he was supposed to be the controlling sort, after all.

"I don't know enough of the science to answer that," I said. "But they certainly aren't the same sort of human as we are."

"So the rapists were Changelings?" asked Moses.

"Yes, but not trained warriors with magic powers. It seems only a few are so gifted. I learned that the swordsmen work for a Changeling called Joseph Green, who is a sort of patriarch to them, if that term even applies. Secrecy is important to them, as I'm sure you can see, and they wanted to kill me before I learned about them. I forced them into a truce of sorts, but it can't last."

Moses leaned back, rubbing his chin. "Especially since you've told us now."

"Indeed. I am depending on your discretion and judgement."

"Okay, Solo, cool story," said Schuyler Norton, speaking for the first time since my arrival. "But how do we know these Changeling dudes killed John?"

"I don't," I answered. "I'm not saying there is any connection. The circumstances are suspicious, though; who else could kill a mage by beheading him?"

"There's something else I'm curious about," said Silva. "You've been in San Francisco, what, two months now? Why haven't you presented yourself to the Conclave before now?"

"I didn't even know about the Conclave until today," I answered. This got almost as incredulous a response as my assertions about the Changelings.

"How is that possible?" asked Silva. "How did you attain this level of skill without ever learning about the Society?"

"I spent my early years in Spain with my parents. When I came of age, I left with friends and 'bummed around' North Africa. We lived hand to mouth, as they say, but we enjoyed it. Then I learned of the man who would become my master, and after my remaining duties to my friends were discharged I entered his service."

I saw that I had the full attention of my audience. "I learned a lot from him, but we didn't see eye to eye, as they say, on a number of things, and I left him before completing my apprenticeship. I realized later how foolish that was, but at the time it seemed the only thing to do.

"I spent the next several years wandering around the coast of Africa, using the powers I had gained to fight on the side of the innocent and downtrodden. I found a lot of people like that in Africa, so I never lacked for something to do. Along the way I occasionally encountered mages; if they were good, or at least

not evil, I would try to exchange knowledge with them. If indeed I met an evil mage, one who used people, or hurt or killed them for his own pleasure, I would fight them. Usually I won."

I noticed Moses Rook frowning, but I decided to ignore him. "Eventually I decided, pretty much on a whim, to cross the ocean to South America. I have an interest in archaeology and had heard stories of some strange connections between the ancient civilizations of Africa and the Americas that I wanted to learn about firsthand. It was after a brief adventure in the mountains of Columbia that I learned of my parent's deaths. I came to the United States, the curious homeland I knew very little about, to settle their estate. I wandered a while and discovered San Francisco to be much to my liking, so I found an apartment and stayed a while. Then the Dreamwalker learned of me, and I had to battle him. As you know, I won."

Moses was still frowning, but he did not question my story. After a moment Doc Silva said, "Interesting. It is true that the Society only extends partially into northern Africa, and is scattered at best in South America, so perhaps I can see how it is that you never heard of us. If you intend to remain in the United States, you had best see about joining."

A veiled threat? "I see. How is this done?"

Ron spoke then. "Usually you would be apprenticed to a Magus, a member of the Conclave of whatever city or district you are in; the Conclave would induct you at that level. Later, when you meet the requirements you would be considered for the rank of Magus."

"What are the requirements?" I asked.

"First, that you demonstrate your knowledge of magic by creating at least one spell of your own. Second, you must enchant an item; the more complex or powerful the better. Third, your master must nominate you for the rank."

"As to the first, I have not created any spells 'from scratch' as they say, but I have amended many of my own spells. For the second, well..." I slid the chair back and stood up, to ensure that no one was in the way; then I grabbed the sections of my staff and struck them together with a slight flourish. *Clank-hiss-click-hiss-click* the staff appeared and extended, and I was pleased to see that Moses and Doc appeared to be impressed. I laid the staff on the table beside the sword so that they could inspect it.

After a moment I continued. "As to the third, I have no master."

Moses looked up at me, and I realized I was still standing. "It is a formality really," he said. "I would be happy to be your master for a day. If you would tell me more about the spells you have amended, and I feel that they qualify, I would immediately nominate you."

Ron spoke up then. "I don't think there would be much problem with the examination either, if as Moses says your amendments qualify you. This staff is not a masterpiece, but it is a fine work, and certainly shows you understand the art of enchantment." He seemed pleased somehow... I wondered why?

"Thank you," I said, reaching out to take my staff. "Shirak." When the staff was fully retracted and once again invisible I put it back in the clips and sat down.

I looked at Moses. "I'll consider your kind offer. I can see the advantages of belonging to such an organization, but I'd like to talk with you more before making my decision."

As Moses nodded graciously to me Ron said, "We need to meet now in closed session to consider our actions in the wake of John's death. Natomi, Solomoriah, and Franklin, you are dismissed." As I stood up I noticed for the first time the papers in front of Doc Silva; he was making notes. I supposed he must be the secretary to the group.

"Solomoriah, your sword..." said Ron.

"Keep it. I have no use for it, and if I did I have others. If you don't want it, so far as I care you may drop it in the Bay." I held the door for Natomi and Franklin, then followed them out into the reception area.

Chapter 5, *Embarcadero By Moonlight*

The air was cooler in the reception area than in the previous room, and I realized I was sweating slightly. Surely, I thought, it hadn't been that warm in there? As I closed the inner door behind us Franklin said, "Solomoriah, I'd like to hire you to investigate the murder of my mentor."

I was a bit surprised at this, but I quoted him my "usual" fees. He said, "I don't have it now, but I will soon. John showed me his will a while back, and I'm to receive a third of his assets and his house. His sister in Stockton gets the other two-thirds."

"You realize that makes you a suspect," I said.

"Yeah. I didn't do it though," he replied. "I don't even know how it was done, but that sword you showed us could have done it."

"I have no love for the Changelings, but I can't think of any reason why they would attack your master."

"Will you take my case?" he asked. I thought about it briefly.

"Yes. Can I get access to his house?"

"I don't know. The police forensics team is still going over it with a fine toothed comb. I'll ask."

"Here," I said, giving him a business card. "Are you available tomorrow morning?" He nodded, and I continued, "Come by that address in the morning after nine and we'll talk more."

We shook hands, and then I braced myself for the onslaught of the dance music. I don't know how it's possible, but it was louder than before. At the foot of the stairs Natomi asked me if I wanted to dance some more (at least I think that's what she said), but I shook my head and started for the door.

Natomi came up beside me and hooked her arm around my elbow again. She had a big smile on her beautiful face, and I wondered what had made her so happy.

It was dark; not surprising, as we had been more than an hour in the club. The tie-dyed valet quickly retrieved Natomi's car, and I tipped him. I must have given him plenty, because he took the money with a smile and said "Hope to see you again soon sir!" I found myself thinking about how some things never change where humans are involved.

I got in the car quickly, for it was chilly and I had neglected to bring a jacket. Natomi was still smiling, seeming unaffected by the cold, as she started the car and drove down toward the waterfront. As she turned onto the Embarcadero I

found myself thinking of other things that never change, for I had noticed the little glances, the ever-so-subtle movements...

Was she really flirting with me? This Natomi Osaka seemed very different than the one I met almost two months before at 50 Fremont Center, or for that matter the one who had summoned me that very morning. Yet, I was sure that she had deliberately exposed even more of her leg than on the trip to the nightclub; and the Embarcadero, though certainly an interesting and often beautiful drive, was hardly the most efficient way to get me home.

Then she turned toward me, and though it was dark outside it seemed that her smile warmed my face like sunshine.

I doubt I could have been much more uncomfortable. Did Natomi really think I would cheat on my wife? I began to doubt she was thinking at all. But no matter how attractive Natomi was (and she was very attractive) my heart would always be Mara's.

Natomi was also a powerful ally, though, and I had few enough allies in those days. I didn't want to anger her.

Finally I scraped up enough courage to speak. "Natomi, what are you doing?"

"What am I doing?" she said, a half-smile, half-frown on her face. "What do you mean?"

"I think you know what I am talking about."

Her smile fled from her face, leaving the car seemingly darker. After a moment of staring straight ahead she said, "I'm sorry. I'm afraid my feelings have been less than honorable."

"Natomi, though I would not have expected this when I first met you, I consider you a friend. I don't want that to change. You must know how much I love Mara; we were just married, after all."

"I know," she said, her shoulders slumping. "I can't help but wonder if things would have been different had I met you first."

"That's pretty well impossible," I said. "Stop along here somewhere; I want to tell you a story." She turned onto a side-street and found a place to park, then looked at me expectantly.

"That story I told about my past at the meeting was partially true... enough so that, should any of them be somehow reading my mind or otherwise monitoring me for lies they would be confused. I have practiced it over and over to fix it in my mind so that no stray thoughts would give me away. Now I'll tell you the whole truth, because you are my friend. Do you know the spell of Mind Reading?"

"I know such a spell."

"Cast it, then, for I want you to truly see the things I am going to tell you."

She did so, and I told it all to her, abbreviated slightly, but essentially all that I have previously written about my past, up to the first time we met. I showed her the people and the places, and when she saw Mara, the first Mara, I could see the surprise and then the understanding on her face.

When I was done with my story she said, "Amazing. How long ago did your civilization exist?"

I was pleased she seemed to believe all of it. Of course, it's hard to intentionally fake memories. "About thirteen thousand years, as best as I can tell from my research."

She was about to ask another question when her eyes strayed to her watch. "It's late," she said, "I should get you home. Mara will be worried."

As she drove me home, by a bit more direct route this time, she said, "I am truly sorry."

"Don't be," I said. "We are still friends, and nothing happened. This need never be mentioned again."

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you also for telling me the truth about you. I will keep your secret."

"And I will trust your judgement," I answered.

"How can you, after this?" she asked.

"It was a moment's weakness," I answered. "If you truly care for me as much as I think you must, then I know I can trust you to protect me."

"Thank you," she said again. "I have been such a fool."

"I know the feeling," I replied. We pulled into the drive and I got out. "Goodbye, Natomi."

"Goodbye, Solomoriah. If ever I can be of service to you, call me."

"I will."

Mara met me at the door; it was by then almost midnight. She kissed me as I walked in, and I pushed the door shut behind me without breaking the kiss.

"You smell like Natomi," she said after a few moments. "She has a lovely perfume."

"I hadn't really noticed." I hadn't, actually. "I suppose her car must hold the fragrance." Though I had done nothing wrong, this line of questioning was making me uncomfortable. I kissed Mara again, and she pulled away.

"What happened," she said, without anger. She could feel my discomfort in my kiss, and probably sense it in my soul. There's just no hiding anything from her, so it's just as well that I never need to.

I told her everything. Nothing happened, after all, and I hoped she could understand that. I will not recount my words here because, even with my spell of Mnemonic Enhancement, I can't remember them clearly.

At the end she said, "Were you tempted?"

"No. I was just uncomfortable." She nodded, and I could see she believed me. "Please, my love, don't hold this against Natomi. She is my friend, and that's all she'll ever be to me. I don't want to lose her." I could not read the expression on her face; after a moment I said, "If you can't forgive her I'll understand. You are the most important thing in my life."

She smiled then, and if Natomi's smile warmed my face, Mara's warmed my whole body. "I trust you, Solomoriah. Even if she tried to win you from me every day I know you would be true; and I know she is a good and honorable person. Natomi is probably terribly ashamed of herself now. No, love, I won't hold it against her."

I took her in my arms again, joyfully. "Of all the women in the world, I was lucky enough to get the one who can truly see into my heart. I don't deserve you, Mara."

"I know," she said, a devilish grin on her face. "We need to work on that." She led me upstairs.

Chapter 6, *Tuesday Morning*

The next morning I woke up early, and as so often happens I couldn't get back to sleep. I lay there thinking about the meeting with the Conclave, and feeling rather exposed. Any or all of them could be reading my mind right now, or scrying on me, and I wouldn't know it. Even my new client, Franklin Evans, could be watching me that way.

Not a pleasant train of thought, but what could I do? I got up and got dressed, and went into the back bedroom. It had been the room of Dreamwalker's apprentice, David, and we had cleared all the furnishings from the room when we acquired the house. Mara didn't want to use it for a bedroom again; too many had lived there briefly before being murdered by Dreamwalker. Eventually it became the repository of all the books of magic I found in the house. Two bookshelves contained most of it, but some books were piled on the floor or on a small table evicted from the parlor during the renovation.

I sat on the floor beside the table with a selection of books, and looked for an answer to my problem. In the next hour or so I found many fragments of an answer, but not enough to assemble. Then I heard Mara moving around in the master bathroom, and realized it must be about time for work.

As I followed my love downstairs to the kitchen I found myself missing the Ring of the King almost as much as I had missed the right hand it had been on. That ring, you might remember from my earlier tales, indicated whether or not the wearer was being scryed upon by magical means. I smiled a rueful smile as I realized that I had regenerated that hand not only once, but twice in my first two weeks in the modern age.

The morning was cool, overcast and gloomy, which fit my mood. After checking in at the office I took a practice staff and went outside to work out. After an hour or so my mood had improved, and I decided to go in and change.

It was nearly ten o'clock when Franklin rang the bell, and Mara showed him into the parlor. I invited her to join us, for as I have said before, her hunches are worth more than most people's facts.

"So, Franklin," I began, "tell me as much as you know about the murder of your master."

"Mentor," he said. "John always preferred that term to master, which has too many negative connotations in English."

"I see," I said. "So tell me about his death."

Mara said, "Do you mind if we record this?" Franklin shook his head, so she turned on the recorder as he began.

"I don't really know what I can tell you. John's office is in the front of his house, and I found him there. I have a key to the house, though I haven't lived there for a while. I let myself in last Friday morning and found him dead in front of his desk."

"In front, not behind?" I asked.

"Yes. His head and body were lying a few feet apart. It was the most horrible thing I ever saw." He broke down there, covering his face with his hands and crying silently.

When I judged he had regained his composure I said, "A few feet... can you be more exact?"

"Three or four, no more than that," he answered without looking up.

"So far as you know, did John have any particular enemies?"

"None. I mean, Ron Harris always wanted to be top dog, and they argued a lot. I didn't get to attend very many meetings, but John would tell me about it afterwards. From time to time Ron would visit, and John would take him in the office and close the doors; sometimes I would hear them yelling, but he never told me what the yelling was about."

"When was the last time this happened?" I asked.

"Last Wednesday I think," he replied.

"Besides Ron Harris, did John ever come into conflict with anyone else?"

"I don't know for sure. I know he got irritated with Moses Rook and Phillip Silva for what he called 'endless rehashing of tiny details' but I don't think he ever actually argued with either of them. As for Schuyler Norton, he hardly ever mentioned him."

"I see," I said. "Before last night, had you ever heard of the Changelings?"

"No. In fact, if Ms. Osaka didn't vouch for you I'd think you were lying. It's just too weird."

"You know you are a suspect in this case," I said. "Tell me about your relationship with John."

"It was good. He never married, you know, said he never had time. He called me the 'son he never had' once. I know I told you about the will, and you said that made me a suspect; but John told me just last week he was going to nominate me for Magus. Why would I kill him now?" He looked up at me then, expectantly.

"Did he tell anyone else this?" I asked.

"I think he told Doc Silva, but I don't know for sure."

"I see," I said. "I've noticed that the Conclave members all have, ah, 'day jobs.' What did John do for a living?"

"He was a realtor. He didn't work much anymore, though. Thanks to some good investments and side income from his magic, John didn't really need to."

"Side income?" I asked.

"Odd jobs, he called them. Evicting spirits from a motel, for instance; that was the last job he did, before..."

"Ah," I said. I thought for a moment. "I need to see the house."

"The police say no. I don't know why; their forensics experts left yesterday afternoon, and as far as I know they are done."

"Well, I'm going anyway," I said. "I need more information to proceed. I'll just have to be careful."

"You'll need a key," he said, fishing in his pocket. "I brought a spare."

I took the proffered key. "Thanks. Does this fit the back door?"

"Yeah."

I stuck out my hand and said, "Thank you for coming this morning. I think I have enough to start investigating; I can wait for your payment until the will is settled. Please give Mara your address and phone number so we can contact you; oh, and the address of John Harkin's house."

As he did so I picked up the recorder and turned it off. Mara saw him to the door, and I went into the office with the recorder in hand for Mark to listen to.

When I told him what we were planning for the afternoon, Mark said, "Great, a case! You need a ride, or are you flying?"

"A ride I think. I want you to watch the house while I am inside; if it really is Changeling involvement I don't want them sneaking up on me." As I stood there thinking about various plans of attack Mara entered.

"He was lying," she said. "He knows something about the Changelings."

"Ah," I said. "Any other lies?"

"I don't think so. It's hard to say; he was hard to read."

"Okay. Say, could you go with me today?"

"To search a house?" she said, surprised. "Why do you want me along?"

"You saved me half a dozen times from traps I missed in this house. I can't imagine that Harkin's house is without surprises."

"Hey," said Mark, holding out the newspaper for me to look at, "you want to take a side-trip before lunch? I called Val and told her I'd have to skip lunch today."

I looked at the page he was pointing to, and was stunned by recognition. Pictured in the paper was a Waystone.

In the ancient age I was raised in, we used magic to enhance almost everything. We invented celestial navigation, for instance, but eventually created a simpler way. Each town or city had its own Waystone, a large block of native stone with an Affinity enchantment. Small stones of identical material would be placed in 'pigeonholes' in the stone for a day or more to gain Affinity to the stone; then they would be stuck to the ends of sticks or the edges of disks of wood with wax. When floated upon a dish of water and activated with a very simple spell such devices would turn to point at the 'parent' Waystone.

A sea captain would have a box of numerous direction-finders, each with the name of the target city marked upon the stem or disk with ink. Navigation was therefore much easier and more reliable.

According to the caption below the picture, this stone had been dredged up from the Bay a few weeks ago, and was now on display in a certain museum. By a twist of fate it was the same one I was displayed in as a statue.

"Yes," I answered at last, "we'll go there. I have to see it."

Chapter 7, *Deja Vu With A Twist*

It was upside down. That was the first thing I thought as I walked around the Waystone for the first time. The lower third of the seven-foot-tall Waystone should have been the pigeonholes, but they were on the upper third instead.

This was the first piece of evidence I had seen of the age I came from, other than those things I brought with me. I was so fascinated, I forgot that Mara and Mark were with me until I heard them talking.

On the way I had explained the purpose of the Waystone to them. Now Mark asked, "What was the name of the town this thing was in?"

"I don't know. The inscription is almost completely worn away. Let me look closer..." I spoke a word, quietly, activating the analytical form of Mystic Vision, and the inscribed symbols seemed almost to ignite.

"Quo Doran," I said. "The name means 'Fertile Valley.' I met a man from there once... He was a sailor aboard the ship I crossed the Atlantic on, had been everywhere, but Quo Doran was all he talked about."

I was standing there amazed that the enchantment, though depleted, seemed intact, when Mark called to me. "Solo, I think you should see this." I followed the sound of his voice around a corner, and felt my knees weaken when I saw what he was looking at.

It was Silla. I stood there dumbfounded for a moment, staring at the stone form of the woman I had protected from Tjarik, the Mage of Flame. She was standing, slightly on her toes, looking downward in surprise. Her arms were held across her abdomen in a warding gesture. "She must have seen the Basilisk," I mumbled, then noticed a museum employee looking at me strangely.

"How long?" asked Mara quietly, when the employee had moved on. I must have looked puzzled. "How long until she... thaws."

"Ah," I said, "I don't know. Let me focus a moment." I concentrated, bringing the Mystic Vision to the fore again. I saw that the magic field surrounding her was quite faint. "Not long. Minutes, days, a few weeks perhaps, but surely not longer."

"Any minute now, eh?" said Mark.

"I'm afraid so," I answered.

"Then you better come around here and see this." I walked to the side of the roped-off display and saw what he was pointing at... a metal bar almost two inches around, supporting Silla in the upper middle of her bare back.

"Is that..." I began.

"Embedded, yes," said Mark. "It looks like they drilled a hole in the middle of her spine. When she wakes up, that'll be stuck in her back. Probably she'll be paralyzed from there down."

"I can handle that," I said, twisting the ring on my finger.

"Yeah, but what if you aren't here when she wakes up?" he said. "You just said you don't know when it will happen. You can't stake out this display, can you?"

"No," I answered. "We'll have to take her home with us."

"I, uh, don't think that's allowed," he said.

"I know."

I stood there a moment in silence. Silla's body was far less damaged than mine had been, having only the hole in her back and a few missing fingers... I could easily imagine her drawing a breath at any moment.

That might happen, I told myself, and with that breath she would scream. I suppressed a shiver.

"You know," said Mark quietly, "if you really plan to do what you just said, we should try not to look so suspicious." I nodded, and slowly walked on to the next display. I had been a fool, again, and I was glad that it was my friend who caught me at it.

We spent the next hour or so pretending to be interested in the other items on display. I found the Pleistocene exhibit sad. The primitive men and women depicted there were certainly typical of primitive tribesmen of my day; but civilized people, my people, were absent, forgotten.

At last we made our way to Mark's car and went in search of food. "Where do you guys want to eat?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said, still somewhat distracted.

"I don't care," said Mara.

"Now come on, somebody make a decision," he said. Just then I saw my favorite fast-food restaurant a little way down the street, and I reached over Mark's shoulder and pointed it out. I thought for a moment Mara was going to complain (for it's not exactly her favorite) but she held her peace.

The drive-through was overflowing, but there were seats available inside, so we went in. As we ate, naturally we discussed the museum.

"How are you going to do it, Solo?" asked Mark in a quiet-but-excited voice.

"How are you going to heist a statue from the museum?"

"You mean, rescue Silla, don't you?" I asked. He nodded, his mouth full, looking a bit irritated. "I saw some cameras, but they don't cover the entire building. I can become invisible, but since the cameras do cover Silla pretty well I assume the guards will be there right away if anything happens to her."

"Oh, like if she suddenly starts floating away," said Mark, grinning. He's my best friend, but he can be a real pain at times.

"In the movies," Mara said, "the thief takes an instant photo of the room, then fixes it somehow in front of the camera."

"Hmm." I thought a moment. "I could use an Illusion to cover the removal of the statue; but that requires me to concentrate. I could only get a little extra time that way."

Silence ensued for a while, as we were all lost in thought. Besides, we had our mouths full. Presently Mark said, "You told me you wanted me on lookout at Harkin's place. How am I supposed to signal you if I see trouble?"

"You have a car alarm, right?" I asked.

"Technically, it's just a panic button, but yeah, I do," he answered. "You really want me to make all that noise?"

"I've noticed that people just ignore car alarms, or curse them," I said. "So you set yours off if you see trouble, just for a few honks of the horn, and we'll take that as a signal to hide."

"Gotcha," he said. "Sweet."

"Are you ready?" asked Mara.

"As ready as I'm going to get," I answered. "Let's go."

Chapter 8, *The Scene Of The Crime*

John Harkin's house was not hard to find, perched near the top of a hill. Mark parked streetside, facing down the adjacent hill with the house straight ahead, at eyelevel. The day was warmer but still overcast; visibility for our lookout would be quite good.

Some time back Mark had purchased a box of surgical gloves so we wouldn't leave fingerprints; naturally we had brought them along. I handed a pair to Mara and put a pair on myself. "Ready, my love?" I asked.

"As ready as I'm going to be," she answered. I released a spell of Invisibility over the two of us. "Hey," she said, "I can't see you! Aren't you going to give me Mystic Vision?"

"No," I answered, "I don't want to interfere with your perceptions. I can still see you, though, and I'll guide you. Mark, please lower the top so we don't have to open the doors."

"No problem," he said. As the top of the convertible came down, I took Mara by the hand, and we climbed out. There were few people on the sidewalks, which was a mercy; dodging people is a lot of work when you're invisible. We walked quickly to the house; the back yard was fenced off, but someone had left the side gate unlatched. I opened it for Mara, then followed her through, trying to move it as if the slight breeze were responsible.

"Nice," she said quietly to me as I took her hand again, "making it look like the wind was moving the gate."

"Ah," I answered, "I didn't think it was very convincing."

"Why do you do that?" she asked as we climbed the back steps.

"Do what?"

"'Ah.' Instead of 'oh' or 'huh' or whatever, you say 'ah.'"

"Old habit, my love," I said. "I grew up speaking a very different language." I fished in my pocket for the key Franklin had given me. "Mark says my accent is almost gone, but I guess some things are hard to change."

As I went to insert the key in the lock, I dropped it. It became visible as it hit the boards with what seemed to be an earsplitting noise. "Damn," I said, looking around as if I thought someone might be watching.

"Well, you curse in English anyway," she said with faint laughter in her voice. I picked up the key, which remained visible, and she said, "Why doesn't it disappear when you pick it up?"

"The Invisibility spell clings to you like a skin," I said, "and when you drop something it falls out of the spell. Pick it up again, and it stays visible because the spell doesn't expand to contain it. Watch this." I put the key in the palm of my hand, and closed it, and the key disappeared. When I reopened my hand it was still invisible.

"What did you do?" she asked, and I remembered she couldn't see me.

"Closed my hand over it. When I enclosed the key completely the spell recovered it. Putting it in my pocket would have worked too."

This time I got the key in the lock, and opened the door. I ducked under the yellow police tape, then guided Mara under so she wouldn't accidentally get her hair in it.

I shut the door and relocked it, putting the key in my pocket, then looked around the house. It was fancy but not opulent. Mara and I quickly moved through the house looking for the office in the front which Franklin had described.

Of course John Harkin's corpse was no longer on the floor, but the white lines marking the separate positions of the body and head told us where he had fallen. A large, irregular stain of mostly-dried blood connected the two locations. I focused my Mystic Vision on the area for several moments but saw nothing mystical about it.

I looked for a moment longer, fixing the scene in my mind, then said, "Why don't you take the desk, and I'll look at the bookshelves?"

"Sure," she answered, then "Ow! I kicked the desk! It's hard to move around a small office when you can't see your feet!"

I smiled, though she could not see it. "You should have seen me the first time I used this spell. I had thought it would make me invincible as well as invisible, but I promptly tripped and fell in the dirt."

I was looking down the rows of books. By their titles I knew that they were about history, and archaeology, and anthropology; the only books about magic were two rows in one shelf. I opened several before I realized they were about mythical and tribal magic, also known as nonsense. A "hall of shame," it appeared to me.

"I wonder where he kept his good stuff," I mused.

"If he had an appointment calendar, it's missing," said Mara. "These desk drawers aren't empty but I'm sure there are things missing."

"Probably the police have them. I may have to break into a police station..."

"You won't need me for that," she said, and I shook my head.

Oops. "No, I suppose I won't," I said, remembering she couldn't see me. "What's that?"

"What, this magnifying glass?" asked Mara, handing the circular glass to me. "I found it in the top drawer with the pens."

"It isn't a magnifying glass. Look here," I said, holding it over a printed page on the desk, "it doesn't enlarge the text at all." I focused the full analytical mode of the Mystic Vision on it, as Mara resumed searching.

"Amazing," I said at length. "It appears to be a sort of an illusion detector!" I put it in my pocket, and it disappeared.

"Are you taking that?" Mara asked, just a bit sharply.

"I'll give it to Franklin when I finish the case. I want to study it in depth."

We continued searching the office. There were two filing cabinets, one containing real estate letters and documents, the other filled with a variety of statements and other general business records. I surveyed the contents quickly, but as I wasn't looking for anything in particular I quickly gave up.

We found nothing in the office to tell us about the murderer, so we went on to survey the rest of the house. We found the master bedroom upstairs, and searched it rather thoroughly. Under the bed I found a stack of pornographic magazines featuring gay men.

"Now we know why he didn't marry," said Mara.

"True," I answered, "but it doesn't tell us any more about his killer. A Changeling has little or no use for a human male no matter what his sexual orientation, so a lover's quarrel seems unlikely."

"Oh, yeah," she said. "But what if the killer wasn't a Changeling?"

I didn't answer, for another thought had come to me. "Mara, did you see stairs to the basement?"

"No," she answered. "We looked in all the closets downstairs, didn't we?"

"I thought we did." I put the magazines back under the bed and took her by the hand. "Let's go look again."

We went all over the ground floor, looking through every door, but found nothing. I used the illusion-detecting glass in every room also, still to no avail. "Does this house even have a basement?" asked Mara when we thought we had looked everywhere..

"What do you think?" I asked her back.

She looked off into space, and after a moment she said, "Yes, I'm sure it does."

"Then let's look at this from a different angle. I've noticed that many houses are like ours... the stairs to the basement are directly under the stairs to the second floor." I led Mara into the front hall, and we looked the stairs over carefully. They proceeded up on the left side of the hall, and on the right the hallway ended at a door.

After a moment I said, "Nothing here, it seems. If there is a secret door I can't find it."

Mara walked to the door at the end of the hallway, right beside the end of the stairs, and I followed. The room on the other side was the kitchen. She turned around to the left and opened the pantry closet. "It must be here," she said, "'cause this is where the door to the basement would be in a house like ours."

"The back of the closet looks quite solid," I said. "Even if it did open, all the items on the shelves would have to be removed to enter."

"Give me that glass thing please," said Mara. I put the illusion-detector in her open hand, and she laid it down inside the closet a moment to make it appear. She picked it up again and I saw that she was inspecting the inside of the door. "Look at this!" she said triumphantly.

I took the glass from her. Inscribed at eye-level on the inside of the closet door was a pentacle... a five-pointed star within a circle. This one was displayed point-upright, and covered with an illusion to hide it.

"Fascinating," I said. "I wonder what it does..." I racked my brain to remember the things I had read about pentacles. Cabalist mages believed it conferred protection from demons, or could be used to contain them; I was unsure which way it went.

"I remember a passage in a book from the library," I said. "It was written that, for the pentacle to be effective, it must be drawn as a single line, without lifting the pencil or chalk. I'm going to try tracing it with my finger."

"Good luck," said Mara as I began tracing the star with my left index finger. I started with the lower left leg of the star, for no particular reason. When I finished the star I continued on into the circle; when that was finished I lifted my finger and waited.

Nothing.

"We'll have to think this over some more," I said. Putting the illusion-glass in my shirt pocket, I stepped back and closed the closet door. As soon as the latch clicked that entire section of wall moved toward me!

I jumped backward in surprise, knocking Mara down and falling over her backward. As I fell I saw the advancing section of wall suddenly stop. My rear end hit the linoleum floor hard, but at least my weight didn't fall on Mara.

We were both visible now... I would have to cast my second Invisibility spell in order for us to leave. "Are you alright, Mara?"

"Yes, love, I'm fine. Are you hurt?"

"Just bruised. My pride is my most sore part."

"I won't tell if you don't," she said with a pixie's smile.

"At least it will be easier for us to move around now," I said. We got up to look over the results of my experiment.

The entire closet had advanced into the kitchen about four feet; as it was only about a foot deep, this left a full three foot span for us to step through, down the now-revealed staircase into the basement. The stairs were illuminated, not by electricity, but by two enchanted crystals hung from the sloping ceiling.

"Well, we found it," I said. "John obviously didn't want it to be easy."

Chapter 9, *The Basement*

I hesitated a moment, at the top of the stairs. John Harkin had gone to some trouble to avoid anyone finding the way into his basement... what awaited us below?

"Why didn't Franklin tell us about this?" asked Mara. "Surely he knows."

"Probably, but he might have thought John's secret basement had nothing to do with his murder."

"So you think it does?"

"Why do you kill someone?" I asked as I started down the stairs. Unlike my basement, this one appeared to be finished, smooth painted wallboard instead of bare stonework, and it was larger too.

"Revenge, or profit, I suppose," she said.

"Right. That's the problem with the Changeling theory; why would they care about John Harkin? A man, gay or not, is of little interest to them."

"Sexually, maybe, but why wouldn't the profit motive apply?"

"Good point..." I began, but then I saw the room at the foot of the stairs, and I stopped short. The room was large, perhaps ten yards square, with four large support pillars spaced around it. Shelves lined the walls on three sides, laden with books, scrolls, and strange artifacts of all sorts. That wasn't what stopped me...

"What is that?" asked Mara. Standing above me on the stairs, she had to bend down to see into the room. I shook my head.

"I don't know." It was a crystalline circle, a yard in diameter, set into the floor, and the glow of mystic energy from it was potent. Shortly curiosity overcame cowardice, and I walked into the room. Mara followed a moment later.

I focused my Mystic Vision on the slightly raised crystal disk. The glow was almost blinding, and the form of its enchantment entirely strange. As I continued to study it my Mystic Vision began to fade. I resisted the urge to curse; I didn't have another one prepared.

I stood up. "My Mystic Vision has expired," I said. "I guess I'll just have to touch it."

"Be careful, love, it feels very powerful." I kissed her briefly.

"Step back a bit, Mara, in case something happens." I quickly stepped on the disk...

Well, it felt a lot like my butt was on fire for a moment, to be perfectly plain about it. I think I may have yelped or something, and Mara giggled. It took me a moment to realize that what I had felt was my ring healing my bruises, but rather than a long moment of tingling there was a short moment of fire.

I felt mystic energy filling me from the crystal platform, and I realized that it was more powerful by two or three times than the magic I had been used to in my own time. "The crystal seems to be pushing mystic energy into me under pressure," I said to Mara, "and I called out from the heat of my ring healing me very fast."

"So this is his secret?" asked Mara, sitting down in a reading chair I hadn't even noticed. There were two, and a small side table between them; a book lay on the table.

"Yes. This is how he prepared spells. I don't know if he used a Tap to fill it or if it uses some other method. I think I'll replace some spells while I'm here."

As I prepared a replacement for the Mystic Vision spell, in analytical mode again, Mara picked up the book on the side table and began to page through it. I felt so powerful there, that I discarded the Kinetic Shield I had prepared previously and prepared one of sevenfold power. It was easy, since I didn't have to hold concentration nearly as long to draw the power.

It was a heady sensation, with all that power at hand, that I began to prepare a Flight spell, adapted for myself and those I touched, at fourfold power. Imagine my shock when the power ran out before my second chant of the power phrase!

I stepped down, released the new Mystic Vision spell, and studied the crystal platform. It was obvious that the power was depleted, and the spellform was now clearly visible. There were many elements of it I did not recognize... how I wished I could spend the time to learn its secrets.

Finally I turned away. The method of recharging the crystal seemed beyond me. I noticed Mara was still examining the book from the side table. "What is that you are reading?" I asked.

"I think it may be a journal," she answered, "but it's not in English. Here, you look at it."

I took the book from her and looked for myself. "Latin, I think. Greek characters look different. Or it could be a code... We'll take this with us and study it in the office."

I began moving around the room, looking at the other books there. Most of them were quite old, but there was almost an entire section of newer works. The newer items were mostly printed by a company called Hermetic Press.

Mara was looking with me, and she suddenly pointed out one book. "Don't you know the author of that book?" she asked.

"Yes," I said, reading the name Moses Rook from the spine. I pulled it down to look at it, and saw it was titled *Adapting Traditional African Magic for the Modern Age*, with a recent publication date. Inside I discovered it to be entirely in English, with any African languages or symbologies carefully explained. "I think I'm going to borrow this also," I said.

Mara gave me a warning look but didn't say anything. I suspected she wasn't happy with all my borrowing from a dead man, but I did have his interests in mind as well as mine. To my thinking, I was making a bargain with him... I find his killer, perhaps even avenge his death, and in return he loans me things he isn't even using any more. Perhaps that's wrong but it's what I did.

I was about to say something I have since forgotten when Mara held up her hand, stopping me. She was listening. "It's Mark's car alarm!"

"Quick, up the stairs!" Stuffing the books into my shirt, I ran up as fast as I could, and Mara followed. Just as we reached the top of the stairs we heard the honking stop.

"How do we close this?" asked Mara, and I shook my head. I opened the closet door, about to retrace the pentacle, when I suddenly had an idea. I closed the closet door and the entire thing receded silently, swiftly, and seamlessly into the wall.

Without another thought I grabbed Mara's hand and spoke a word, releasing the second Invisibility spell. At that very moment I heard voices at the front of the house.

"Alright, Tom," said a loud male voice, "I don't know what you expect to find with all that equipment, but the place is yours. I'll be over here in the living room, watching TV." I moved quietly through the kitchen and dining room, heading for the office, with Mara holding my hand. The back office door, the one leading to the dining room, was ajar (had I left it that way?) and I could see a slender man in glasses and a disheveled white dress shirt adjusting what looked like a large camera. This, I assumed, was Tom.

He began looking through the camera, shining a bluish light around the room. I watched as he panned around the floor, though I did not know what he was looking for. I didn't realize the danger until it was too late.

When the bluish light fell upon me I became visible, as a bluish ghostly figure. Tom jumped, and yelled something unintelligible. I backed up, whispering to Mara, "Get out of here, quickly!"

I followed her as closely as I dared, and I heard the loud man yelling, "What's the matter, Tom? You look like you saw a ghost!" I couldn't hear Tom's reply but I didn't stay around for clarification. It was all I could do not to bump into all the furniture, and it was almost a miracle that our Invisibility held.

I accidentally slammed the back door behind me as I went out it, and sure enough I heard it open again in mere moments. I stopped a moment beside the corner of the house, ready to duck around it but too curious to leave just yet. Tom was accompanied by a large man, muscular but a bit flabby, who had the look of a policeman about him. Then Tom said, "Come on back inside, Detective. I don't have enough cord to chase whatever that was around outside. The light might not even work that way in the daylight."

Mara had continued on, of course; being unable to see me, she had no way of knowing I had stopped. I took note of the somewhat dirty blue car with city license plates parked out in front as I ran past it.

I ran all the way to the Mark's car, down the hill from Harkin's house and back up the hill where it was parked. I was panting loudly when I jumped into the back seat. Mara was already seated, so I said, "Close the top... and drive away... please" between breaths.

Mark did as I asked, and I dismissed my Invisibility as soon as the top was up. I was surprised when Mara didn't do the same. "Mara, what's wrong? Why are you still invisible?"

"How do you turn it off?" she said meekly. I wanted to laugh, but I kept it to a chuckle, then instructed her in the simple act of will required. She got it on the second try.

Chapter 10, *Research*

Shortly we were back at the house. Mark went to the office to check for messages. Mara made xocholotl for us, and I think the act of doing it calmed her as much as the hot, bitter-sweet drink calmed me. Mark came in, grabbed a Jolt from the refrigerator and sat down at the kitchen table with us.

"What did you learn?" he asked.

"A lot. Nothing. I don't know."

"Could you, like, be more specific?"

Mara said, "The office was the way Franklin said it was. The police put lines where the body and head were found, and there was blood between them."

I held up a hand, stopping her; she looked at me with a question in her eyes, but when I spoke it was to cast a spell: Illusion. I concentrated, projecting on the table the scene as I had seen it.

"Yes, like that," she said. "The only thing of interest we found there was a glass that Solomoriah says detects illusions."

"Here," I said, pulling the glass from my pocket. "Try it." Mark looked through it at the projection on the table, nodded, and handed it to Mara who also looked through it.

"Handy device," said Mark, "but nothing about the murder?"

"Nothing," said Mara.

"We searched the rest of the house," I said, showing each room briefly in my illusion-view. "The only things we found that told us anything were gay pornography magazines. Evidently Harkin was gay."

"Like that's unusual in this town," said Mark, grinning.

"Then we realized we hadn't seen a basement," continued Mara, "and we looked all over the first floor again before we found that the pantry closet was hiding it."

"Secret door?" he asked, and Mara nodded.

"There was a pentacle, inscribed inside the door, hidden by an illusion," I said. "The glass made it visible, but if not for Mara I'd have never found it. Tracing the pentacle with a finger, then closing the closet door, was all it took to make the entire closet slide out into the room. The basement contained an extensive library of real magic works, and a crystalline platform which was some sort of mystic storage battery."

"So you checked out some books from the library," he said, pointing to the books which I had laid on the table.

"Yes. This one may be a journal of some kind, but I think it's in Latin. I doubt it's a spell book, since there are no diagrams." I handed it to him, and he paged through it briefly.

"It's Greek to me," he said, and I didn't get the joke. Mara groaned.

"Aren't you ever serious?" she asked.

"I was when I saw those cops coming," he said.

"That's another point," I said. "The skinny man was a technician of some sort, and he had a bluish light that made me slightly visible."

"Could be a 'black' light," he said, "but that's just UV; if UV made you visible then you'd never be able to hide. I don't know what it could have been."

I sat there silent for a moment. "This other book was written by Moses Rook, one of the Conclave members. I don't think it has anything to do with the murder, though."

I took the books and wandered into the living room. The journal, as we then thought it was, did indeed appear to be in Latin, and I knew only enough of that old language to be sure it was.

After a while I turned to the second book. On the title page, below the title *Adapting Traditional African Magic for the Modern Age* and above Moses' name, was a symbol I had never seen before. Within a thick circle five solid black pentagons were arrayed, point-outward, in a star pattern, with additional trapezoidal blocks toward the center of the symbol.

Puzzled, I read the introduction, but it did not mention the symbol. As I paged further into the book I soon forgot the symbol; for I quickly realized that this was by far the best book on modern-age magic I had yet seen.

I was fully engrossed. I didn't even notice when Mara came and refilled my cup of *xocholotl*; I don't think I even thanked her. By the time Mark left I had papers spread all over the table, covered with my scribbling in both English and the old language.

It was six o'clock when Mara called me for supper. She had prepared a fine supper of grilled chicken and rice with grilled vegetables, but I barely tasted it in my excitement. "Mara, that is the most fantastic book I have ever read!"

"What's so great about traditional African magic?" she asked.

"Well," I said between mouthfuls, "I have some small familiarity with shamanistic magic, which I learned about from Gruven Ket. He showed me the errors in their understanding compared with the forms he taught me. This book compares shamanistic magic to the modern theory."

"So?"

I tried to frown, but it came out a smile. "I've learned more about the modern theory today than in the almost two months since I awoke! It's all beginning to make sense; now many of those books I 'inherited' from the Dreamwalker will become useful." I took a "break" to wolf down more of my food. "Besides all that, he presents numerous of those traditional spells adapted to modern form, in English! Not Latin or Greek, which I can barely puzzle out with guidebooks. Converting those spells to the old language will be simple."

"What kind of spells?"

"Healing, for one thing. There is a disease curative spell and a wound healer provided. True, with my ring I don't need a wound healer, but I might someday. A couple I already know about, like Invisibility and Flight; but there are still several I don't know at all. There's a whole section on fire magic, and..."

At that moment, the office phone rang. Mara went to answer it, then came back in quickly. "My love, it's Moses Rook calling you!"

I hate to admit it, but I ran to the phone. "Solo Jones here."

"Yes, this is Moses Rook," came the slightly-accented voice from the phone. "I need you to meet me, right away. It's important. I can't tell you more."

"Where?" I asked, and he gave me an address.

"I'll be waiting outside. Please be quick," he said, and hung up.

I relayed his words to Mara. "Could it be a trap?" she asked. "Are you sure it was really him?"

"It was just last night that I met him, so I can't be sure, but I think it was," I said. "He sounded agitated. I have to go."

I prepared an Invisibility spell, and another analytical Mystic Vision, then cast a twofold duration Flight and an Invisibility on myself. "Mara," I said, "I'm going to the back door... can I have a kiss goodbye?"

She came quickly to the door, unable to see me of course. "You'll have to kiss me," she said, "for I don't think I can find your mouth!"

Then she puckered up, like she'd tasted a lemon, and I laughed and kissed her. "Goodbye, my love. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Goodbye, Solomoriah. Be careful!" I opened the door and flew out, across the back yard and up into the early evening sky.

Chapter 11, *Another Murder*

The sky was blue, full of fluffy clouds, a nice change from earlier in the day. The trip was short and the address wasn't hard to find; I was almost sorry to arrive.

Moses was leaning back against the wall of the apartment building. Though he barely looked I knew he could see me. He opened the door, then stopped and looked around as if he heard something, and I slipped inside. As I passed he whispered, "Please remain invisible," so I did.

He followed me in. There was a sort of reception counter there, with a pretty young woman as an attendant. There were two interior doors on our side of the counter, and one on her side. "Mister Rook," she said, "back so soon?"

"Yes, my dear. Has Doctor Silva returned yet?"

"No, sir. Are you sure he wasn't there?"

"Well, perhaps I should try again," he said, proceeding toward the right-hand interior door. I followed him. "Would you buzz me in please?"

"Yes, sir," she said, and I heard a buzzing sound from the door. Moses pulled it open, then turned toward the young woman.

"Thank you, my dear," he said, giving me time to pass through the door. On the other side was an opulent hallway lined with artistic prints. Nearby were elevator doors. Moses came through and proceeded to push the up button, and we waited in silence for what seemed like a long time.

Shortly we were going down a hallway on the twenty-first floor; Moses still had not spoken, and I didn't break the silence either. I did notice that the doors were spaced rather far apart, and the hallway was decorated with polished wood accents.

Moses approached a door, saying a word I didn't recognize as he grasped the doorknob; he opened the door and motioned for me to enter before him. As he closed the door behind himself he said, "You may appear now, Solomoriah, for there is no one here to see you but me."

I dismissed the invisibility, and looked around the apartment. My first thought was, what a mess! Every surface was laden with books, magazines, and papers, and the overflow was piled on the floor.

My second thought was, what a huge place! It was the biggest apartment I had ever seen. The main room combined a living room and wet bar, with a sunken space in the center. A beautiful chandelier illuminated the space, and doors led off in both directions. Large windows permitted a wonderful view of the city and the sky... and for me, with my Mystic Vision active, a good view also of the downtown Ley line. It looked almost close enough to touch.

"I assume this is Phillip Silva's apartment," I said.

"Condominium. Yes, it's his place. Come this way please." He led me toward one of the interior doors, the one which would be on the left after entering via the main door. I saw that it was slightly ajar. He gestured for me to precede him through the door; I stopped, taking time to put on another pair of surgical gloves.

The scene on the other side of the door was not a pretty one. Phillip Silva's body lay in one place on the floor, beside a desk; his head was more than a yard away. An irregular pool of blood connected them, and I could see it was still quite wet.

Sprawled across the dead mage's legs was another man, and though he still had his head I could see that he was also dead. In his right hand was a curved sword with the distinctive finger-loop; and when I looked closer I saw that he had the family resemblance to Joseph Green which all the swordsmen had.

Carefully I rolled the swordsman over, noting that his mustard-and-grey striped polo shirt was burned through just below his ribcage. The scent of burned flesh assailed my nostrils, but I have smelled worse in my life; a necromancer, even an apprentice, must have a very strong stomach.

"So," I began, standing up, "this Changeling swordsman came to kill Phillip Silva, but just as he was administering the deathblow the Magus blasted him with a fire spell."

"It appears so," said Moses. "I thought you should see this before I call the police. I didn't think to tell you to come invisibly, but I'm pleased you did."

"How did you find out about this?"

"Several years ago my friend's wife died in an auto accident. I made a point of inviting him to my house for a game of chess on the Tuesday following the funeral, hoping that the fellowship would help him through his dark time. Since then, he has joined me at my house every Tuesday evening. He eats with my wife and me, then we watch a video, or talk about magic, or even sometimes we play chess." Moses stopped speaking then, and I could see that the death of his friend was affecting him.

"Come," I said, "let's move into the living room, away from this grisly scene." He nodded, and we did so.

"He didn't show up tonight," continued Moses, "and after a while I became worried. I went called his office at the University, for he had from time to time forgotten to quit working, but he wasn't there. A graduate student in his program answered, telling me that Phillip had left on time tonight. Immediately I came here, and found this."

"What time was that?"

"Six fifteen," he answered. "I called you right away."

"Tell me about him," I asked. "I know he was a Magus, so he must have been accomplished at magic. Did he have a specialty?"

"Oh, indeed he did. My friend is among the top three or four in the world at the magics of the mind. He was, anyway. He created the spell we of the Conclave used for protection against the Dreamwalker."

Those words were like an electric shock to my body. "There's a defense against the Dream Contact spell?"

"Better, Solomoriah. Phillip created a spell which would protect the mind of the sleeper if cast in advance, but further could be cast as a counterspell after the contact was initiated. He had discovered the fact that spells could be cast while in the dream state, under the influence of the Dreamwalker."

"I learned that too, but I didn't have a specific counterspell. I had to bluff."

"I see," he said, pausing a moment. "He never learned how the Dreamwalker's spell worked, though."

I resisted the urge to tell him that I knew the spell. "Do you have any idea why the Changelings might want to kill your friend?"

"None, I'm afraid, unless they somehow discovered that you told us about them and decided to silence us. Solomoriah, I am no warrior, just an old professor with a peculiar talent. I'm not so ashamed that I can't tell you I'm frightened of these swordsmen."

"You have every right to be," I said. "I need to search that office, but I'll be as quick as I can. Please wait here."

His day's mail was piled on the desk... bills and junk mail, and a thin official envelope from the City of San Francisco. This last I opened, using his letter opener, and found a check for just under a thousand dollars. The stub said only, "SVC. REND." What services did he render, I wondered idly.

His appointment calendar was absent, but I assumed it would be in his University office. In the large bottom drawer of the desk I found handwritten journals, with some odd diagrams, which I decided must be spell books. They were entirely in Latin, like the journal from John Harkin's house. I left them there, of course.

My Mystic Vision detected only the powerful and familiar magics of the murder weapon. The blade was clean of blood, but since I knew those swords actively

repel blood I was unsurprised. Almost as an afterthought I got out Harkin's illusion-detecting glass and scanned the room, but found nothing interesting.

I turned my attention to the bodies, searching all their pockets. I learned that the swordsman's name was Roberto S. Alvarez. I made note of his address, and impressed his face on my mind. His dark hair had been carefully styled, and he had a thin mustache... a sort of a "latin lover" look, not at all the short hair and clean-shaved faces of the other swordsmen.

I frowned, realizing that I had only his facial features as evidence that he was a Changeling. I needed better proof; so, though the act was distasteful to me I lifted him up again and undid his pants, then slid them down far enough to verify his unusual sexual organs. Being both satisfied and disgusted, I redressed him as quickly as I could.

I put everything back as best I could and returned to the living room, where Moses was staring out the window. "I'll be leaving now. You should call the police right away; the receptionist will likely tell them how long you've been up here."

"I'll deal with her; I have a spell that can help. Then I'll call the police." He followed me to the door. "Thank you for coming, Solomoriah. I know that Franklin Evans has hired you to solve John's murder; I thought you should see this first."

"Thank you," I said. Pulling off and pocketing the gloves, I spoke a word, releasing my Invisibility spell. "Would you mind getting the door?"

As he reached for the door he said, "There are many things about you that puzzle me, Solomoriah. I'm not sure I completely trust you. I must tell you, Phillip Silva complimented you. He listened to your thoughts as you told your story, and he was impressed by your mental discipline. He told me that he wished he had an apprentice as gifted as you."

My face flushed, and I was glad to be invisible. I didn't know what to say, so I said "Thank you again for your help with this case. May I call you if I need more information?"

"Yes, please do," he answered, holding out a business card. I took it from him, and put it in my shirt pocket, where it disappeared.

"I'll be in touch," I said, and went through the door. I followed him down the elevator and outside, then took flight for home.

Chapter 12, *The Compassionate Heist*

Mara was sitting on the back porch swing, drinking a large glass of lemonade. I dismissed the Invisibility just before I touched down, but she didn't seem surprised. "Tell me, love," she said, "what happened?"

I sat down beside her on the swing. "Phillip Silva has been murdered, beheaded like John Harkin. He was to visit Moses Rook tonight at his home, and when he didn't appear Moses went looking for him. It looks like he was attacked by a Changeling swordsman, and they killed each other simultaneously. I'm not sure it's how it looks though."

"Show me," she said.

"Are you sure? It's not a pretty scene."

"Yes," she said firmly, so I laid a hand on her shoulder and gifted her with Mind Reading. She closed her eyes and focused on my thoughts, and I showed her the scene. I saw the revulsion on her face at the grisly images, but she quickly recovered.

Her next words mirrored my first thoughts when I saw the crime scene. "He doesn't look like a swordsman."

"My thoughts also. Besides his casual dress and grooming, he isn't particularly muscular. I had to handle the body a couple of times, and I noticed that."

"He is a Changeling, isn't he?" I was a little irritated that Mara didn't think I was sharp enough to verify that, so I showed her. "Okay, okay," she said, "I get it!"

"It was a set-up," I said, "but what I can't figure out is why, or who did it. Who is killing the Conclave? Where did they get that Changeling sword? Why try to implicate the Changelings? How many people know about both groups?"

"I can answer that last question," she said. "Us, of course, plus the Conclave members, and Natomi Osaka."

"Well, I assume it's not you, me, or Mark. I hope it isn't Natomi, but I suppose she is a suspect. Otherwise the only suspects are the remaining Conclave members: Ron Harris, Moses Rook, and Schuyler Norton. I hope it isn't Moses."

"You like him, don't you?" she asked.

"Yes. And I've learned a lot from his book, so I feel gratitude for him. I can't let that blind me to any evidence, though."

"I'll help you," she said, kissing me. "Now, my love, just two days ago we were married, and since then you haven't paid me as much attention as I would like."

"I'm sorry," I began, but I saw the impish smile I knew so well, so I stopped talking and kissed her some more.

It was three A.M. Wednesday when the alarm went off. I cancelled it quickly, and Mara rolled over and mumbled a little but didn't awaken.

I got up and dressed quickly by the light of the alarm clock. In the kitchen I fixed myself a quick breakfast of cereal and orange juice, wishing I had reset the timer on the coffeemaker as well as the alarm clock; a cup of xocholotl would have been nice.

I prepared spells in the living room, in the semidarkness. For a moment I was reminded of my years in Ket's gloomy fortress, and I shivered.

As I was completing the casting of a powerful Flight spell, of threefold power and threefold duration, Mara came in. "Were you going to say goodbye?"

"I didn't want to wake you," I said. "I'm glad you did wake up, though." She knelt down on the couch beside me and we embraced.

After a moment I said, "I'd love to stay, but it's almost four o'clock. I must go."

"I know," she said, and kissed me again, briefly. "I love you, Solomoriah."

"I love you, Mara. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Just don't let me find you in jail," she said, grinning.

I went to the back porch, cast Invisibility on myself, and took off into the darkness. The sky was overcast again, but once I had a little altitude it wasn't hard to navigate above the well-lit streets.

Getting in would be the hardest part. I flew around the building, 'casing the joint' as they say. The doors were out; locks I could handle, but alarms were beyond me. Getting out, I didn't intend to worry about the alarms.

I was circling the building for the third time, and beginning to think there was no way in; then I saw a door open in the back. As I approached I saw a portly security guard step out. He pushed the door back until it caught, then drew out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter.

Ah, human weakness! As he lit his cigarette I landed nearby. He was illuminated by the open door, and I was in darkness; even were I not invisible he might not see me. I waited, letting him smoke his cigarette partway, while I looked around the alley for something I needed. Shortly I was ready.

I threw the empty soda can I had found behind the open door, so that it clattered loudly against the outside wall. I got the response I was hoping for... he turned around suddenly, and actually took a few steps down the alley toward the sound.

In other words, I could now pass through the open door without bumping into him. I did so, quickly, and shortly he came in also. He pulled the door shut, checking the latch, then pulled a walkie-talkie from his belt. "Yeah, Alex, this is Chuck." I couldn't understand the response from where I stood; then Chuck continued, "You can secure the back door, I'm done with my break."

Ah, again. Wherever this Alex was, would be the control room for the cameras and alarms. That was where I needed to be.

I discovered that I was in the "employees only" area of the building. On the ground floor, that seemed to consist of storage and machine rooms. I wandered around, searching at random for the control room. It turned out to be easy to find, for it had a large glass window with a grill to speak through, and a door labelled "Security." Within were two men, a bald black man with glasses and a skinny white man with greasy-looking blonde hair.

Just then Chuck came around a corner toward the window. "Not much going on tonight, boys," he said.

The black man laughed. "Except for that business with the one-armed statue, when is there ever much going on here at night?"

"How's the lady?" asked Chuck.

"She's right where she was last time you asked," came the answer, as the black guard pointed toward one of the several display monitors. I leaned rather closer to Chuck than I should have, looking at the perfectly framed image of Silla. I was right about them watching her closely.

At that point, the skinny white guard got up and stretched. "I gotta hit the head," he said, and opened the door. I stepped back so that I had a clear line of sight to all three of them, and carefully formed a word in my mind.

They dropped, asleep, in unison. Unfortunately, I was not able to remain invisible this time. The white guard fell in the middle of the doorway, and I had to step over him. I looked around the small room crowded with equipment, and found what I was looking for... the electrical cords. I promptly pulled them from the wall.

I jumped at the resulting noise. Mark would not have been surprised at the sound of the uninterruptible power supplies sounding their alarms, but I had no idea what they were. I quickly plugged everything back in, then went around laboriously turning off all the equipment one item at a time.

For safe measure I unplugged the cords again, one at a time, and this time no noises went off. I wiped the sweat from my brow and stepped over the sleeping guards again.

As I walked down the hallway toward the Pleistocene display I suddenly remembered my still-active Flight spell. Why had I wasted time stepping over the guards when I could hover?

At last I saw Silla again. She was unchanged, mercifully. As I studied the rod embedded in her back I had the constant feeling that she would awaken at any moment.

The hole was irregular and rough. I had expected a clean hole, bored by modern equipment; perhaps this hole was not made recently? The hole had been filled with some sort of clear glue and the rod inserted. Having no other alternative, I decided to try force.

I stood on the floor in front of Silla, and grasping her under her arms I pulled hard. After a moment of groaning and straining I decided to try something else. I got out my staff and assembled it, then slipped it into the space between Silla's back and the wall behind her. Using it as a prybar I pulled with my right hand, keeping my left arm around her middle to catch her.

With a loud *crack* she came free of the rod. I caught her, of course, and was surprised how light she was. I had expected her to weigh perhaps three or four hundred pounds as a statue, but evidently she weighed no more than she had in life; about a hundred twenty pounds perhaps.

"Hold it right there! Lay that statue down real carefully and step away from it!"

I turned my head to look over my shoulder. Another guard, this one a muscular asian man, and he had a handgun pointed at me. The other guards hadn't had guns. "Okay, okay, just hang on," I said, hoping he hadn't seen much of my face.

As soon as I had Silla safely grounded I spoke a word and disappeared. I braced myself for the gunshot, but it didn't come. Instead, the guard said a few curse words and began rapidly panning his gun around. It seemed he expected me to leap out at him at any moment.

I had two more Sleep spells at the ready, so it was a simple matter to wait for him to turn away and then release one. He fell also, asleep.

Unfortunately my Invisibility spell was broken again. Well, it wouldn't have covered my cargo anyway. I picked up and stowed my staff, then summoned a Spirit Servant. I used a twofold spell I had prepared earlier, since I expected her to be quite heavy. It lasted just long enough to get her to the door, so I would have to carry her home myself.

The Flight spell was still in effect, of course; I wasn't even sure when it would run out. Just as I hefted her rigid form onto my right shoulder I heard the sirens approaching.

My takeoff was anything but graceful. I heard yelling voices behind me as I lifted off into the early-morning gloom, but I felt secure in the darkness.

I was a fool, again. The searchlight from above caught me by surprise; I had not heard the helicopter over the noise of the sirens.

I've tried to imagine what the helicopter pilot must have thought, seeing a flying man lifting a statue into the air. Someday I'd really like to know. Just then, though, that didn't seem very important. I wanted to get away. Without Silla I felt sure I could outmaneuver the helicopter, but with the extra weight it didn't seem likely.

I could blast the fragile rotor with a Force Wave, or Paralyze the pilot, but either one would result in a deadly crash. That wasn't my goal, of course. I flew several blocks with the helicopter tailing me before I decided what to do.

I fell. I had been steadily climbing, and had reached twenty stories of altitude. The helicopter pilot, to his credit, wasn't fool enough to do what I did, so I suddenly was clear of him for a moment.

Pulling out of the fall at half-again my normal weight was tricky, but I did it. I looked around and saw that I was in Chinatown, not far from a Ley line.

Few people were on the street, and apparently most weren't looking my way. The few who yelled or pointed didn't follow me as I carried my load down a narrow alley. There, out of sight at last, I released my Tap and used it to cast a spell of Illusion.

The Tap dismissed, I walked out the far end of the alley as a tall Oriental man carrying a large rolled-up carpet. I didn't bother to cover my clothes; they were plain enough. Several times police cars passed me, and I repeatedly saw the helicopter, but they didn't pay any attention to me. Maybe I wasn't so bad at illusion-magic after all.

As the sun rose I climbed the steps to my front door, still carrying the 'carpet' over my shoulder.

Chapter 13, *Complimentary Home Delivery*

Mara saw me coming up the walk, and opened the door as I approached. "Hi, honey, how was work?" she said with that impish grin.

"How did you know it was me?" I asked, as I maneuvered the "carpet" into the door.

"I just knew," she said, securing the door. I dropped the illusion as I continued down the hallway. The basement stairs, as I have said, were under the stairs to the second floor. Mara opened the door for me with a flourish and a bow, which made me laugh; for she was barefoot, wearing her nightgown. It was, well, silly.

I descended the stairs carefully. I had been carrying Silla for quite a while, and my shoulder hurt. I knew it would be fine in moments once I put her down, but I still had to be careful not to drop her or smash her into a wall.

The next door I had to get myself, for I kept a threefold spell of Closing on the door under the basement stairs. In that room, of course, were all the strange things I had acquired; the black opals, the two curved and two straight swords, and now the statue-form of Silla. As she would not stand upright, I laid her carefully on the floor.

Mara hadn't followed me; most likely she didn't want to walk barefoot on the cold stone floor. I knew I should go back upstairs, but I stood there a moment and looked at the cold, nude form of the young woman. "Silla," I said, "what am I going to do with you?"

I joined Mara in the kitchen, where I found hot xocholotl waiting for me. I sat down and told her all about my early-morning escapade.

"Wow," she said as I concluded my story. "You were lucky to get away."

"Indeed," I said. "I need to go back downstairs and study the magic affecting her. I don't know if bringing her here will stabilize her, or if the magic is still fading. If it's still getting weaker, I'll have to go ahead and wake her up."

"You're planning to leave her that way otherwise?" she said, surprised.

"Silla was fifteen, maybe sixteen years old when she was taken to Tjarik's fortress. I assume she was turned to stone the same day I was, or maybe a day or so later. She knows no magic, speaks only the old language, and has no experience adapting to strange situations. I was a warrior, and a necromancer, and I had travelled the world. Learning to live in this age was really not that hard, and I had you for incentive. She'll be missing her family and friends.

"No," I said, "I don't want to wake her up yet. I don't think I'm ready."

We talked a while longer, then I went back downstairs. I cast a fresh Mystic Vision, analytical of course, and began studying the spellform. I had with me a legal pad and pencil for note-taking.

It was strange. Rather than the numerous "pages" of a normal spell, this spellform was three-dimensional and almost random seeming. The elements themselves, though mostly recognizable, had a strange organic irregularity. I drew it all as best as I could, thinking I could figure out how reform it into a proper spell.

The good news for me was that the spell appeared to be recharging itself. Silla would not "thaw" without intervention, so I had time to think about how to deal with her. Even better, I could see several ways to break it when I decided to.

After studying and drawing it out for a while I found two elements I couldn't identify. I puzzled over them for perhaps half an hour before I decided I must move on.

Next I cast an Aura Reading spell. Silla's aura was clearly present, but somnolent. It was then that I understood one of the unknown elements of the spell... it was like an element of the Zombie Creation spell Ket taught me. That element, and this one as well, worked to bind the spirit to the body, so that the spirit can be made to power the spell.

I searched my memory and remembered the word, and the symbols to write it, for this element. That left just one I couldn't identify; it must be directly responsible for the transformation to stone-form, but I couldn't think of a word that seemed right to represent it. Instead, I drew a modern question mark in that position.

I was still puzzling over this when Mara called downstairs, "Solomoriah! There's a delivery man here to see you!" I thought I heard a note of laughter in her voice, and I puzzled over that as I secured the door and ascended the stairs.

Imagine my surprise when I saw that the deliveryman was Cheng, who I had bested two mornings before in a staff-fighting match. "I have those mats you ordered, sir," he said, obviously uncomfortable. "We had them in stock in Sacramento, so they came in sooner than expected. I hope this isn't too inconvenient?"

"No," I said, going out with him to his truck. The mats were larger than I had imagined; carrying them in the front door would be foolish. I intended to store them against the wall in the laundry room, which was across the hall from the kitchen, all the way in the back of the house.

"Pull through the drive to the back, please," I said, "and we'll get these unloaded." He did so, and silently we carried the mats up the steps, in the back door, and put them against the wall of the laundry room.

I put the next-to-last mat against the wall, and stepped out of the small room to make room for Cheng. As I did so I glanced out the open door and my blood ran cold.

I saw the ghostly figures, invisible to the eye but visible to my Mystic Vision spell, walking up the back yard slowly. As I have before described, we had recently finished building the two terraces, but at the sides we left the yard sloping; otherwise we would have needed steps. So, I watched as one invisible figure walked up the left side of the yard, and the other up the right. They were still below the edge of the second terrace, but if they were who I expected they were that distance would mean little.

I quickly sized up the situation; the odds didn't look good. Mark hadn't arrived at work yet, so I was on my own. I yelled, "Swordsmen in the back yard!" and jumped out the door onto the back porch.

Even as I assembled my staff in one practiced move, the two swordsmen leapt into the air and became visible. My heart sank; the one on the left was armed with a curved sword, but the one on the right had two straight swords, one in each hand!

I jumped down from the porch to the upper terrace, raised my left hand and spoke a word, and the lefthand swordsman reversed direction in midair. The Force Bolt was threefold, but I could see it had not penetrated his close-fitting skin of protection. He landed in the branches of a tree which overhung my yard from the neighboring property, and I turned my attention to the other swordsman.

He landed at the edge of the terrace, one foot on the grass and the other on the retaining wall stones. I came at him furiously, hoping to drive him back over the edge; but he wielded his swords like lightning, weaving a virtual web of steel to hold me at bay.

Then he pressed the attack, driving me back with his twin blades, and it was all I could do to keep up. I didn't have a Kinetic Shield activated, but since that spell had failed me before when facing the swordsmen I didn't miss it. Finally the rate of his attacks slowed up a bit, or at least seemed to, and I began to feel I might be his equal after all.

Then I saw the other swordsman bounding toward me. How could I deal with two of them?

Just as it seemed that I would be finding the answer to that question the hard way, a figure interposed itself before the second swordsman. It was Cheng, armed with one of our practice staves!

I couldn't watch him very well, for the first swordsman was keeping me pretty well occupied, but from what little I could see Cheng was doing pretty well. He

seemed to realize that the swords could chop his wooden staff in two, as he was parrying with side-strokes rather than straight blocks.

So it went for a few moments of intense strikes, blocks, and parries. Suddenly I heard Cheng cry out; I risked a glance and saw that his opponent had succeeded in chopping through the wooden staff. I thought I also saw blood on Cheng's white shirt.

Well, I found myself rather busy for the next few moments, but when I again could see my ally I discovered he was fighting with the two staff-pieces as if they were meant to be used that way! I was then unfamiliar with the use of the baton as a weapon, but evidently Cheng was well trained at it.

I was deflecting a particularly vicious strike when I heard, "Okay, Changelings, drop the swords or I drop you!"

It was Mark, standing on the back porch, his handgun levelled at my opponent. For an instant, all activity stopped.

Then, in a move almost too fast to see, my opponent threw his right-hand sword in the air, reversed his grip and threw it. I had seen this move before, in fact I dodged that sword in midair, but this time the range was too short. Mark was struck in the abdomen by the razor-sharp enchanted weapon, and it went right through him, pinning him to the wall. His weapon fell with a clatter to the porch floor.

It had been a long time since I was so angry, so outraged at anyone. I remember seeing a reddish haze before my eyes, and I swung at my opponent underhanded. My weapon connected with his left hip, knocking him sideways onto the ground. I followed up with a savage overhand strike which he parried lefthanded. He somersaulted backward and regained his feet, and had time to move his sword to his right hand before I came at him again.

Now he was between me and the porch. The only way past him was through him, it seemed, and he was making that impossible. My rage at him increased; I became sure he knew that I could save my friend if I only got there in time.

I cracked. I began to chant words, terrible words I had sworn never to use against another. The very air seemed to darken as I chanted the power phrase over and over seven times, all the while striking and parrying with the strength that only the mad have. As I concluded the awful spell I drove him back against the porch steps and pinned him with my staff and my knee, and then I slapped his face.

The effect was instantaneous. He was dead. As I turned toward the other swordsman, still fighting Cheng, he realized what had happened, and with a single panicked leap he cleared the fence into the neighbor's yard.

I jumped over the corpse and up the steps. Mark was unconscious, and no longer breathing; Mara was holding him up, her clothing soaked with his blood. I pulled the ring from my finger and put it on him, then braced myself and pulled the sword out of the wall and out of my friend. He fell, limp, to the porch floor.

Mara and I knelt beside him, and for a long moment we thought our friend was gone. Finally, though, he drew a ragged breath and spat out a mouthful of blood. "Did we win?" he asked weakly.

"Yes, we won," I answered grimly. We had won, but I had lost.

Mara looked into my eyes, ever sensitive to my moods. "You did what you had to do, my love," she said. "Mark would be gone now if you hadn't."

I tried to console myself with that. How could she know, how could she ever understand, how much that spell cost my soul?

Chapter 14, *Determination*

Cheng said, "You're a sorcerer!"

I stood up, and turning to him I said, "Yes, I am." I saw the blood on his shirt, and realized that his chest wound wasn't serious.

He made a sign with his right hand which I didn't recognize. "Cheng, you needn't fear me. I am honored that you fought beside me, for without you I might well be dead now." I bowed to him then, and he hesitantly bowed also.

"I am honored to have helped," he said. At that moment I heard Mark moving behind me, and as I looked that way I saw him standing up. He looked weak but his wound had closed. He smiled weakly, and Mara led him inside.

"Cheng, please join us inside," I said, turning back again. "When my friend has completed his healing I will heal you also."

I could see he was uneasy about entering my house, but he did so, carefully avoiding the corpse on the porch steps. "Thank you," he said as he entered.

"I'll join you in a moment," I said. I lifted the swordsman's body over my shoulder, and cast an Invisibility spell. I didn't want Cheng to know all my secrets.

I quickly dealt with the body, then returned to the house, still invisible, bearing with me the swordsman's scabbards. Mara was hosing the blood from the back porch; I was glad we had gotten it watersealed. She smiled at me, and I forced myself to smile back. I didn't feel very happy though.

Inside I saw that Cheng was wearing my ring. Mark had downed two sports drinks (the best thing I could find for blood regeneration) and Cheng was chugging one down as I entered. Both men had removed their bloody shirts and I could see that their wounds were healed.

"Thank you again, mister Jones," said Cheng, handing me my ring and bowing. I bowed also, and he said "I really must be going. I'll have to get another shirt before I return to work."

"Here," I said, fishing for my wallet, "let me give you a tip, and pay for your shirt."

"No, thank you, mister Jones, I can't take your money."

"Well, then, accept my gratitude. It has been an honor. Call on me if ever you need help." We bowed again, as it seemed required, then Cheng quickly left.

"How do you feel, Mark?"

"Better. Death sucks."

I laughed, but a hint of bitterness was in it. "I knew you would say that."

I looked at the kitchen clock. It was not yet ten o'clock in the morning, and I was tired already. As Mara walked in, I said, "I'm going downstairs. I have some things to do."

I meditated, sitting on the rug which was the only furnishing in that room under the basement stairs. There in the company of the statue-woman I had failed to protect, and the unwanted spoils of battle, I... moped.

It's the only way to say it, and after perhaps an hour of that I became disgusted with myself. I went back upstairs, and found Mark and Mara in the office. I saw the swords, in scabbards this time, and the pieces of the broken staff lying on top of the filing cabinets; I would have to put the swords in the basement later.

"Hey, Solo, how're you doin'?" said Mark, his cheeriness forced.

"Better. Killing sucks." Mara stood up then, and hugged me, and I held her for a long moment. Finally she backed away slightly, her hands still on my shoulders, and I said, "It's time to finish this. I'm going to solve this case, and after I deal with the murderer I'm going to confront Joseph Green. This business with the Changelings has gone on long enough."

"So what do we do?" asked Mara.

"There are two suspects I haven't interviewed: Ron Harris and Schuyler Norton. I think I'd like to talk to Schuyler first... he barely spoke at the meeting. I've a feeling he might know a lot. Mara, I'll want you to join me."

"Sure," she said, smiling.

"So how do we find him?" I asked. Mark was already paging through the fat San Francisco white pages, but shortly he shook his head.

"Not in here. He might live in an outlying area..." Mark turned to the computer and began a web search.

"Ron Harris I can find," I said. "I expect he'll be at his nightclub most any night of the week."

"Except maybe Sunday," said Mara, and I nodded.

"Mark, I'd also like to know more about Franklin Evans. If you find Schuyler Norton, Mara and I will fly there, and you can do some research."

"Bad idea, Solo," he said, pointing to the window. The morning had been cloudy, but now it was turning to rain.

"Ah. Hmm. Well, we'll just figure it out as we go."

"Well," said Mark, "while you're figuring that out, would you mind taking those cannibal's steak knives downstairs? They're making me nervous."

I picked up the two swords and headed for the room under the basement stairs. There were two sets of cast-iron shelf brackets there, left over from Dreamwalker's "zombie array," and I was storing my collection of swords there.

I looked over the swords already there; the two curved swords on the top brackets took up more room than the two straight swords on the bottom, so I squatted down and pushed them back, making room for the new ones.

As I arose from that position I bumped into the upper brackets, making the swords there shift. I froze in amazement at what I saw next.

The tip of one of the curved swords *passed through the shelf bracket* as it weren't there. Then the sword hung in place, impossibly balanced at the lower end of the blade, with the curved sword-tip entirely below the bracket!

It was a moment before I realized what I was seeing, and I used a few curse words as I contemplated the meaning. I took that sword down by the hilt and went upstairs with it.

"Hey, what..." began Mark, as I walked into the office. Mara entered from the living room, stopping at the door as she saw me brandishing the sword. Without a word I held the sword out in front of me and turned it edge-upward. Slowly I lowered it until the intangible blade-tip passed through the top of the desk. When three inches of the blade had disappeared into the table I felt it hit at last.

"What the heck is going on?" said Mark, pushing his chair back and standing up to study it. A small nick was visible in the wooden desktop about five inches just beyond the point where the blade "entered" the table.

I pulled Harkin's illusion-glass from my pocket and handed it to Mark. He looked, as I lifted the sword up from the desk, then with a puzzled look on his face he handed the glass to Mara. Her eyes grew wide as she looked through the glass.

"That was in the basement?" asked Mara.

"Yes. On the top rack with the other sword, which really is curved. The lower rack still had two straight swords."

"What does it mean?" asked Mark. I could see comprehension dawning on Mara's face.

"Monday I was summoned to the meeting of the Conclave. I took a straight sword as an example, and I left it there. Then there remained two curved and two straight swords in my collection. Now, there are three straight swords and one curved. This one has been disguised so I wouldn't notice the substitution; I wouldn't have, either, for some time if I hadn't bumped the brackets by accident."

"Why?" asked Mark. "Why break in here and exchange swords?"

"Phillip Silva," said Mara. "His 'killer' was armed with a curved sword."

"I thought it must be a set-up, but I couldn't account for the sword. It was definitely one of theirs, and that threw me off. Now I know how it happened."

"One of the Conclave did it, then," said Mark.

"I had assumed as much before; one of the Conclave, or Natomi Osaka. I don't want to think it was her, but I can't rule her out yet."

I was about to say more, but the phone rang. Mark answered it, saying "Solo Jones Investigations, Mark here, what can I do for ya?"

He listened for a moment, then said "Yeah, great, send it... The fax is on this line... I know, I know, my boss is cheap... Thanks again, I owe you a steak for this!"

Mark hung up. I opened my mouth to ask the obvious question, but he held up his hands a moment, and the phone rang again. This time he rolled his chair over to the fax and pressed "Start."

"What is it?" asked Mara.

Mark said, "I have a buddy who's a real police nut. He's not in good enough shape, couldn't get in, you know? But he has connections downtown, so I called him, and he got us something interesting."

He handed me the first page, and I read it with some difficulty. English I had mastered pretty well, but reading government forms was still difficult. Mara read over my shoulder, as I finally figured out what it was.

The top said "Coroner's Report" and below that, in the Name field, it said, "Harkin, John Xavier." I struggled a bit with the unfamiliar medical terms, learning little; then Mark handed me the second page, and I jumped to the "Summary" section.

"...conclude that the decapitation of subject was caused by a wire garotte or similar weapon, employed by an individual of unusual strength," I read aloud. "There are no other types of weapon known to cause this type of wound."

"If Silva was killed the same way, then it wasn't the sword that did it," said Mark, grinning slightly. "It was completely a set-up."

"Wait," I said, and read further. "Suspect is likely a bodybuilder or other extremely strong person. Crushing of vertebrae observed requires extremely high pressures." I thought a moment. "None of the Conclave members are that muscular. Really, they are a pretty soft group. Natomi is strong for her size, but

she's no bodybuilder. A Changeling swordsman might be that strong, but I doubt it."

"Magic?" asked Mara.

"Probably, but I can't imagine what form it must take," I answered.

We stood there, each of us lost in thought for a moment; then Mark said, "What now?"

"Now, I need to talk to some mages," I said. "Any luck finding Schuyler Norton?"

"Oh, yeah, I found his agent," he answered. "He was happy to tell me that Schuyler's band, the Unity Principle, is playing at a club over at Pier 96. It's noon now, so he's probably not there yet."

"Noon. Ron Harris probably isn't at work yet, and Natomi will be at lunch," I mused.

"We should be also," said Mara. "Let me go throw the wet clothes in the dryer, and we'll all go out for lunch, since I haven't had time to fix anything." It was only then that I realized Mark was wearing one of my shirts. It was a bit big on him, but Mark seems to look natural in about anything.

That seemed the thing to do, so we got in the car and left. "Where do you guys want to eat?" asked Mark.

"I don't know," said Mara, grinning.

"I do care," I said. "Isn't there an Italian place near Pier 96 you've been promising to take me to, Mark? Drive us there and lunch is on the company. Maybe afterward I can catch Schuyler practicing or something."

"You got it, Solo."

Chapter 15, *Schuyler Norton*

The restaurant was dimly lit inside, and it was a bit before I could see. The crowd wasn't too bad on a Wednesday, so we were quickly seated and our orders taken.

As soon as the waiter left, Mark said, "I just have one question, Solo. How did anyone get into the room under the stairs? Don't you have that secured with magic?"

"I was afraid to ask that," said Mara, shivering slightly.

"I don't know," I said. "I know my own spells, and the spell of Closing on the door has been mine each time I have visited that room. Whoever got in there knows how to circumvent the spell without dispelling it."

Mark frowned, and said "What did they do? Turn into a liquid and run under the door?"

"I don't know," I said again. "I wish I did. I suppose it's possible a very skilled mage might have been able to suspend my spell without breaking it. I can imagine in general some ways it might be done, but I don't think I could do it."

"That means probably not Franklin Evans, since he's an apprentice?" said Mara.

"I'm afraid he's still a suspect," I said. "He told me that John was about to nominate him for Magus; if that's true he's as skilled as they are. I guess I need to talk to him also."

"Do you think he's more skilled than you are?" said Mark.

"It's not just a question of skill," I said. "Suspending another caster's spell would be a form of Metamagic, or Metamancy; I'm not sure which is the correct term. I don't have much formal training in that field. Of course you know what I was trained in primarily." My friends both nodded, and I said, "Pretty much everything else I have taught myself or picked up from others in bits and pieces."

"Y'know," Mark said, "I think there's something you missed searching Harkin's and Silva's offices."

"What's that?" I asked.

"Did either of them have a computer?"

"Yes," I answered, not getting the point right away. "They both did."

"You may have missed a lot of evidence, by not searching the computers. You need me for that."

I learned to 'Surf the Web' the same week I learned English, but I still wasn't used to considering computers as a storehouse of personal or business data. Silently I cursed myself for such a simple mistake.

Mark must have seen it in my face. "Hey, Solo, it's what I do and I didn't think of it 'til now. Don't bust your chops too hard."

Just then I looked up and saw Schuyler Norton entering the restaurant. He was accompanied by four men, three in very casual (torn, tattered) clothing like Schuyler, and the last in a business suit. I nodded toward them. Mark turned to look, and said "Huh. His band, and the nightclub owner?"

"Or maybe their agent," said Mara.

I watched as a waitress led them to a table. They were still sunblind, narrowly dodging chairs and customers, so I was pretty sure we hadn't been noticed yet.

Suddenly I saw something unexpectedly familiar... one of the band members had the "family resemblance" to Joseph Green! Though I could not be completely certain, I felt it likely he was a Changeling.

Mara looked at me then, recognition in her eyes also. "A Changeling in the band?" she asked, and I nodded.

"Yeah, he does look like one," said Mark, turning back to our table. "We better not stare, though; they'll be able to see clearly pretty quick." As I was the only one of us seated with a clear view of their table, I could watch them over Mara's shoulder without looking too suspicious.

Well, our food came, so we ate, making small talk between bites, and I saw the same happen across the room at the band's table. Schuyler seemed to be a prodigious eater, which surprised me as he was rather slim. Eventually he noticed me and waved, so I waved back.

As our waiter was taking our dessert order, Schuyler came over. "Have the ice cream," he said cheerfully, "They have real vanilla that's amazing and a fine chocolate that is even better." I ordered the chocolate; I don't remember what my friends had. "May I join you?" he asked, after the waiter had gone.

"Sure," I said. "I was going to look you up anyway. You heard about Phillip Silva's death, didn't you?"

"Yeah, Ron called me the next morning and told me to turn on the news. Killed with a sword, and he shot the killer, they said."

"Not exactly," I answered. "Phillip evidently used a fire-spell on him. I imagine the police had a hard time figuring out how to write that up."

"Fire spell, eh?" he said, sounding unconvinced. "Doesn't sound like Doc."

"Moses said the same thing," I said.

"Is he the one that found Doc? The news didn't say, and Ron didn't seem to know."

"Yes. Before he called the police, he called me. I got to look at the scene first."

"So, was the killer one of the Changelings Ron is so suspicious of?"

"He was a Changeling," I said, "but he didn't look like a swordsman. I'll tell you what really happened... someone else killed Phillip Silva, and then planted the dead Changeling there with a sword. You remember the sword I brought to the meeting?"

"Yeah. Ron said he was going to do as you suggested and drop it in the bay. Was it the murder weapon?"

"It wasn't the one at the murder scene. Someone very skilled bypassed my spell of Closing and exchanged that sword for a curved one, to throw me off. He, or she, put an impressive static illusion on the straight sword to make it look curved. What I don't know is who in the Conclave could do that."

"Any of us, I suppose," he answered. "John was the undisputed master of illusion, but I don't guess he's much of a suspect."

"We are sure he's dead, aren't we?" I asked.

"Yeah, he is," he said. "I saw him myself; slipped into the morgue and gave him the full scan."

"Well, I'm glad that's settled," said Mark. "With mages it's not safe to make assumptions."

Indeed, I thought, but I didn't say it. The conversation stalled there for a moment; Schuyler sipped at the beer he had brought with him, and we all picked at our desserts, uncomfortably.

"So who do you think did it, Solomoriah?" asked Schuyler presently.

"I still don't know. I have a lot of suspects, and a lot of questions, and not as many answers."

"I imagine I'm one of those suspects."

"I'm afraid you are," I said. "Where were you yesterday at about six o'clock?"

"Warming up with the band, just over there at the club. Several employees saw me."

"What about Thursday night?"

"Playing at the club until just after midnight, then I guess I have no alibi," he said. "I'm too wasted after a gig to do any killing. Heck, I'm a pacifist. I don't kill spiders and snakes."

"I'm curious," said Mara. "Do you ever play at Ron Harris' club?"

"A.J.'s? We did, once, and it was a good gig, but Ron creeps me out. Y'know, in this town just about any kinda sex is considered cool, but Ron, well... I didn't tell you this, okay? Ron doesn't care if you're male or female, young or old, as long as you are, like, his. All his."

"I've been told he's a master of influence and control magic," I said. "Does he use magic to get his way?"

"Hey, you didn't hear that from me," he answered. "But that doesn't mean he's a killer. I think he's too much of a coward... his magic isn't overpowering enough for him to feel safe taking on a Magus." He looked at his watch. "Dude, I have to get back to the club."

"I see. Thanks for your help with this case."

"No prob," he said, getting up. "See ya later." As he returned to his table, the band members got up to leave with him. The man in the suit signed for the bill and put a cash tip on the table, then left also.

"Must be the club owner," said Mark. "I can't believe their agent would buy them lunch."

"If they're popular enough, he might," said Mara. "After all, he'd be spending their money."

"True," said Mark as I signed the credit-card slip. I also left a cash tip; it always seems to make the waiters and waitresses more helpful.

Outside, I noted that the weather had cleared up again; blue sky filled with little puffy white clouds. The air was cool and rain-clean, and it felt good.

Then I remembered the morning, and I didn't feel so well. It's easy for me to forget when I'm busy; it's the quiet times when I feel the darkness within me.

In the car, I said, "Well, what have we learned here?"

"He was very truthful," said Mara. "Except he seemed nervous talking about the Changelings. Didn't you say he didn't know about them?"

"At the meeting, he only spoke once," I answered. "I assumed he was among the surprised, but as Mark pointed out moments ago, it's not safe to make assumptions about mages."

"He does have one in his band," said Mark. "Maybe he has firsthand knowledge."

"Maybe. I don't know. He's hiding something interesting, but is it important?"

Mara shook her head. "I don't know."

I thought a swear word, for I had been hoping for one of her reliable hunches. "Well," I said, "Natomi, Franklin, or Ron Harris?"

"Why Natomi?" asked Mark. "I've been wondering why she's a suspect since you first mentioned her name. Isn't she on our side?"

"She has acted a bit... suspicious. She called me to the meeting; without me, none of them would have brought up the Changelings."

"I think they're a red herring," said Mark.

I wasn't familiar with the phrase, but I could guess his meaning. "Me, too," I said. "Anyway, after the meeting she came on to me. At the time I thought she was really interested, but it was so out of character that I now wonder if it was an act."

"Man, you just got married! Did she really think you'd cheat on Mara?"

"I don't know," I said. "I turned her away gently; then I told her my story, the real story, and I told her how important she was to me as a friend. She seemed to accept that."

"Strange, but is it suspicious?" he asked.

"Just before she came on to me, Franklin Evans hired me to investigate the murder. She knows my success firsthand on the Burke rape case, after all; if she's the murderer, she might want to influence me in her favor."

"Gotcha."

"In fact, I think I should talk to her next," I said.

"Alone?" asked Mara.

"I'm afraid so," I answered.

Chapter 16, *Natomi Osaka*

"I'm sorry, sir, but Ms. Osaka is in a meeting right now," said the Consulate receptionist. "I can't tell you how long she'll be, but you're welcome to wait if you want."

There being nothing else to do, I sat down and began looking through the pile of old magazines that always seems to be in such a place. Roughly half of them were in Japanese, and the other half were tourism guides for San Francisco; anyone else would have been bored to tears, but not me. Though I had been in San Francisco for about two months (as flesh-and-blood anyway), I really hadn't seen the sights.

Shortly the receptionist's phone buzzed, and she picked it up. I couldn't hear her, but the call was obviously about me, since she kept looking toward me. I put down my magazine just as she said, "Ms. Osaka will see you now, Mister Jones."

"Thank you," I said as I passed her. Natomi's office door was open, and she stood up as I entered. "Hello, Natomi," I said.

"Hello, Solomoriah. How can I help you?" I closed the door behind me, and we sat down.

"I've learned a lot about this case," I said, "but there are still a lot of puzzles. I'd like your opinion on my discoveries so far."

I was lying, of course. I wanted to see her reaction to my discoveries, not hear her opinions. Without Mara I would have to really pay attention to learn anything this way. I was carefully keeping my mind quiet, in case she was listening to my thoughts.

I hated lying to her, but what choice did I have?

"Tell me," she said.

"Well, I assume you know about the second murder..."

"I know Phillip Silva was killed by a man with a sword. That's what the newspaper article says, anyway." She waved a hand toward a newspaper on her desk.

"Not exactly," I said. "The curved sword found there was stolen from my basement. Whoever did it was somehow able to bypass or suspend my spell of Closing without breaking it. Do you know who might be able to do something like that?"

"There aren't any other ways into the place where you put the swords?" she asked. I shook my head, and she continued, "I don't know. John could have done it, if anyone could. My master could, but he's not a suspect. He's in Tokyo."

"I didn't even know you had a master," I said. "You aren't still an apprentice, are you?"

She laughed. "No. Our ways are different. You know, the Conclave is just a local group... there are many Conclaves in the world. They are all members of the Hermetic Society."

"Named for the Greek god Hermes?" I asked.

She nodded. "They are a lot like the Masons or other so-called secret societies; but the Hermetic Society actually has some real secrets."

Well, she had just told me a lot I didn't know. I would have liked to learn more about the Conclave and the Society, but I really needed to get back on track. "The sword stolen was replaced with the one I took to the meeting Monday night, covered with an illusion to make it appear curved. I didn't even know that an illusion could be made stable that way." I could see the surprise on her face at this information.

"I didn't know that either. John Harkin was the only mage I ever met who knew enough about illusions to try that."

"His name keeps coming up in that regard," I said. "There were other strange things about the murder of Phillip Silva. The supposed killer was slain by a bolt of flame or something like that." Again the surprised look.

"That doesn't sound like Phillip. He was a pacifist, even marched in the peace rallies back when he was a student. He used to tell those old stories until you just about fell asleep in your seat."

"I'm told he was a master of mental magic," I said. "The flamebolt seemed to me to be a strange choice for him." I gathered my thoughts for a moment. "The alleged killer was a Changeling, all right, but he didn't look like the other swordsmen. Since the sword was a plant, I assume he was also."

"That seems reasonable," she said, nodding.

"There is one last thing that has come up," I said. "I got a look at the Coroner's report about John Harkin. He wasn't killed by a blade, but rather by a garotte of some sort. The report says that the killer must have been extremely strong."

"Aren't the Changeling swordsmen strong?" she asked.

"They are, but why wouldn't they just use their swords? Doesn't make sense to me." I sat back in my chair. "Someone has gone to a lot of trouble to fake all this,

and implicate the Changelings. I'm not fooled. Unfortunately, Joseph Green seems to have figured out that I gave away their secret to the Conclave. He sent two swordsmen to kill me today, and I killed one of them."

Evidently Natomi could see that I was bothered by that. "Didn't you once tell me that you believe anyone who tries to take your life gives up their right to their own?"

"I do," I said. "That's not what bothers me. Mark was injured grievously, and I needed to end the battle quickly. I used a Death spell."

"Oh," she said in a small voice. "Necromancy. Why did you use that spell, instead of Paralysis or Sleep?"

"I was insane with anger. I wanted him dead. I cast that spell while wielding my staff; I didn't even know I could do that. Natomi, I cast it at sevenfold power, more than twice what would be needed to kill a man. I wanted him dead in the worst way."

"I see," she said, still in that small voice.

"I swore to myself I would never use that spell against a human."

"Did you, really?" she asked then. "Are Changelings really human?"

"I don't know," I said. "They walk like men, and talk like men, so they must be men... an old saying from my youth. I fought Ape-Men in the grasslands of the Sahara in the old days; that saying was about them. Their spears and clubs were inferior to our weapons, but still quite lethal. They were men. Are Changelings less than that?"

"I guess not," she answered reluctantly.

"It's one thing to kill a foe in a fair fight; after all I have seen and done I'd rather not be responsible for anyone's death, ever again, but if it happens that way I can live with it. It's another thing entirely to tear away an enemy's soul with a slap of your hand."

We sat there, looking away from each other. I realized then that Natomi understood less of the darkness in me than Mara did.

After a few moments of that, I said "Well, I didn't come here to burden you with my problems. I still need to speak to Franklin Evans and Ron Harris today."

"You didn't come here for my opinion," she said. "I'm a suspect, aren't I? Why?" Before I could answer I saw dawning comprehension on her face. "It's because of my indiscretion Monday night... you think I was just trying to influence you, offering you favors to look the other way. What kind of woman do you think I am?"

"I don't know, Natomi. Each time I meet you, you act like a different woman. The first time you were angry, and I understand why... we were trespassing on your 'turf.' The next time was when you hired me to solve your niece's rape, and you were all business. Then Monday night you were... enticing, desirable, sexy, and I'm sure it was deliberate. You have to admit, your behavior has been very confusing."

"Men," she said. For a moment she scowled at me, and for that moment I felt almost as uncomfortable as in the presence of my old master. Then her expression softened. "I did act in a dishonorable fashion. I suppose it's reasonable that you think me capable of more dishonorable acts. Solomoriah, you forgave me, so I forgive you. What must I do to convince you that I'm innocent?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Read my mind. I give you permission."

I didn't want to do that. What man has any business in the mind of a woman he's turned away? But she was right, and as she had offered I had to accept. I spoke the word to activate the spell.

"Tell me," I said, "where were you Thursday night through Friday morning?"

"In my apartment. Alone, except for my cat." I saw in her mind the cat, a beautiful Siamese. "I watched television until late, then went to bed." I could detect no untruth there.

"What about yesterday afternoon?"

"I worked late yesterday, and the deputy consul invited me to eat at his home with his family; I accepted." I saw the smiling faces of the deputy consul and his wife, and three slightly rowdy children.

"Thank you," I said, getting up to leave. Natomi looked surprised at my sudden departure, and I turned to her and said, "Tell me how you feel about me."

She didn't answer in words, but the rush of images and emotions staggered me. I saw things I should not have seen, fragments of daydreams and fantasies, and I knew her feelings for me were genuine. Then she realized how I had tricked her, and her feelings turned to anger. "Get out! Out of my office!" she said, standing up.

As I reached for the door I said, "I'm sorry, Natomi. I had to be sure."

"Go," she said quietly. I could see tears welling in her eyes. "Please just go."

Chapter 17, *Franklin Evans*

The weather was still clear as I stepped out onto the roof of 50 Fremont Center. I was already Invisible, and had activated my Flight spell, so I could take off any time I wanted. I didn't take off right away, though.

I stood at the edge of the roof for a long moment. I knew I was safe, but it was still unsettling, looking out over the city from such a height. Facing my fear helped keep my mind clear and focused.

I stepped off and took to the air. Diving, I rapidly gained speed; then I pulled up and headed for home.

Mark was waiting for me at the office. "I've got something interesting for you!"

"Tell me," I said, as Mara came in from the hallway.

"On a hunch," said Mark, "I did some surfing on a couple of local news sites, looking for stories about people killed by decapitation. I found an interesting one only a couple of months back... a headless body pulled from the bay. The story didn't tell me much, so I called my police-freak buddy, and he got me this." He handed me a fax copy of a forensics report, on a "John Doe," and I automatically turned to the summary section.

"Subject was decapitated by means of small-gauge wire rope a.k.a. aircraft cable," I read aloud, so that Mara would hear it. "In the absence of other evidence, this must be considered most likely an industrial accident. Crushing of the vertebrae of the neck by the cable is so severe that we feel it could not have been caused by a garotte or similar weapon."

"Wow," said Mara.

"Wait, you're not done," said Mark. "Go back up to the examination section and read it." I skimmed the section he pointed out until I found what he was referring to.

"Subject has apparent full male sexual organs, with an incompletely formed vagina, a variation of the condition formerly referred to as a male pseudo-hermaphrodite.' He was a Changeling!"

"Exactly," said Mark, "and he was killed just like John Harkin and Doc Silva."

"It must be the same killer," I mused. "That killer must be a member of the Conclave, based on what we've learned already."

"Natomi's not a suspect anymore?" asked Mark.

"No."

"Whoa, that sounded final," he said. "I won't ask."

"That'd be best." I considered my options for a moment. "I think I need to speak to Ron Harris next. There is still too much I don't know here."

Without another word Mark dialed a number and handed me the handset. "AJ Enterprises, Mister Harris' office, can I help you?"

"Yes, this is Solo Jones. Can you tell me, would it be possible for me to see him today?"

"Well, sir, Mister Harris is in a meeting with the zoning board this afternoon. He may be in later today but I can't say for sure."

"Thank you, miss. I'll try again later." I turned off the phone and handed it back to Mark. "He has a meeting with the zoning board," I said.

"There's nothing that San Franciscans like to argue about more than zoning," said Mark. "Hey, wait... Harkin was a realtor. Could there be a connection?"

"I suppose, but how exactly?" I said. Mark shrugged.

"Wasn't there an article in the paper about zoning issues in SOMA last week?" said Mara. I shook my head; I hadn't read many newspapers in the week before our wedding. Then she turned and left the room, and I pulled up a chair and sat down.

"Well, I guess I need to see Franklin Evans next then," I said to Mark. "Do we know how to contact him?"

"Mara wrote down his address and phone number yesterday... forgot already?"

I smiled a rueful smile. "I suppose so. Yesterday morning seems like an age ago. Dial it for me?"

He already was. "Here," he said, handing it to me.

It was ringing. Click... "Hello?"

"Franklin? This is Solomoriah."

"Yeah, Solo, it's me. What's up? Are you close to solving John's murder?"

"Maybe," I answered. "I need to talk to you again. Are you busy?"

"No, not doing anything. D'you want me to come to your house?"

"No," I said. "I'll meet you at your place, if you don't mind. Right away if that's okay with you?"

"Yeah, fine. I'll be here." Click.

I turned off the phone and handed it back to Mark. "Here it is!" called Mara. She came in waving a newspaper. "I didn't think I had thrown these out yet." She handed the paper to me and pointed out the article. I quickly skimmed it.

"Ron Harris, CEO of AJ Enterprises Inc. and proprietor of the popular AJ's nightclub, was again denied the zoning variance for expansion of his nightclub," I read aloud. "Mr. Harris refused to comment after the meeting.' Hmm. How does this fit in?"

"This was just last week," said Mark. "Isn't it a bit soon for him to be bugging the zoning commission again?"

"That's what I was thinking," said Mara.

"He's supposed to be an expert at spells of influence and domination," I mused. "He would never be turned down if he didn't want to be."

"Does the Conclave have rules of ethics?" asked Mara.

"I don't know; it didn't come up," I said. "Well, I'll try to remember to ask Franklin. I better be going."

"Need any help?" asked Mark.

"I figured I'd fly. Hmm, I'm a bit short on prepared spells..." I wandered into the parlor, so as not to disturb Mark should any phone calls come in, and swiftly prepared replacements for my Invisibility, Flight, and Opening spells, which I had used leaving 50 Fremont Center.

I still had a sevenfold spell of Kinetic Shield prepared; but I wondered if perhaps I needed something special, to protect against beheading by means of wire garotte. I found myself wishing I knew the secret of the Changeling's very durable protection. But, I reminded myself, I didn't, so I did the best I could.

For a moment I thought, and then I began casting an amended Kinetic Shield spell. It took eleven more words to constrain the area of effect to my neck, but by concentrating it that way I made the threefold casting as powerful as an eight or ninefold normal casting.

With that powerful mystic field surrounding my neck, I decided to go ahead and prepare for anything. I cast Mind Reading and analytical Mystic Vision at threefold duration each; both would therefore last the rest of the day and probably all night.

I was tired, after all that; but I had a job to do, and too much time wasted already. I found Mara with Mark in the office, discussing the case. "Want to go along, Mara?"

"Yes," she said, rising from her chair.

"I guess I'll hold down the fort here," said Mark.

Mara said, "Let me go change shoes, and get my purse." After a few aerial trips with me, Mara had selected a small purse into which she could put "the bare minimum" she might need. Larger purses turned out to be very inconvenient while airborne. As to the shoes, well, the backless women's shoes then in fashion were hard to hang on to while flying.

It didn't take her as long to prepare as it did for me to cast Flight to affect two and a blanket Invisibility spell. "See you later, Mark," I said.

"Probably tomorrow," he said, not bothering to look for us. "It's half past three now; by the time you get back, I'll probably be home."

"See you tomorrow, then," I said, taking Mara by the hand.

"Goodbye, Mark," she said as I held open the door for her.

As we flew through the afternoon sky toward Franklin's apartment building, I realized it was where I had seen my first Tap. That night, less than a week after my "awakening" in this age, I stood on a rooftop and saw the thin conduit snake upward and connect to the Ley line. Though I flew as fast as I could I did not make it in time to meet the mage who created it. Now I could at least guess who it was.

I rang the doorbell, wishing Mara could see the look on my face. After a moment the door opened, and Franklin looked out. Not seeing us, he said, "I hope it's you, Solo... come on in."

"Thanks," I said quietly. As he stepped back from the open door I gently guided Mara ahead of me. "I'm in," I said, and he closed the door. As soon that was done, I dropped my Invisibility, and after a moment Mara appeared also.

"Mara," he said, "I didn't expect you also." He looked around at the disorder in his bachelor's apartment. "I hope it's not too bad in here."

"Looks fine to me," she said brightly, moving a pile of books from a chair and sitting down.

I smiled at that, then remembered why we were there. "Franklin, some things have come up that I need to ask you about."

He cleared a chair for me and I sat down. "Ask away," he said, sitting down himself.

"Did John have any connection with the zoning board?" I asked.

"Yeah, he did... it was an old arrangement. He monitored a lot of public and some non-public meetings for magical influences. Some friends of his at City Hall arranged payment for the services." He paused. "Does this have something to do with his murder?"

"Maybe," I said. "Is there a connection to Phillip Silva?"

"Sure, he's the alternate... he did the job when John was busy." I could see the suspicion growing in Franklin's eyes. "It's Ron, isn't it?"

"I think so," I said. "I still don't know how, but now I have a very solid reason why. The Changelings were a smokescreen."

"Yeah... I thought it seemed far-fetched." I glanced at Mara and she nodded, almost imperceptibly. Interesting.

"Well, I thought I had other questions, but I guess not," I said, standing up. "Now it seems I must seek the dragon in his lair."

"I'm going too," said Franklin. "He was my mentor. I have a stake in this too."

"Very well," I said. "Mara, this will probably be ugly, and I'm afraid you aren't really ready for this sort of fight." She looked unhappy about my words, but didn't say anything. "I'd like you to go back to the house."

"We'll take my car," Franklin said before she could answer. "I'll drop you by your house," he said to Mara, "and then we'll go on to AJ's." He turned to me. "I guess that's where we should look for him?"

"I think so," I said. "He's supposed to have businesses all over, but I don't know about any of the others."

"Can we prep spells at your place?" he asked, as we walked out the door.

"Sure," I said. "Let's go."

Franklin's car was tiny. I had a hard time folding my six-foot frame into the back seat; but Mara would have had nearly as much trouble as I, and I always let her have the better seat.

So I was greatly relieved to arrive at the house. I practically had to crawl out, over the folded driver's seat, but as soon as I walked in the front door my sore spots faded away.

Mark was just closing up the office. "Hey, didn't figure you'd be back this quick," he said.

"Solomoriah has solved the case," said Mara. "Ron Harris is the killer."

"Probably," I added. "I'm only nine-tenths sure."

"Well, I'm sure it was him," said Franklin.

"I don't need to prepare any spells," I said to Franklin. "Feel free to use the parlor." He remembered the way, and I followed him.

"This place feels pretty good," he said. "Better than my Mystic Conduit spell."

"Not as much of a rush as John's crystal platform, though."

He looked at me, surprised. "You got into John's basement?"

"Yes. When I search a house, I do a thorough job." I felt a bit guilty not mentioning the computers. "I borrowed a couple of books... wait in the parlor and I'll get them for you."

I handed him the two books. "I don't know why I took that journal; I don't read Latin. The book by Moses Rook was very illuminating."

"I haven't read it yet," he said. Holding up the journal, he said, "This is John's spellbook."

"How is that possible? There aren't any diagrams."

"John created a pure-text notation for gestures and spellform structures. I think I'm the only person besides him who ever learned read it."

"Ah," I said. Then I remembered the illusion-glass. "Here," I said, handing it to him, "this was John's also. Very handy... it helped me solve this case."

"Well, I'm glad," he said. "You have anything else I might need?"

"No, that's all I borrowed. I'd be happy to return the favor; I have all of Dreamwalker's books. So far as I care, you can have all of them which aren't in English."

He began to say something more, and stopped. "There'll be time enough to chat later. Do you have a spell to protect you from spells of influence or domination?"

"No," I admitted.

"I'll cast a protective spell on you before we go."

"Do you have any spells to protect against physical attacks?" I asked.

"Yeah, I have a couple of options. Can you tell me what we're up against?"

"The medical examiners' reports I have seen indicate some sort of very powerful garotte. Sturdy neck protection is called for, I suppose."

"Gotcha," he said.

Mara walked in at that moment, bearing a tray with a steaming carafe of xocholotl and three cups. Mark followed her in, Jolt in hand. "Either of you need a drink?" she asked as she put the tray on the coffee table.

Franklin looked suspiciously at the dark liquid in the carafe. "Ever have xocholotl?" I asked.

"Nope. What is it?"

"It's a lot like liquid dark chocolate," said Mara, handing him a full cup. "Try it."

He took a sip, then drank deeply of the strong hot drink. Mara handed me a cup also, and took one for herself.

"Not bad. I could get to like this," said Franklin.

"Gah," said Mark, "can't stand the stuff."

Franklin put his drained cup on the tray. Mara gave him a questioning look, and he shook his head. "It's good, but I need to prep a couple spells now."

"Come on, guys, he doesn't sound to me like he needs an audience," said Mara, picking up the tray and leading us out. Mark and I went to the office and sat down; after a little while Mara joined us. I could hear Franklin pretty plainly, and I marvelled at how he wove English words together like fractured poetry to form his spells. I wished I could watch his gestures...

Shortly he came into the office. "Ready. I've already got my protection on... how does it look?"

I brought my Mystic Vision "forward" and focused on him. He had an interesting armoring spell, with a double-layer around his neck; and I could make out a spellform oriented around his head which was entirely unfamiliar to me. "Looks good to me," I said.

He began a new spellcasting, and I paid close attention, though I was sure I couldn't remember all the words. As he completed the final gesture he laid his left hand on my shoulder, and I felt a strange sensation as his spell wrapped itself around my skull.

"Third tier of power," he said. "Best I can do."

"Feels good," I said, feeling it out with my mind. I discovered that the Mind Reading spell I had cast earlier, which was still in effect, could not reach out beyond the protection; so casting it had become a waste of time. Still, I felt the protection well worth such a small cost.

"Let's go," I said. "Mark, Mara, this may be pretty, ah, 'hairy,' so I'd like you to stay here. A mage's battle is no place for you two."

"I understand," Mara said, smiling. I could see the worry behind the smile. "Good luck, my love."

"Hey, it's about quitting time anyway," said Mark. I could see he was disappointed to be left out of the action, but he couldn't argue with my logic.

I kissed Mara, a bit self-consciously this time, and said "I'll be back."

"You better," she answered, still trying to smile.

Chapter 18, *Ron Harris*

The ride to AJ's was much more comfortable in the front seat of Franklin's car. We didn't talk much, and the tension was almost a physical force, growing stronger as we approached our destination. I could see Franklin forging righteous anger into determination...

That early in the day, AJ's wasn't open yet. "We can force the front door, or look for a servant's entrance," I said.

"Yeah, in the back," he said, sounding distant. "It'd be more discreet." We walked down the narrow alleyway separating AJ's from the neighboring building. Halfway down we found a door, and it was unlocked. Franklin reached for it, but I held out a hand, stopping him.

"We don't want to leave any evidence," I said, and pulled on yet another pair of the surgical gloves, which by now I was carrying rolled up in my pants pocket.

I offered him a pair, but he shook his head. "I'll keep my hands to myself."

I opened the door. Inside we found a combination storeroom and office space, obviously where the help did their paperwork or took breaks. Large quantities of alcoholic beverages were stored in big stainless-steel refrigerators or stacked in boxes and kegs on the floor; and across the room was another door, slightly ajar. There was a light on in the storeroom, but the next room was apparently darkened.

I picked my way through the room; the floor near the outer door was occupied by what I took for a fresh shipment of beverages, not yet "checked in" by the help. The place seemed deserted, but then it was only just five o'clock... the sign at the front door had indicated the club opened at seven. I hoped we would be finished before any of the help arrived.

The other door opened into the dance floor area, beside the bar. There were a few lights on, over the metal stairs which themselves climbed over the bar, but otherwise there was no light.

"See you tomorrow, Mister Harris," said a woman's voice from overhead. It was Ron's secretary, leaving for the day! Franklin and I quickly moved from the storeroom door to the much darker area near the stage, so that she wouldn't see us; and it worked, for she left by the storeroom door, closing it behind her.

"Perfect," I said quietly. "Ron must be alone."

Suddenly I was blinded; all the lights in the house came on at once, at full intensity, and I couldn't see a thing. I think I may have cried out.

"Thought you had me at a disadvantage, eh?" came Ron's voice, booming loudly at us from overhead. I heard footsteps descending the metal stairs. "I assume,

since you are skulking around here in the dark, unannounced and unexpected, that you must have decided I am responsible for the deaths of John Harkin and Doc Silva?"

"Yes," I said, shielding my eyes as best I could. I still couldn't make out where he was exactly. "You were sloppy, Ron, and your coverup was strictly amateur."

"I thought framing the Changelings was a pretty good idea, myself," he said, from a different part of the room. "What, pray tell, did I do wrong?"

"Whatever you killed John Harkin with, wasn't a sword or knife. The medical examiner thinks it was a garotte of some sort." I could just see him now, in the middle of the room. He was tossing something into the air and catching it, over and over; a coin?

"I won't rest until I avenge my mentor," said Franklin in a menacing voice.

"Oh, come now, boy," he said, emphasizing the last word, "I am a seasoned and experienced Magus, and you are just an apprentice. Do you think you really have a chance?"

"Haven't you noticed you're outnumbered?" said Franklin. I cursed silently... I still couldn't see well enough to fight. We still needed to stall for time!

"When I find myself outnumbered," he answered, "I make some of my enemies into friends." He spoke a word then, in Latin I think, and then cursed. "A protective spell? John taught you well, boy, but you know, for every spell there's a counterspell." He spoke again, two words in Latin.

The next thing I knew, Franklin was wrestling with me. He jumped on my back, getting his left arm around my chest (pinning my left arm) and his right arm around my neck, and then he began to choke me.

Wrestling isn't my strong suit, but I've been in a few barroom brawls in my day. I knew hitting him would be worthless, though; Franklin's armoring spell would easily absorb all the damage I could apply to it. Engaged as we were, I didn't think I could manage a spell; so I improvised.

I reached up and over with my right hand, grabbing Franklin's right pinky, and I bent it back and pulled. Pain overrode the mental control, and he lost his grip around my neck. Then I turned to the right, pulling him off balance (since his left arm was still around me) and stuck out my left leg. He tripped, lost his grip and fell in front of me.

Before he could get up again, I spoke a word and released a threefold Sleep spell. He succumbed immediately.

"Not bad," said Ron, clapping slowly with a sarcastic expression on his face; my eyes were finally adjusted enough to see it. I could see that he had a variety of

protective spells in effect, but I decided to go all out anyway. In quick succession I released two threefold Force Bolts and a twofold Force Wave. He was driven backwards across the room by my onslaught, and my final spell not only shattered his shielding spell, it also shattered most of the bottles and glasses behind the bar.

"Now, that was rude," he said. "That booze cost me a lot of money."

"Tough," I said. "Are you ready to end this, Magus?"

"Sure," he said with a sadistic grin on his face. "I'm betting you are out of offensive magic right now, or you'd still be hammering me. It's only a matter of time until my Emotion Control spell breaks through your protection."

It was true. I could feel the spell Franklin gifted me with faltering under continuous pressure from Ron's spell. "You're right, I don't have any more offensive spells," I said, assembling my staff. "I guess I'll just have to beat you with a stick."

I saw a look of fear, real fear, cross his face, and I sneered at him as I approached. I felt strong, and dangerous. Once again, I was a fool.

When I was just three yards away from him, he yelled "Hai!" and threw something at me. It was that coin-like object he had been toying with, and it unfurled into a thin metal cable with a sound like a muffled whipcrack just before it wrapped itself around my neck.

My special protective spell slowed the strangling-cord, but didn't stop it. Before I could react it was choking me.

I did the only thing I could think to do... I fell backward. As I did, I put my right hand around my neck and stretched out my left hand toward the sky, speaking one word. I don't know if Ron saw my threefold Tap snake out through the ceiling in search of the nearby Ley line; he didn't react to it, anyway.

I felt the tingling as my ring rushed to repair the damage being done by the cord as it crushed, then cut through my windpipe. The pain was excruciating; thinking, and spell casting, was out of the question. I could hear the snapping of tendons and the tearing of muscles as it proceeded through my throat.

"I heard a rumor that you were hard to kill," I heard Ron say. "You are healing right now, aren't you? How are you doing that?" He said a word in Latin, and then I heard his footsteps, walking around me slowly. I forced my left hand to come down and cover my right, and hoped he hadn't seen my ring. Then I realized that the cord was cutting close to my spine...

With an audible, sickening crack the cord crushed a vertebrae and cut through my spinal cord, and my hands fell away from my bloody neck. "Aha!" he said,

"It's the ring! I'll just take that from you, if you don't mind." He bent down toward me, reaching for my right hand, and as I lay there helpless I saw movement above me.

For a moment a slim, dark figure was framed perfectly overhead. Though I could not see her face clearly I knew it must be Natomi; and she struck Ron feet-first in the chest. I could see her protective magics, but I also saw something new... short, broad blades of force surrounding her hands.

I heard Ron hit the floor beyond my feet, but of course I could not move my head to look. He was gasping for breath; without his protective magics he had taken the full force of her strike.

"I suspected you from the start, Ron," I heard her say. "If I were you I'd just lay there; if you stand up I might get the urge to kill you."

"No," he gasped out, "not... me." He coughed. "You hate... Solomoriah."

Natomi screamed then, and I heard (or felt) her hit the floor. I couldn't see what happened, and uncertainty was tearing at my soul. In that long moment, I heard a sound like a coin hitting the floor beneath me, and realized that the strangling-cord must have come out of my neck at last.

"You... hate him... because he didn't return your love," he gasped out. "You want him to die."

Then, like an electric shock, my body became mine again. I reached my left hand beneath my neck and grabbed the metal disk, slipping it in my shirt pocket as I sat up. I hurt, but I knew I didn't have time to hurt. I saw Natomi kneeling, her hands over her ears; the force-blades seemed to have faded. Ron was reclining near her, apparently where he had fallen; he looked toward me with a sneer and said, "Kill him."

Natomi slowly turned toward me, a look of pure hatred on her face; I grabbed my staff, which I had evidently dropped when Ron threw the strangling-cord at me, and came to my feet just in time to block her rush. The force-blades were again visible to me, and they looked fearsome; and I wasn't even sure my head was firmly attached yet. For a while it was all I could do to keep up with her slashes and kicks. Ron lay on the floor, watching, for a while, then slowly and painfully he pulled himself to his feet.

"Oh, little Natomi," he said, his voice stronger now, "you will love me, and you will give yourself to me. I do so look forward to using you, and you will be so glad to be used by me. You will love me so much, that when I hand you the knife you will kill yourself gladly for the sake of that love."

Natomi still had that look of dark hatred on her face. How could one who felt love for me just two days before now hate me so much? Ron's magic was surely strong...

Then I realized what I had to do. I waited for Natomi to make a double-overhand strike at me, which she had done several times; but this time instead of blocking it, I said "Shirak." My staff broke and disappeared as I took a step toward her, and I locked my arms around her back.

She was surprised for a moment, but of course her hands were still free; those wicked force-blades still menaced me. What I did next surprised her even more.

I kissed her. Her mouth was hard as stone at first, as was the rest of her body; then she seemed to melt into the kiss. Finally I judged it safe to break the kiss, and she whispered, "You bastard."

I released her, and she took a step back. I could see Ron behind her, fear written large on his face; he began to walk backward, chanting in Latin. Natomi heard him, and I saw an almost palpable darkness pass over her face. She turned and ran toward him; quite sensibly, he gave up his chant and tried to flee, but she was too quick. With a single slash of her right hand Natomi beheaded him.

We stood there, drained, as his body slowly fell.

"Very entertaining!" came a voice from above, and I heard clapping. I looked up to the top of the metal stairs, and there I saw three men. The two in the back were obviously Changeling swordsmen, but in front of them stood an old man I had never met, but who was nonetheless familiar to me...

It was Joseph Green.

Chapter 19, *Joseph Green*

"I have rarely seen such drama played out before me! I applaud you!" As he clapped, I looked him over... like his "children" he appeared to be of no race in particular, having elements of all. He was dressed in a red silk tunic and trousers, decorated in some Oriental (perhaps Chinese?) style with golden braid. His curly hair was entirely gray; if you had asked me, I'd have said he was in his sixties.

Just then, the front door opened, and two more swordsmen entered. The four of them looked like Joseph, of course, but they weren't twins; more like brothers. All four were dressed in black "ninja" outfits, and I could see their powerful, close-fitting fields of magic protection. I almost laughed as I realized the swords of the two newcomers were not yet completely enchanted.

Then I realized how serious the situation was, and it didn't seem so humorous.

"You've been a thorn in my side since you came to this town, Solomoriah," he said. "When I learned that you had slain my old enemy, the Dreamwalker, I wondered if I had just traded one problem for another; so I sent my boys to watch you, in shifts. I don't know how that damn woman of yours figured out that my boy Elliot was there. He shouldn't have attacked you, but at least he made up an inventive story."

The situation didn't look good for our side... we were outnumbered, and my battle spells were mostly depleted. I had no way to know if the spell Ron placed on Franklin would persist after the caster's death, but I decided I had to risk waking him. With an act of will I dismissed the Sleep spell.

Green continued to speak as I did so. "I had hopes, after you sent him home unharmed, that you wouldn't be a problem, but then you," he said, pointing to Natomi, "you had to hire him to investigate your niece's rape. Of course I knew Joel and Daniel were Changelings, and my descendants to boot. I couldn't just let you figure it out."

"But I did figure it out, anyway, and your 'boys' never managed to kill me," I said. "I have quite a collection of those swords now."

"We'll be seeing about that soon enough, Solomoriah. Now, since this little drama so entertained me," he said, gesturing towards the corpse of Ron Harris, "I'll repay you by telling you a story. Listen well, because it'll be the last story you ever hear."

I listened, but I also was preparing myself. I still had that sevenfold spell of Kinetic Shield; it would merge with the one around my neck when I released it, increasing its own duration but not its power. I made ready to activate it; I could have just done it right then, but if Green or his swordsmen were using Mystic Vision they'd see it, and might interpret it as an offensive action. I was stalling for

time, hoping that Franklin would wake up and be ready in time to help Natomi and me.

"In the days of my birth," said Green, "it was mighty shameful for a woman to have a child out of wedlock. My mother tried to love me, but she hadn't much hope of that, and at just three years old I wound up in an orphanage. I think she had died, but I don't know for sure. I was just eight years old when I changed, and when some of the other boys found out I had to flee.

"I lived on the streets. I learned to steal, and fight, and gamble, and cheat. I joined a pack of other Changelings for protection. When I was thirteen I signed on to a ship as a cabin boy. The ship I'd found was manned mostly by Changelings; it was just another pack to me.

"Well, I worked, and fought, and served the Captain well, and I was just twenty when I was promoted to Captain and given my own ship. We were trading in the Far East, and it was there that I saw martial artists for the first time. Wizard, when I saw the power they had in their hands and feet I knew I had to have it too. I resigned right then and there and went in search of a master to train me.

"I learned every style of Chinese martial arts. At each temple or school, I would train until I knew all the masters could teach me, and then I'd ask, 'Where can I find someone who can teach me more?' Eventually I found myself in the most forgotten and empty places in China, learning from men that outsiders believed dead. They taught me the real secrets of the Wu Sha, the true power of chi, and I learned well.

"I was almost forty when I returned to San Francisco. I founded my own pack, training my followers in the martial arts and giving them a place to live or to, well, hang out, as they say. A few I judged competent to learn the real secrets, and they are my favored sons. Until yesterday I had five, Solomoriah, but now you've killed one. For that you must die."

"If you're such a great warrior, Green," I taunted, "come down here and kill me yourself."

"Oh, no, my friend, it isn't done that way. The august master doesn't fight unworthy enemies. My boys will deal with you."

This was the cue the swordsmen were waiting for. The ones by the door began to approach me cautiously, as the two with Green jumped off the landing. I reassembled my staff and spoke the word to activate my Kinetic Shield; Natomi raised her hand and spoke, releasing her Force Wave at the leaping swordsmen.

Faster than my eye could follow, Joseph Green's right hand snapped out, palm forward, and I saw the Force Wave dissipate in midair before reaching the swordsmen. Then I became too busy to pay attention to that side of the battle.

Keeping two swordsmen at bay was about all I could do. The staves I trained with in my youth were almost three yards long; my new staff was not quite two yards. Against a single opponent it worked well in the defensive mode, but two opponents were quite another matter.

As I blocked and parried my opponents for all I was worth, I could hear Natomi doing the same thing with her two swordsmen. After a short time I realized that Franklin was chanting. I could almost understand his spell, spoken in strangely altered English, but I didn't dare waste any effort listening to him.

Suddenly, one of my opponents was wrapped in a cocoon of what appeared to be spiderweb! I made a mental note to thank Franklin later, as I pressed forward with a rapid series of attacks against my remaining opponent. I elbowed the struggling, web-wrapped swordsman as I advanced, and he hit the floor with a satisfying thud.

Now, for me at least, the battle was more even. I began to get in a few good strikes, and I took advantage of my powerful Kinetic Shield, letting the swordsman strike at me a few times so that I could get in more hits of my own. I was rewarded when I saw his protective aura begin to falter.

Then Natomi screamed, and I turned to look. She was clutching the bloody stump of her right arm, which one of her opponents had taken off above the elbow. Franklin was lying on the floor in a pool of blood; I had not known he had fallen. The two swordsmen facing Natomi both stepped back, with dark, triumphant smiles on their faces.

Turning to look was a mistake, I realized, as I felt my opponent's blade stab deeply into my chest. I coughed up blood, and knew my right lung was punctured. I fell to my knees, dropping my staff, as my opponent also backed away.

As if they were one man, the three standing swordsmen looked up at their master. He also had a triumphant smile on his face. Without seeming to move his arms or legs, he pitched forward over the railing, performing a straight-bodied somersault in slow motion, and landed gently on his feet in front of the bar.

"Now, Solomoriah, it is over. Boys, finish them."

I slipped my bloodsoaked right hand into my shirt pocket even as my opponent drew back his sword and approached me. I didn't know if the strangling-cord would work for me, but it was the only chance I had left.

If I killed my immediate opponent, that left me facing two more, and though my ring was healing me quickly the wound had made me quite weak. There was only one real option... with a snap of my right hand I threw the metal disk at Joseph Green, and I managed to cough out a half-hearted "Hai!"

Again I heard the sound of the muffled whip-crack, as the strangling-cord unfurled in flight. Faster than my eyes could follow, Green brought up both his hands, crossing his forearms in front of his neck.

Denied access to his neck, the cord wrapped around his arms instead, and with a strange, sickening sound severed them. His scream was as much rage as pain.

He didn't bleed much, nor scream long; my opponent and another swordsman leapt to his side, each catching one of his hands in mid-fall.

"Kill them!" screamed Green. "Kill HIM!"

"No, master," said a swordsman (the one holding Green's right hand). "There will be another time. We must get you out of here."

"His RING, you fools! It can heal me! Kill him!"

They turned toward me, new purpose in their eyes; but then the two nearest Joseph Green realized they were still holding his hands. It was comical, really, but I had no time to laugh. The third swordsman was still standing near Natomi, who was standing her ground, a hopeless expression on her face. Somehow she had stopped her wound from bleeding, and she had her left hand in a defensive position, but with my Mystic Vision I could see that the force-blade was gone, as was most of her protection.

I, on the other hand, was feeling much better. I picked up my staff, and, holding it like a lance I launched myself at the third swordsman. My Flight spell propelled me like a rocket at him, and when the tip of my staff struck his chest I saw his protective aura flare up and disappear. He fell and did not rise again.

Landing, I turned to face the remaining swordsmen, who were tucking Green's bloody hands inside his shirt. Now the odds were somewhat better. Joseph Green was still screaming orders at his remaining men, but as they turned to face me I saw that they wore calmly determined expressions. The one I had been fighting last had visibly weaker protection, and I determined to deal with him first.

Then I heard Natomi say, "Can you spare one for me?" I glanced to my left, and saw that she had the downed swordsman's weapon in her left hand. She was holding what remained of her right arm close to her body. I quietly hoped she was still strong enough to fight.

I didn't answer her in words; rather I just nodded toward the swordsmen. I decided then to fight a defensive battle, protecting both of us, and let Natomi make the attacks.

The swordsmen had already thought of that, I discovered, as they separated, forcing Natomi and I to fight back-to-back. Worse, the swordsman facing Natomi still appeared to have full protection, and a fully-enchanted sword, while I would face the man I had battled earlier.

There was no time to waste worrying, though, as I again began trading strikes and parries with the swordsman. I could hear the bright sound of clashing swords behind me; my staff made a duller sound when struck.

My opponent's plan became obvious after a few moments. He knew I was tired, and weakened from the wound that had only just healed, and further he knew that I had a powerful spell of protection to deflect his blows; so he fought defensively, seeking to wear both my body and my protection down.

Given enough time, I knew he would win. Grimly I fought on.

Suddenly I heard an outcry of pain from behind me, and it took me a moment before I was sure it wasn't Natomi. Then she was beside me, assisting me against my foe, and I was sure the other one was dead.

We drove the last swordsman backward. When Joseph Green saw us closing with him, he seemed to snap out of his rage. I saw the cold realization dawning on him... he was about to die. Without a word to his last "favored son," he turned and fled through the open door to the storeroom.

The swordsman seemed to realize what had happened, though, and he began backing in the direction of that door. Natomi circled around beside him, driving him away from the door; it seemed she didn't want any more of them to escape.

In response, the swordsman made one of those amazing leaps, backwards toward the staircase. He landed ungracefully on the steps halfway up, and ran to the landing. Natomi was about to follow when I said, "No. Stay here with me."

"Why?"

"Don't you understand by now? I can save Franklin, and put your hand back on. My ring allows the wearer to regenerate."

"You mean the old man was right?" she asked. "Your ring could save his hands too. No wonder he didn't run until the last moment." She laid down the sword and picked up her right hand as I ran to Franklin's side. He wasn't breathing, but I put the ring on him anyway. He was wounded in the abdomen, just beneath the ribs.

I saw that he had a Tap of his own, still open, so I didn't have to use mine. I waited a long moment for him to breathe, but he didn't.

"It's too late. He's dead," I said.

"Maybe not," said Natomi, and she quickly instructed me in the art of CPR. I did poorly at it, I'm sure, but it only took one round of chest compressions and one of assisted breathing, and he coughed and began to breathe raggedly on his own.

"I'll have to study that trick," I said, looking up at Natomi. I thought of the strange and unpleasant relationship we'd had recently... "Natomi, I'm sorry for the way things have been since this business began."

"Don't let it worry you," she said. "Ron was influencing me, and I didn't know it. You just did what you had to."

"Thank you," I said. It was the only thing I could think to say.

It took a while for Franklin to heal enough so that he could stand. I took the ring from him and turned to Natomi. I had to take her cold right hand from her to put the ring on her; then I held it in place until it began to become warm.

"How did you stop your bleeding?" I asked.

"An old warrior's spell," she answered. "I'll teach it to you sometime."

I noticed the web-wrapped swordsman was still unable to free himself, and I was impressed. "Franklin, did your spell actually create those webs from nothing?" I asked.

"No," he said. "Atmospheric dust. It's usually useless indoors, but this is a pretty big room." He still had a pained expression on his face; his wound wasn't completely healed.

Just then the front door opened, and a young man looked in. Seeing the bodies on the floor, one of them beheaded, he screamed and shut the door again.

"Come on, we better leave," I said, taking my ring back. "We'll have company soon."

"Wait," said Natomi, and she spoke a word. Strange sparkling bluish light sprang from the palm of her restored right hand. She walked around the room, shining it on the floor, and everywhere it shone on blood, the blood rapidly boiled and evaporated. I saw that she was only erasing our blood.

While she was thus occupied I remembered a loose end. I had to look for it for a few moments, but shortly I found the spiral-graven disk on the floor beside the bar. I slipped it in my pants pocket and stood up.

I walked over to the bound swordsman. "We can't leave him like this," I said. I cast a Sleep spell on him, fourfold, and saw that it had worked. "Dismiss your webbing, please," I said to Franklin, and I watched as the webs disappeared in a puff of dust.

I put my ring back on Franklin, and cast Invisibility over us all, and the three of us walked wearily out the back door.

Chapter 20, *Magus*

Moses, acting as chairman of the Conclave, called a meeting for Friday at the same Italian restaurant near Pier 96 where I had interviewed Schuyler. Mara and I flew there, invisible of course as it was just after noon; we appeared in a narrow alley behind the building.

I held the door for Mara, and she went into the dimly lit restaurant before me. Moses had reserved two tables in the very back, which had been pushed together to accommodate us all.

As Mara approached the table, Moses stood up and bowed slightly. "Welcome, welcome, friends! You must be the beautiful Mara!"

I'm sure she was blushing, but sunblind as I was it was hard to be sure. "You must be Moses Rook," she said. "Solomoriah has told me a lot about you."

He waved toward the chairs at his right hand, and I took that for an invitation. As my eyes adjusted I saw that Natomi Osaka, Franklin Evans, and Schuyler Norton had already arrived. Franklin and Schuyler were occupied by a private conversation, apparently, but both managed to wave at us as I pulled out a chair for Mara. "Good afternoon, all," I said. After Mara was seated I sat down where Moses had indicated, at his right hand.

"Aren't your other friends coming?" asked Moses. "I told you to invite them."

"Mark had to pick up Valerie and Emily," said Mara before I could speak. "They'll be here shortly."

"Good, well, then..." he began. "I realize this location is unconventional for a Conclave meeting, but it was the best we could do on short notice."

"Not a problem for me," said Schuyler, a half-eaten breadstick in one hand and a glass of red wine in the other.

Moses tried to glare at him, but couldn't help smiling instead. "This should be a somber occasion, my friend. Two of our esteemed colleagues... indeed our friends... have been slain by another of our number. Let us observe a moment of silence for John Xavier Harkin and Doctor Phillip Andrew Silva."

So for a moment we all looked at our bread plates. I thought of the terrible deaths of Harkin and Silva; I had suffered as they had suffered, after all, but unlike myself they knew they were dying. Schuyler had called Ron Harris "too much of a coward" to attack a Magus, but evidently he had believed the magic strangling-cord made him the equal of anyone.

Greed, power, and control... the vices of the truly dangerous.

"We ourselves," Moses continued after an appropriate time, "you and I Schuyler, really did little to effect justice for the fallen. Instead, these two outsiders and an apprentice did our work for us. Let us now consider rewards."

He turned to face me. "Solomoriah, have you decided? Do you wish to become my apprentice, and thus join the Conclave?"

"Yes," I answered. There was more, much more, that I wanted to say, but I held my peace.

"Very well. Franklin Evans," he said, turning to face Harkin's apprentice, "Do you also wish to be my apprentice?"

"I do," he said, with all the formality of a wedding vow.

"Schuyler, you and I now are the entire Council of the Conclave of San Francisco. I wish to nominate before the assembled Conclave both of my apprentices for the rank of Magus."

I expected Schuyler to give a flippant answer; so I was surprised when he sat up, washed down the last of the breadstick with a gulp of wine, and said "I accept your nomination, acting Chairman Rook, and I move that we put it to a vote."

"All in favor, raise your hand," said the acting Chairman, and both of them raised their right hands. "The motion is carried. Congratulations, Magus Evans, Magus Jones!"

"Now," said Schuyler, "before we move on, I hereby nominate Moses Rook, acting Chairman of the Conclave of San Francisco, to the permanent position of Chairman. All in favor, raise your hand."

Schuyler raised his hand, and after a moment of surprise Franklin and I did also. Moses looked... irritated?

"Oh, very well," he said. "I knew it would fall upon me. I accept."

Schuyler slapped Moses on the shoulder. "Congrats, dude," he said, falling back into his rock-star persona.

"Now, as to Natomi Osaka. As we all know, Natomi has other commitments, so we can't offer her a place among us."

"Why not?" I said. "They give honorary degrees to the unqualified because they are famous and popular. We can at least offer an honorary title of Magus to one who is perhaps more qualified than any of us."

"Yeah, man," said Schuyler. "Why not?"

"Well, there is no precedent for it," said Moses, rubbing his short salt-and-pepper beard. "Still... Shall I take that as a motion?"

"Sure," I said.

"I second that motion!" said Franklin.

"A vote, then..." said Moses. "All in favor..."

He didn't have time to finish; we all had our hands up.

"Looks like a robbery here," said Mark, walking up to our table. I turned and saw Valerie behind him, carrying Emily through the busy restaurant.

"Mara, Mara!" said the little girl, struggling to get down. As soon as Valerie put her on the floor, she ran to my wife and climbed into her lap.

"Excuse me," said Moses, with a stern voice and an incongruous smile, "we're still conducting business here. Now, Natomi, let me say how happy I am to confer upon you the honorary title of Magus."

"Thank you," she said, inclining her head briefly as if bowing. "I shall endeavor to bear the title with honor."

"You already have," said Franklin. "I never got to ask you... how did you know we were at AJ's?"

It made me uncomfortable to realize I hadn't wondered about that.

"Mara called me," she answered. "She told me what you two were doing. As it was, I arrived there almost too late."

"Mommy, I'm hungry," said Emily. "When can we eat?"

"When the meeting is over, sweetie," she answered.

"I move that this meeting be adjourned!" said Franklin. Grinning, he leaned over the table toward Emily, winked, and said "I'm hungry too." She grinned back at him.

"I second that motion!" I said. Moses didn't have time to call for a vote, as we all had our hands up... even Emily.

"Very well," said Moses. "Meeting adjourned. I have taken the liberty of ordering the buffet for everyone, so help yourselves!"

Perhaps it should have been a somber occasion, but somehow it wasn't, quite. I saw fleeting sadness on Moses' face several times, but each time he hid it. Franklin seemed to have come to terms with the loss of his mentor, and Schuyler's mood was unreadable.

A thought occurred to me, as I was putting my second plate of food on the table. "Moses," I said, "I borrowed a book of yours from John's library, titled '*Adapting Traditional African Magic for the Modern Age*'."

"Yes, I remember that one," he said. "Did you like it?"

"Very much. I learned more from that book than from any two I'd ever read before."

"I'm glad you liked it," he said with a pleased smile. "I thought it was one of my better works."

"I have one question. On the title page there is a strange symbol, pentagons arranged inside a circle. Can you tell me what it means?"

"Oh, yes," he said, grinning broadly. "Many years ago, as I was listening to a lecture by my master, my mind wandered. I thought about the sign for atomic energy, which was everywhere in those days, marking the presence of fallout shelters. I wondered what the symbol for dangerous magical energy should look like, and I doodled that figure."

He took a sip of his beverage (tea, I think) and continued. "Well, my master saw me, and when he asked me what it was I knew I was in trouble. Timidly I told him it was the symbol for 'magical energy hazard' and that I had created it myself. I really expected a caning, you know, so when he broke out laughing and slapped me on the shoulder I was stunned."

"So it has no real mystic significance?" I asked.

"Not a bit," he said. "I have it printed in all my books, and I only explain it to those who ask. There isn't enough mystery left in the world, Solomoriah."

After a few moments of quiet he added, "Except possibly you." I just grinned at him.

After a while, and several trips to the buffet, Schuyler leaned back, slapped his belly and said, "Well, I'm done. If I eat any more, I'll never manage to sing tonight. Hey, that reminds me..." He fished in his pockets and produced a handfull of tickets, which he began to hand out to everyone. "You're all invited to the show tonight, on the band. Drinks are extra, though."

Everyone thanked him, of course. Mara leaned close and said, "Is this what they call a cheap date?" I just smiled back at her, unsure of how to answer.

Schuyler got up, to leave I thought, but then he headed for the back of the restaurant... to the rest rooms, obviously. I waited briefly, then followed. He was washing his hands when I entered, and the unusually large rest room was otherwise unoccupied.

"Hey," I said, "I need to talk to you." As he dried his hands I silently placed a spell of Closing on the door.

"What about?" he asked.

"You. You're a Changeling, aren't you?"

After a moment of stillness he said "Yes. How'd you know?"

"The only time you spoke at Monday's meeting was to defend the Changelings, and you tried just a bit too hard to sound like you didn't know anything about them. I'm not nearly as sensitive as my wife but I did pick that up... it just took me a while to figure out why."

"You're pretty sharp," he said, an edge to his voice.

"I try," I said. "Your band are all Changelings too, aren't they?"

"Not all," he said. "Bob Katsoff, the bass player, he's not. He knows about the rest of us though. So what? Are you going to tell the rest of the Conclave?"

"What I do depends on how you answer my next question. What do you and your band do for women when you need them?"

"Groupies, usually; sometimes prostitutes. Always with a condom. As far as I know I don't have any children, and since they joined the band I'm pretty sure the others haven't been responsible for any. Y'know, most people think we're gay."

"I assumed that was the reason you 'hang out' in San Francisco," I said.

"Yeah," he said, the edge gone from his voice. "It's surprising how many 'het' women think they are such good lovers they can change a gay guy to straight. Most of the women I've been with since I started the band thought they could change me... they never had any idea how wrong they were." After a moment he said, "So will you keep my secret?"

"So long as I believe you are honorable, and I do." I dismissed the Closing spell as Schuyler started past me toward the door. Since I was there anyway, I attended to "business" before rejoining the group. When I got back to the table Schuyler was already gone.

Eventually the party, if that's what it was, began to break up. I took Mara's left hand as she led me out; I was surprised to find Natomi following close behind. We stopped just outside the door, blinking in the bright sunshine.

"Solomoriah, didn't you say you have several of those Changeling swords?" asked Natomi.

"Yes, I do," I said.

"Are they all as fine as the one I used Wednesday?"

"I suppose. I'm no expert."

"Well," she said, "would you be willing to sell me one?"

"Natomi, you can have them all if you want them. I'm no swordsman, and don't ever plan to become one."

She looked surprised. "Oh, no, I couldn't. One will do."

"Are you here in your car?" asked Mara.

"Yes, over there," said Natomi, pointing.

"We flew," I said. "Give us a ride home, and I'll give you your pick."

Mara's expression was, well, guarded seems the best word. I let her have the front seat, and I took the back. "Mara, I want to apologize to you," said Natomi as soon as we were on the street. "I'm sure Solomoriah told you about Monday night."

"Yes, he did," answered Mara, just a bit hesitantly.

"I like Solomoriah, it's true, but just as a friend. Ron put a spell on me, amplifying those feelings into love and desire. It took all my will to control myself around him... I considered a great many dishonorable acts, but I managed to avoid them all. Your husband was always true to you."

"I know," said Mara, turning to smile at me.

The conversation turned to less uncomfortable subjects, and shortly we were back at the house. I led Natomi down to the basement and into the small room under the stairs. "There they are, Natomi. You may have any or all of them."

Natomi wasn't looking at the swords, though. "So you stole the statue from the museum!" she said. "Who is she?"

"You remember Silla, the young woman I saved from Tjarik? This is her."

"She encountered the basilisk, too," she said, not exactly as a question. She squatted down and stroked the stony face gently. "Can you restore her?"

"I think I have the correct counterspell; but I'm not ready for that. She was just a girl. I was a hardened warrior, used to finding myself in difficult situations; the modern world hasn't been any worse than my own time, and here I have Mara to make it all worthwhile. This young woman has no one, and she's in no way prepared for this world."

"I can teach you the secrets of language spells," said Natomi. "Would that be fair compensation for two swords?"

"I suppose, since I'd hand them all to you for nothing. Thank you."

After trying them all, Natomi settled on the two straight swords with scabbards. Out in the back yard, I sparred with her a bit; she turned out to be very good with a sword, as I expected. Mark was back by then, and he and Mara watched from the porch.

Some time later Natomi looked at her watch. "I suppose I must return to the office; otherwise my boss may decide I've deserted him." Mara and I saw her to her car.

As she drove away Mara said, "Have any energy left for me?"

"Sure," I said, smiling, and she grinned back.

At the back door she handed me a practice staff, and took one herself; I had replaced the broken one. "This wasn't what you thought I meant, was it?" she asked with a sparkle in her eye.

"Not exactly, no," I answered, as Mark came in from the office. "Anything I need to know about?"

"Lady just called, owns a haunted bed-and-breakfast," he answered. "She thought it was a quaint story, but now she's decided it really is haunted. Wanted you to come tonight."

"I hope you didn't say yes," said Mara.

"Nope. Scheduled her for first thing Monday." He followed us out to the porch. "Hey," he said, "I've got a question for you."

I stopped at the top step. "Ask away."

"You're teaching Mara to fight. Would you teach me magic?"

I was stunned. I had never considered taking an apprentice. A thousand reasons to say no streamed through my mind.

"Sure," I said. "You've been called my apprentice before, you know."

"Alright!" he said loudly, pumping his fist in the air. I wondered again where that gesture came from...

"Solomoriah..." said Mara. I turned toward her, and saw a shy expression I rarely ever see on her face. "Me, too?"

"Yes, my love," I said. "Anything for you."