

Fire rises

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1. Facing fears

The sound of the alarm cut through Ash's head. Groaning she reached up and pressed the snooze button, this was the fifth time she put off getting out of bed. She really should be getting up now, but she feared what the day could bring. It would be her first day on her new school: Svallbard Academy. Her mother and her had moved from Washington to Midland only a week ago. It had still been summer break, but now she had to face the inevitable: Meeting her new class. On Hammington College back in Washington she had had her place, it was in the back of the class and all the way on the bottom of the 'cool kids' list, but it was a place nonetheless. Her classmates had at least been sensible enough to just leave her be. That there had been very strict anti-bullying protocol had probably helped. Somehow she had a feeling this new school wouldn't be so easy on her.

'Amanda! Get up! I have waffles ready and you really don't want to be late for your first day!'

That was her mother yelling from downstairs. Ash's real name was Amanda Sara Harper, but at Hammington people had nicknamed her Ash, after her initials and her strange black eye colour. She didn't know why, but somewhere in the past year she had started thinking of herself more as Ash than Amanda. Maybe the name had grown on her because she had heard it more often than her real one.

'Amanda! Are you up?'

Her mother again. She opened her eyes and looked at the red digits of the alarm clock. Seven thirty? She really should get going then, the first class was to start at eight. Their house was on the edge of the town and, although Midland wasn't really big, biking to the center would take some time. Looking around her room the empty wardrobe and the boxes in the corner reminded her that she still hadn't unpacked her clothes. Apart from her plain bed and her desk full of scattered drawings and drawing supplies the only thing adorning the small bedroom was a poster from the Imagine Dragons album night visions.

'Amanda?'

Ash sighed and sat on the edge of her bed.

'Yes mom, I'll be down in a minute!' she yelled.

Rummaging through the box closest to her she found a pair of jeans and a t-shirt and put them on. She grabbed her vest from the chair next to the desk

and went downstairs.

‘Are you ready for your first day?’ her mother said, while she put a plate of waffles in front of her.

‘As ready as I’ll ever be...’ Ash said, devouring the first waffle.

‘Come on girl, I’m sure it won’t be that bad.’ Her mother walked to the counter and started cleaning the waffle iron. ‘By the way, you really should get going. Your class won’t wait for you.’

‘I know mom.’ Ash said as she wolfed down the last waffle in the pile.

She picked up her bag from next to the counter and walked to the front door. When she was about to open the door she remembered that she hadn’t put in her lenses yet. These weren’t prescription lenses but ones with fake brown irises. Their purpose was to hide her natural black eyes. The lenses were both for the benefit of herself and of the people around her: It made people uneasy, talking to someone who’s irises you couldn’t see. It must have been a mutation, because her mother had green eyes. The eye color of her father she didn’t know; he left her mother just before Ash was born and she still didn’t want to talk about it.

After putting on her lenses in the bathroom Ash picked up her bike and cycled to the city centre. Midland was a small town in South Carolina built

on the ocean shore. Ash had wandered through it for the past week and the only two exciting things she had discovered were the beaches and the forest. Both of which would be beautiful to draw.

Arriving at school Ash immediately saw why it was called Svallbard college: there was a big statue of a viking in the middle of the yard. It had a plaque on it which probably would read something like: 'Here landed Svallbard the great, actual first discoverer of America.' That also explained the name of the town. Midland sounded like it was located in the middle of Scandinavia, not on a foresty coast in America. Walking towards the steps leading up to the impressive wooden main doors someone yelled at her.

'Hey you!' Ash stopped. 'Yes, you! In that lousy imitation of my outfit!'

Oh man, this was going to be a problem. Ash turned around and... turned again, because she was met by a punch in the face which felt like it spun her twice before she dropped on the ground.

'Did you really have to hit her that hard, Samantha?'

From her low vantage point Ash could see three pairs of legs. The middle pair wore ripped jeans and a pair of boots which looked really suitable for kick-

ing. The ones flanking the legs of her attacker, who apparently was called Samantha, wore quite expensive looking trousers and matching shoes. The person who had spoken to samantha was the one on the left. Looking up, Ash could see tall, red haired boy, who surprisingly looked quite concerned. He looked quite muscular and wore an orange hoodie which colored nicely with his hair. While Ash got to her feet she had a closer look at her assailant. Samantha had short black hair and at the moment she had quite a mean look in her eyes. She wore a white t-shirt with skull print and a black vest. It did indeed resemble the clothes Ash was wearing, except that her jeans didn't look like she lost a fight with a bulldog. Standing now she saw that the guy on the left actually was about her height. In fact, the only one taller than her was the girl on the right, which she had ignored up to now. The girl had long brown hair and the same blue eyes as the boy. She actually wore a vest of the same orange as the boy's hoodie. The overall effect made them look really similar. Ash didn't doubt these two were twins.

'Yes, I did Steven.'

So that was the boys name.

'You see how she is wearing my clothes and is taller than me? She really needs to know who is boss here.'

Ash had no doubt about who was the stronger one. Although she was a good fifteen centimeters taller than Samantha she wore her clothes like a shield to hide behind, while Samantha wore hers as an insult to everybody around her. While the three of them were bickering they seemed to have forgotten Ash, who was now silently trying to back away.

‘Oh no, you’re not going anywhere,’ Samantha said as she turned back in Ash’s direction. ‘What is your name loser?’

‘Ash.’ Ash said while she tried to evade Samatha’s gaze.

‘Ash, huh?’ Samantha even managed to pronounce it like “trash”. ‘Well Ash, I don’t like people like you insulting me by wearing my clothes badly. You don’t even have a tattoo!’ Samantha said while taking a threatening step towards her.

Tattoo? what was this about? Now that Ash was looking for it, she could indeed see a tattoo of a snake on Samantha’s right arm. It was curling around her forearm with it’s head on her wrist. It looked so realistic that Ash thought she saw it’s tongue move.

‘You see, everyone on Svallbard Academy must have a tattoo to be worthy.’ Said the twin girl. She had no visible tattoo’s anywhere but Ash was quite sure she would have an offending one somewhere under her clothes.

‘Wait a minute,’ Steven said ‘Look at her eyes, they’re pure black!’

Oh no, she must have lost her lenses in the fall. Ash brought her hand to her face and felt a fluid running over her lip. Great, a bloody nose too. Now she surely would be late for art class.

‘Well, that explains the name.’ Samantha now had an evil grin on her face. ‘You better start running creep, because you wouldn’t want to be late in class, especially not when you have Miss Ironfist as a teacher.’

Steven and his twin sister were now grinning too. Ash backed away slowly, not sure whether the comment about running was serious. She cautiously turned around and walked towards the main doors for the second time this morning.

‘Don’t forget your tattoo!’ Samantha yelled. ‘And don’t think about taking a standard design, or we won’t be so easy on you next time!’

Looking around Ash could see Samantha and her twin thugs walk towards the dormitories. Great, they probably lived here, which meant she could expect them any time of the day. Walking to the toilets Ash thought about what Samantha had said. Why would she need a tattoo? Now that she was aware of them she could see that the other kids walking around the corridors had tattoos too. Some small

and barely noticeable, others placed prominently on the face. Would she take one too? Those things were pretty permanent after all. When she was nearly done cleaning her face the school bell rang. Ash startled, they didn't have one back at Hammington, the teachers had found it an unnecessary nuisance. What had those bullies said? Miss Ironfist? She should indeed make sure she was on time then. 'Would she really be so bad?' Ash thought while she hurried to the cart class. How did Samantha and her minions even know which teacher she had? Had they gone through the trouble of looking up her timetable just to laugh at her? Or did they have art at the same time as her? That would be really bad.

When Ash finally found the art class she was relieved to see that the teacher was not yet there. She had actually made it on time. Walking to one of the last empty seats in the back of the room Ash looked at her classmates. They didn't look too bad, some of them even gave her a friendly nod when she passed them. When they saw her eyes though their friendly faces quickly turned into the mix of surprise, interest and disgust that Ash had come to know so well. Luckily she couldn't see Samantha or the twins anywhere, they must have known her timetable then.

When she sat down the teacher entered the classroom and closed the door.

‘Welcome everybody, for those of you who don’t know me: I’m Mrs Royce,’ Mrs Royce said.

Ash could see why people would call her Miss Ironfist: With her long gray hair, leather vest and trousers she looked like a classic Hells Angles member. Ash wouldn’t have been surprised if the vest had the logo on the backside, but instead it read: ‘Los Angeles Motor Festival 1999’. What only made the outfit worse were the spiked leather collar and wristband she was wearing. Now that Ash looked at Ironfist’s wrists she saw that her left hand had actually been tattooed to resemble a medieval gauntlet. Now the nickname made even more sense. So even some of the teachers went along with the tattoo thing? Was the whole town into that or something?

Walking to the cantine Ash thought about her first class. Miss Ironfist actually wasn’t that bad of a teacher, the stuff she told was quite interesting. The problem with her was that she lost her temper quicker than a beehive being beaten with a stick. A couple of minutes into the lecture a student had entered the classroom, she had been held up by the concierge and was a little late. Most teachers would have been

understanding and wouldn't have made a problem of it. Not Miss Ironfist though: She immediately burst into a tirade about the importance of being on time and how the youth of today didn't have any discipline. The girl, who was called Clara, had to stay during the midday break. Ironfist said she wanted to have a talk with her. Ash was quite sure that wasn't the appropriate reaction for a teacher, but she didn't want to get in any more trouble on her first day.

The cantine was just big enough to house all the students. It had several rows of wooden tables and benches, all randomly colored either dark blue, dark green or dark red. There was a podium on the far side and a food counter to the right of the main entrance. Light was flooding in through the big windows on the left side of the hall. Overall it actually looked quite welcoming, Ash thought. She walked over to the counter and grabbed a plate. The food didn't look too different from the stuff they served at Hammington. It looked like they had fish and chips on Mondays. Standing in front of the freshly baked fish Ash realized she was actually quite hungry and filled her plate. Having picked up her food she found a quiet table and sat down.

'Do you mind if I sit here?'

Ash looked up from her plate, Clara was standing on the other side of the table with a plate in her hands. Ash noticed that there was no fish on there, she had only taken chips and green beans.

‘Eh, sure...’ Ash said.

Clara actually looked relieved as she sat down. She wore her black hair in a ponytail and had matching black glasses. Her eyes were the same color brown that Ash’s would have been if she hadn’t lost her lenses.

‘I thought Mrs Royce was a little harsh on you in class,’ Ash said to break the silence.

‘Oh that,’ Clara seemed surprised that Ash had spoken to her. ‘That happens a lot with Miss Iron-fist. She picks a different student every lecture though, so it isn’t that bad. You’re Ash right? I saw you had a collision with the local fashion police, you took the punch quite well.’

It took some time for Ash to realize Clara meant her run-in with Samantha earlier on the day.

‘You think so?’

‘Yes, you were back on your feet in no time at all. Most people stay down for quite some time after a blow like that,’ Clara said. She looked away and said a little softer: ‘At least I did...’

‘She hit you too? Someone should really do something about those bullies.’

‘That would be really difficult. Her family, the Erikssons, owns half the town. And the other half is owned by the Patrickssons, which is the family of the twin tugs.’

‘So Steven and that other girl really are twins?’ Ash said as she started on her second fried fish. Clara might be vegetarian, but she sure loved her meat.

‘Correct. The girl is called Ingrid by the way.’ Clara was eating slowly and didn’t seem to be very hungry.

‘Really? My mom is also called Ingrid.’

Ash suddenly smelled a waft of smoke. Had she imagined it? No, there it was again. She looked at Clara, who was looking at her plate and didn’t seem to have noticed it.

‘Do you also smell that smoke? It would be quite something if the school burned down on my first day.’

Clara looked up and inhaled deeply.

‘Something is indeed burning here.’ She said as she craned her head to look at the courtyard outside. ‘But I wouldn’t go as far as saying it is the school. Students quite often burn their old furniture outside. Someone probably put fire to a sofa again.’

‘That’s quite a waste, we could use a sofa in our new house.’

‘Oh don’t worry, the things they burn usually are beyond all hope of repairing. You really wouldn’t want to sit on them,’ Clara said. She seemed to have regained her appetite and was now halfway through her meal.

‘I don’t want to be rude,’ Ash said after a while. ‘But when I agreed to you sitting with me, you looked almost surprised.’

‘I was. I’m not popular around here and I didn’t really think you would want to talk to me. But I thought I could at least give it a try.’

‘That makes two of us, back in Washington I wasn’t exactly a hot shot either.’

After another period of silence, Clara said: ‘They probably pushed you to take a tattoo, right?’ Ash put the last chips in her mouth.

‘Uhuh,’ Ash said while chewing.

‘Yeah, that is something strange about this place. Everybody seems to be obsessed with tattoos. So much that they distrust anyone who hasn’t got one.’

‘So I guess you have one too?’ Ash said after she had swallowed her chips.

‘Yes,’ Clara moved back her right sleeve. She wore a silver bracelet which looked like two strings woven together. ‘I drew it after my bracelet,’ Clara said as she moved it back. And indeed, Ash could

see a perfect copy of the bracelet inked on Clara's wrist.

'Wow, that actually looks quite cool.' Ash said as Clara pulled her sleeve back down.

'Oh, that's nothing compared to what some of the people around here have.' Clara had now finished her meal too.

'I can imagine,' Ash said, while she stroke her hair out of her eyes. 'I have actually no idea what design I would like, or if I even want one.'

'It's your own choice of course. The trouble is that you're going to have a hard time without one,' Clara sighed. 'They really shouldn't be so mean about it.'

During the remaining lunchtime Ash and Clara discussed their timetables. They realized that they attended to almost the same classes. The only lecture they had in a different time slot was math: Ash had it planned right after the lunch. Clara would have it Thursday morning. When the bell rang they agreed they would work together during next mornings chemistry class. The math teacher was an older man who spoke quite soft. Ash really had to focus to get anything out of the lecture.

* * *

After math was done Ash walked towards the spot where she had parked her bike between all the others. At first she thought she had remembered the spot wrong because the bike was not there. But looking around her she couldn't see it parked anywhere else either. Walking along the bike racks she noticed the burned out husk of a couch standing in the middle of the field in front of the dormitories. Someone had indeed been burning furniture. There was a strange form sticking up from the ash. Walking towards the object Ash realized that it was a bike. Her bike. Pulling it from the burned pile Ash saw that there was something carved in the side of the frame. 'You don't belong here, blackeye!' it read. At least she didn't have to guess who the culprits were. Luckily her bike had seen a lot worse than a bit of ash, so this couldn't hurt it much anymore. Ash shook the worst of the ash from her bike and rode home.

During the evening meal Ash didn't tell her mother about what had happened at college today. Ash didn't want her to worry more than she already did. Today had been the first day at her new job and Ash could see that it had been quite hectic. Her mother now worked for a local publisher called Star Publishers. It only payed a little more than her sec-

retary job back in Washington, but at least she liked it way better. Ash hadn't really wanted to move, but she could also see that her mother was not happy in Washington, so she had agreed. After cleaning the dishes Ash went to her room.

2. Firestarter

Ash didn't remember falling asleep. She was lying with her head on her desk, her hands rested on the pile of discarded drawings. She had spent the last evening trying to come up with a good tattoo design, but not a single one of them she found good enough to wear for the rest of her life. Ash sat up and looked at the alarm clock. It told her that she had actually woken up a couple of minutes before her alarm. That was good, because she really didn't want to hurry as much as yesterday.

Walking down the stairs she remembered what her mother had told her yesterday. She and her coworkers had some kind of team bonding exercise today, so she would be gone early. Ash put the waffles in the iron when she heard an insistent beeping from upstairs. Of course, the alarm was still on. She went upstairs and stopped the noisemaker. When she turned around to get her waffles she noticed something odd: There was a drawing on top of the pile which she didn't remember making. She picked it up to take a better look at it. It was a stylised drawing

of a flaming bird. Ash had never seen anything like it before, but the drawing was clearly made with her hand. That was wierd, Ash thought. Could she have made it just before falling asleep? She got a little excited, this would look amazing on her arm. Then she smelled something familliar. The smell of burning waffles. Oh, no! She was way too forgetfull today. Hopefully Clara was a little more focused, otherwise they would make a real mess during chemistry. Ash put the drawing in her bag and hurried down. She dumped the smoking content of the waffle iron into the dustbin, cleaned it and made a new batch. After she had breakfast she had a shower and put in her lenses. She always had a spare pair laying around for when she lost them. On her way to the door she picked up her sporting clothes, their last hour today would be PE which Ash really wasn't looking forward to. She never had been any good in sports even though she had the build for it. Outside Ash brushed the last remains of her bikes fiery adventure away and rode to school.

Ash and Clara met up before the school's entrance. Their first class today was English. The teacher, Mr Jeffersson, was an easy going middle aged man. He wore a red and green tweed jacket and joked quite a

lot. During the lecture Ash showed Clara her design.

‘Isn’t that a phoenix?’ Clara asked after she had a good look at it. ‘Like those in Greek mythology?’

‘I wouldn’t know,’ Ash replied. ‘I don’t know anything about mythology, let alone Greek.’

‘It’s really symbolic,’ Clara was excited now. ‘Legend goes that when phoenixes die, they burn up and reincarnate from their own ashes.’ She explained. ‘And with your name...’

‘Actually, Ash is only a nickname. My full name is Amanda Sara Harper, but you can see what the initials spell.’

‘Aah, I see.’

Mr Jeffersson had just made some joke about Egyptian mummies which half of the class didn’t get.

‘And with your eye co...’ Clara stopped surprised. ‘Wait a minute, yesterday your eyes were black right?’

‘Yes,’ Ash looked away. ‘I normally put in colored lenses to hide them, but yesterday I lost them when I took the hit. People get uncomfortable around me when I don’t wear them and I don’t like that.’

‘I understand,’ Clara said, and she sounded like she really did. ‘Anyway, I really think you should get this tattoo. We could go to the tattoo shop after this class is done, we have the next hour free anyway.’

Ash looked at her drawing of a phoenix. Clara was right, it really would be symbolic. And it would give those bullies something to think about. Something bothered her though: how she could have drawn the bird without even knowing that it existed? She must have seen it somewhere unconsciously, that was the only logical explanation. She looked up. 'Let's do it.' she said.

The tattoo shop was located in a sidestreet not far away from the city centre. From the outside it didn't really look like a tattoo shop at all. The letters above the window had seen better days, the only thing Ash could make out was the word 'magick'. The rest of the name had been bleached by the sun too much to be recognizable. When they entered the door hit a small bell hung from the ceiling, but for the rest it stayed eerily quiet.

'This shop always gives me the creeps,' Clara said as Ash looked around in amazement. 'And the owner doesn't help either.'

The shop was indeed strange: every free surface was covered in occult symbols, small figurines or strange hangers. It was as if somewhere in the past an antiquery, a psychic den and a jewelry shop had collided and this was the result. Now that Ash

looked better, she could also see tattoo designs hanging between all the other stuff.

‘Ah hello, what can I do for the young ladies?’ A pleasant voice said behind them.

Ash and Clara turned around to face the owner of the occult antiquery. Ash looked up, this man was even taller than she was. He wore a classic magicians outfit, including the cape and high hat. Ash couldn’t quite see his face. It was strange how he managed to hide it in shadows even though the early morning sun shone through the large window, brightly illuminating the rest of the shop.

‘My friend here would like to get a tattoo,’ Clara said, while Ash was still intrigued by this strange appearance.

‘A tattoo, of course. I take it she has a design with her? This way please,’ The man said as he made a wide gesture to the back of the shop.

He led them through a wooden arch made from two intertwined dragons to a little alcove with a comfortable looking chair in it. Ash could see strange equipment lying on a table in the corner. Ash had never seen a tattoo machine before, but she was quite sure it was one of those devices.

‘Take a seat and show me your design.’

The magician pointed at the chair and started rummaging through the pile, clicking a sharp looking

needle into a socket on one of the devices. Ash sat down and pulled her drawing from her bag.

‘I would like this on the side of my upper left arm,’ Ash said as she presented the paper to the back of the man.

‘Lets have a look,’ He said as he slowly turned around.

When he took the drawing he seemed to hesitate for a moment, as if he was surprised. Ash couldn’t be sure, as in this darker part of the shop the man had no trouble at all keeping his face hidden.

‘All right, roll up your sleeve please.’

The magician walked around the chair with the now assembled tattoo device in his hand. Ash rolled up her sleeve and tensed as she got a better look at the needle.

‘Please relax,’ The man said. ‘It is difficult for me to get the drawing correct if you’re all nerves. And the more relaxed you are, the faster it will go’

Ash looked at Clara, who nodded.

Walking out of the shop, Ash looked at her new tattoo. The man had really done a great job. She loved how the wings of the bird wrapped halfway around her arm and how the fire almost reached her shoulder. At first it had stung a little, but after she had

relaxed a little she really hadn't felt a lot of the process.

'Now you are a real Midlander,' Clara said as she inspected the tattoo. 'Man, that thing looks almost real.'

'I really like it,' Ash said as they got their bikes. 'Whether or not that guy is a real magician, he can work magic with that device of his.'

Back in the shop the magician was looking out of the window. A female voice behind him said: 'Do you think it is Them?' The woman speaking somehow managed to pronounce the capital 'T'.

'Let's hope so...' He said.

They were back just in time to eat their lunch before the bell rang. The next class would be Chemistry. The teacher was an energetic and curious looking woman who introduced herself as Petra Volt. She looked about thirty and had her blond hair in a ponytail. She wore an open lab coat over her blue jeans and had a black t-shirt with a stick figure and the words: 'Stand back! I'm going to try science!' on it. While she put on a pair of safety glasses Mrs Volt explained that she knew how boring physics class normally was and that she wanted to change that.

'For this first day I want to try something risky,'

She said. ‘You will team up in pairs and whoever can make something explode during our assigned two hours will get an extra point on the next test.’

Ash could judge by the surprised faces around her that this was indeed something new.

‘So grab some protective gear from the racks behind you and start mixing chemicals.’

‘Oh, one thing though,’ Mrs Volt said as the students were excitedly putting on lab coats, gloves and glasses. ‘I am opening the cabinet with dangerous stuff in the room over there.’ She pointed at the door next to her. ‘So don’t drink anything and try not to inhale the vapours.’

Ash looked at clara and said: ‘I she serious?’

‘I think so,’ Clara replied while she put on her lab coat. ‘Mrs Volt is new here, and I have to say that this is not really what I expected. It will be fun though, I think I saw some potassium nitrate in that cabinet last year and if we mix that with sugar we will have an explosion in no time at all.’

‘Okay, you really know your chemistry,’ Ash said while putting on the safety glasses. ‘Show me how it is done.’

The rest of the two hours was filled with mixing ingredients and people shouting: ‘Get down!’ before

igniting their latest experiment. Most of the time nothing happened, but some people managed to make quite impressive bursts of smoke. The sugar mixture Clara had made created a huge blast of flame that almost set off the fire alarm. Ash was glad she had taken a step back, otherwise she would have lost her eyebrows. Surprisingly, no one had gotten hurt so far. The lesson was over a little early because the room had to be evacuated. Someone had created a bubbling broth that was now spewing ominous orange clouds that didn't look too good for your health. Mrs Volt dismissed the class while she called the chemical waste removal squad.

'I hope she doesn't get into trouble for that,' Clara said as they walked to the sport hall.

'Oh, I wouldn't worry about her too much,' Ash replied. 'Judging from her t-shirt she has gotten away with such things before.'

'You're probably right,' Clara laughed. 'let's hope PE is a little less exciting though.'

When they had changed and entered the hall, Ash felt her heart sink as she saw Samantha standing with her "friends" on the other side of the playing field.

'This could get bad real quick. Look,' Ash said

as she nudged Clara.

‘Oh no, I thought those were in a higher grade...’
Clara sighed.

The teacher was an older man with almost no hair left who looked like he had given PE all his life. He announced that, because two classes had sports at the same time, they would do a friendly dodgeball competition.

‘Dodgeball! Could he have picked a worse sport,’ Ash said as both classes went to their side of the field.

‘Well, he could have chosen rugby,’ Clara joked. ‘By the way, I think Samantha has noticed your new tattoo... And she doesn’t seem too happy about it.’

Indeed, Samantha was looking at Ash through narrowed eyes and she had the same mean grin as the day before.

‘Great,’ Ash sighed. ‘We hoped for less excitement, I think we’re only going to get more...’

‘Good luck, and may the best team win!’ The teacher said while he threw the ball into the field.

‘Oh, I forgot to mention, to step up the difficulty a bit we will be using three balls.’

He picked up another two balls from the racks and threw these too.

Samantha’s class clearly had the advantage, they were a year older than the opposing team and, on the average, were built like bulls. After a couple of

minutes half of Ash's class had been hit as Samantha and the twins had organised their team to give all the balls to them. It was almost impossible to catch their balls as they wizzed by with breakneck speeds. The overall effect was that of a three-barrel cannonball machine gun. Ash looked at the teacher for support, but the old man was sitting to the side and reading a newspaper. He occasionally said things like: 'Play nice!' and: 'Don't hit each other too hard.' but it sounded like he did that just for the look of things and had absolutely no idea what was going on in the field whatsoever. They were on their own.

After hitting of all the sporty kids, Samantha and her thugs had now put their sights on the slower prey. Specifically Ash and Clara. The first ball flew by Clara's head so close that little bolts of static electricity sparked from her hair. It bounced on the back wall and made a neat arc right back into Samantha's hands. Ash didn't have too much time to be impressed as she was under fire from Steven and Ingrid who had aquired the other two balls. In unison they made a full-on two handed slingshot throw which hit Ash's legs with pinpoint accuracy. The force of the impact knocked her feet from under her and, turning a nice ninety degrees, she landed face-first on the floor. 'Right,' Ash thought. That was going to be at least a blood nose, again... Ash had prided her-

self with staying calm during her earlier encounter with Samantha, but now she could feel the anger building up inside of her. These brats thought they could knock down people for fun and get away with it! The fact that they probably *would* get away with it made it only worse. Furious and in a dream-like state Ash stood up and caught a ball as it came flying past. ‘Lets see how they like to get blown away.’ Ash thought. She imagined all her anger flowing into the ball as she wound up for a shoulder throw. She aimed at Samantha and threw...

Everything seemed to slow down, as the ball left Ash’s hand it caught fire. She saw it fly away in a perfectly straight line, flames billowing out behind it. Samantha didn’t even have time to be surprised as the fireball hit her full in the chest... and exploded.

The shockwave sent the players closest to Samantha sliding over the floor until they skidded to a halt against the wall. The twins, who had been standing on either side of her, were blown straight into the side walls without bothering to hit the floor along the way. Samantha herself received the full force

of the explosion and was smacked through the back wall where she made a roughly human-shaped hole.

As the dust settled it was suddenly very quiet, apart from the teacher everyone was staring either at the hole in the wall or at the scorched spot on the floor where Samantha had stood just a moment ago. Ash looked at Clara, who had the same shocked look in her eyes as she knew she had.

‘Did you do that?!’ Clara was shouting as the explosion had left everyone with a high-pitched beep in their ears.

‘I... think so...’ Ash stood swaying on her feet. ‘Though I have no idea how.’

‘Wow, look at your tattoo!’ Clara was pointing at Ash’s left arm and suddenly looked more fascinated than the appropriate emotion of scared-to-death. ‘It’s glowing.’

Indeed as Ash looked down her left shoulder she saw that the phoenix was glowing a fiery bright orange. It slowly dimmed in color as Clara grabbed Ash by the arm. She seemed to have totally forgotten the destruction around her and was carefully touching the tattoo.

‘It doesn’t feel hot, did it burn you?’

‘No, I didn’t feel a thing.’

Ash left Clara examine her tattoo as she took a good look around the hall. The students on her side

of the field were walking around in shock. The players of the opposing team were now slowly getting up. They pulled themselves from the walls and from under the benches. One was in the process of untangling himself from the volleyball nets. The teacher still had no connection to reality and calmly turned a page in his newspaper. A loud crash near the wall caught her attention. One of the twins had dropped from the wall and was now slowly standing up. It was difficult to see who of the two it was as he was completely covered in dust. Another crash indicated the fall of the other twin. Ash looked at the large hole in the wall. 'Have I done this?' She thought. Poor Samantha, No-one would have survived being forced through a brick wall like that. A movement at the top of rubble caught her eye. Samantha's hand grabbed the side of the hole and the rest of Samantha followed. 'I clearly celebrated too early.' Ash thought as she saw the wild look in Samantha's eyes.

'You are going to pay for this!' Samantha yelled as she threw something into the hall.

It landed in the middle of the playing field and now that it was stationary Ash could see what it was. Clara clearly had too.

'A snake!' She yelled. 'Where did she get that from?!

The shock of seeing the reptile seemed to have brought Clara back to reality. The twins had now too regained their bearings and they slowly turned in their direction. Clara yelped as she saw them pull katanas out of thin air.

‘And where did they get those?!’

Clara was now completely bewildered.

‘Run now, as questions later.’ Ash said as she pulled Clara along behind her towards the fire exit.

She didn’t know why, but she felt completely calm. She dodged as a couple of shuriken flew by and landed in the wall next to the door. She looked around and saw Samantha pull out a couple more. ‘Okay, it really is time to get out of here,’ Ash thought as she pushed the double doors open. She and Clara stumbled outside and Ash pulled the doors shut behind them.

‘Come on, pull yourself together,’ She said as she shook Clara.

‘She... She threw a snake at us,’ Clara said, still shocked.

‘Yes, she threw a snake. And after that she threw shurikens,’ Ash lowered herself to be level with Clara’s eyes. ‘Look, I don’t care what she throws. I only know that this is not a good place for us to stay if we want to stay alive. Can you run?’

‘I, think so...’ Clara still sounded a long way off.

‘Good, then run!’

As they ran away from the school buildings they heard another explosion. Ash risked a quick look over her shoulder and saw that a couple hundred meter behind her the fire escape had been blown out of it’s hinges.

‘Great, they’re in pursuit.’ She said as they turned the first corner.

‘Do you have any idea where we’re going?’ Clara said. She seemed to be a lot more awake now.

‘Not a clue,’ Ash replied as they darted into a little alleyway. ‘I only know that, right now, I want to be as far away from Samantha as possible.’

‘This way.’ Someone said as they got out the other side of the alley. They turned in the direction indicated and suddenly there were three of them instead of two. Mr Jeffersson had joined them.

‘What are you doing here,’ Ash said in surprise as she ran along behind him.

‘Saving your lives,’ Mr Jeffersson said. ‘In here.’ They followed him as he turned into another alley. When they got out the other side he ran towards a car standing on the side of the street. Mrs Volt was standing next to it, she still had her lab coat on.

‘Ah, there you are,’ she said as she opened the back door of the car. She looked at Ash and Clara and pointed at the back seats. ‘In you go.’

‘Why would we?’ Ash asked, she didn’t like this at all.

‘Because those furies will kill you if you don’t,’ Mr Jefferson yelled as he got into the drivers seat.

‘I think he has a good point there,’ Clara said. She climbed into the car and pulled Ash in behind her.

‘All right, buckle up, because this is probably going to be a bumpy ride,’ Mrs Volt said as she got into the front seat. Mr Jeffersson pulled away with skreeching tires and floored the gas.

‘Can someone explain what is going on?’ Ash got flung into the side of the car as Mr Jeffersson rounded a corner.

‘No time, they’ll be pursuing us for sure,’ Mrs Volt answered as she looked in the back mirror.

‘Who? The furies?’ Clara was nervously looking through the rear window. ‘Those didn’t look like furies to me, at least not like the ones from Norse mythology.’

‘Those furies are like you say: myths. The ones following us however are all the more real,’ Mr Jefferson explained as he changed to fifth gear. ‘They are servants of Hekate and no, that’s not the Hekate from the mythologies either.’

‘If that had been the case, she would have crushed us long ago. No, she is only a very powerfull sorcerer-

ess.’ Mrs Volt said while she rummaged through the pockets of her lab coat. ‘Lucky us,’ Sarcasm dripped from her voice. She turned around and offered them some power bars.

‘You must be hungry after expending so much energy.’

Now that she had time to catch her breath, Ash realized hungry would be an understatement, she was ravenous. She grabbed two of the powerbars and immediately started on the first. Clara politely declined.

‘Suit yourself,’ Mrs Volt said. ‘There are more in the side doors if you need them.’ Ash had finished the first two and grabbed another one from the box next to her. ‘I’m impressed that you’re still up. I have no idea what you did back there, but it must have cost a tremendous amount of energy. I could feel the ripples four blocks away.’ Mrs Volt did indeed sound a little awed.

‘You could feel that? How?’ Ash asked with her mouth full of musley.

‘Whenever someone activates their aura it sends ripples through the air. The more energy expended, the bigger the ripples,’ Mrs Volt explained. ‘I’m quite sure what you did has alerted every magical being in a two mile radius.’

Ash wasn’t quite sure, but had Mrs Volt just

shuddered?

‘And I hate to think what could be among those.’

Now Ash was certain, Mrs Volt was indeed scared. And that didn’t help at all in keeping herself calm.

‘Heads up, here they come!’ Mr Jeffersson yelled as he looked in the side mirror.

Ash looked behind her, she could indeed see three motorcycles closing in on them.

‘Did you know they had those?’ Ash asked Clara who shook her head.

‘All right, let them come a little closer,’ Mrs Volt said as she opened up the sunroof. ‘I’ve always wanted to do this, and because of you two I don’t have to worry about being discovered anymore.’ She stood up on her seat and pulled her upper body through the window.

‘Just a little closer,’ she muttered under her breath as she rolled up her sleeves. The trio was gaining on them fast now that Mr Jeffersson had slowed down. Ash could see a light-blue mist seeping out of Mrs Volt’s skin, miniature thunderbolts arced across the personal nebula.

‘What are you going to do?’ Ash asked, not sure what a science teacher could do against three katana wielding, snake throwing furies.

‘I’m going to show them why I’m called Mrs Volt, so cover your ears,’ Mrs Volt answered with

a smirk on her face, her eye's were now glowing the same bright blue as her aura. 'All right, that's close enough.'

She raised both her hands above her head. The mist flared an even brighter blue. Ash could feel the static electricity build up in the air.

'Eat science!' Mrs Volt shouted as she brought her hands down in the direction of the pursuers.

Ash's hair stood up as a large thunderbolt arced across the road. Above the roar she could only just hear Mrs Volt's laugh as she expertly blasted the motorcycles from under their riders, who dropped on the ground twitching with electricity. The motorcycles skidded over the tarmak and smashed into the side rails, turning them into three heaps of sizzling metal pipes and burned tires.

'That'll keep them busy,' Mrs Volt said as she sat back in her seat.

Her ponytail had fanned out behind her and her hair now framed her head like a corona. Small discharges were still arching across it. The mist, which Ash guessed was her aura, slowly faded away.

'Could you get me that box of power bars?'

Ash gave her the now half-full carton. As Mrs Volt took it Ash could see a stylised thunderbolt still glowing a bright blue on her right forearm.

‘Is that your tattoo?’ Ash asked as she pointed at the now fading image. ‘Is that how you shoot lightning?’

‘Indeed, quite perceptive of you,’ Mrs Volt said as she rolled her sleeves back down. ‘The actual energy comes from my aura, but the tattoo helps me focus it into a shape.’

‘You keep talking about auras,’ Clara said. ‘Do those really exist?’

Ash looked at Clara in surprise.

‘They do,’ she said. ‘It was the blue mist around Mrs Volt.’

‘You could see it?’ Clara said. ‘Why couldn’t I?’

Mrs Volt turned around in her seat again. ‘The thing with auras is that most people don’t know they have one. They are dormant, so to speak. With proper guidance some of them can activate theirs, which has the side effect that they also can see the auras of others. The problem is that the activation process can be quite a shock, and most people don’t have an aura strong enough to survive it.’

‘So if an aura needs to be activated, how can I throw fireballs then?’ Ash was now curious.

‘You threw a fireball?’ Mrs Volt sounded awed. ‘In terms of energy expended that was equivalent to the thunderbolt I just threw. And you’re still untrained...’

She slowly looked Ash up and down. 'I could have guessed by the shape of your focus of course.'

She saw the girls questioning faces.

'That's your tattoo. Anyway, in rare cases persons with very strong auras become aware of them by themselves. Some of them realize what's going on and slowly learn how to control their growing power. Others are not so lucky and all the raw power seeps into the environment they are the source of those stories about gots and poltergeists. And then there is the third option, sometimes when someone has a really traumatic experience the sheer shock can activate their aura.'

'So my aura could have been activated when I was knocked to the ground by those bullies?'

'Could be, but I doubt it. No offense of course, but that is not quite the kind of traumatic experience I meant. No, I think you're aura was already active but this was the first time you were angry enough to accidentally use it. It is a good thing that didn't happen earlier too, you were lucky we were in the area this time.'

'Your aura was sky blue, what's the color of mine?'

Ash asked.

'I'm not sure, because I haven't seen you activate it. But I think it will be brown or dark red. As you can see, my eyes are blue; the color of someones eyes

often hints at the color of their aura.'

Mrs Volt had emptied out the box of power bars and was now fishing another one out of her pockets. Ash didn't know why, but she felt it would be wise not to mention that brown was not her actual eye color. Clara seemed to agree on that because she eagerly steered the conversation away from it: 'So Mr Jefferssons aura is also blue?'

'Very dark blue actually, and please call me Philip; were not in class anymore,' he said. 'In fact, I think we'll be on the run together for quite some time.'

'From Hekate? Why does she want to catch us so badly?'

'Ever since Hekate got her power, she has been trying to establish a new world order. One with her at the top of course.' Philip explained.

Petra continued: 'But she has encountered a lot of resistance from people like us, who think the last thing we need is a megalomaniak leading the world. The problem is that she can be very persuasive and has gained quite a lot of followers over the years. While our numbers are slowly dwindling, through betrayal or worse...' She lapsed into silence.

'That's why we are moving around all the time,' Philip said, while Petra regained her bearings. 'We had hoped we were relatively safe in Midland, but it turns out that Hekate had her claws into that town

already. Now that she knows our location she will do everything in her power to catch us. Add to that the fact that you're probably the most powerfull untrained sorceres I've ever seen and we have half her army searching for us.'

Petra was back from whatever past her mind had been occupying and said: 'We should stop by a road-store if we get the chance, you really won't last long in these outfits.'

Indeed, Ash and Clara were still wearing their sport clothes. In all the fuss they hadn't even had the chance of grabbing their bags. Clara shot upright.

'Oh, no. My phone is still in the locker room,' she said. 'My parents will be worried sick if I don't get home tonight. If they can't reach me on my phone they might even go as far as calling the police.'

Clara was almost jumping up and down now. Ash tought about her mother coming home tonight and not finding her anywhere. Although she would be worried she wouldn't go as far as calling the police though. Ash had stayed away without telling her mother more often, usually it happened when she had found a really cool spot to draw and she wanted to get both a picture by light and one by dark. She wished she had her phone though, she could at least let he mother know that she was alright. Although,

come to think of it, she wasn't so sure about that at the moment.

'Well, that's another reason to stop somewhere,' Petra said. 'We will have to use the landline, as Philip and I don't have mobile phones.'

'Why not?' Ash said.

'Too easily trackable, if we used a cellphone we would have furies at our door before we had finished the call. I know a small store a few miles down the road that sells some clothes, let's have a stopover there.'

3.

‘You what?’ The voice on the other end of the cellphone wasn’t angry, Samatha would have been okay with angry. When Anubis was angry he would shout and throw things at you, but at least you knew he was going to give you a second chance. It was when he went straight through angry and out the other side into the dead calm waters of insanity that Samantha really got scared. Anubis wouldn’t kill you when he was in that state of mind, he had way more interesting ways of punishing you than straight up ending your life. In fact, most of his techniques relied on you being alive for as long as possible.

‘We lost them,’ Samantha said.

The cellphones they used were special magically shielded models, untracable except for the most cunning magicians. The downside of this was that she was still stuck with an old model with physical buttons, while most of the kids around her had smartphones.

‘You better make sure that you find them again, Hekate isn’t known for her tolerance with failures,’

Anubis said and cut the connection.

Anubis was one of the higher ranked agents of Hekate and the person Samantha had to report to. Anubis wasn't his real name of course, though Samantha didn't know what was. Hekate had the habit of giving her agents codenames after ancient gods.

'Allright, it's as we expected: he's not happy,' Samantha said when she had walked back to the twins. They had just finalized the transaction for the new motorcycles. It would be better if this surprise-lighting-strike thing did not happen again, or the chase would get very expensive.

'Then we better mount up and follow them, according to my ravens they're on the interstate going west,' Ingrid said.

Ingrid was very adept at scouting, she could make most small animals do her bidding and use them as eyes and ears. She mostly used ravens though, exactly why that was Samantha didn't know.

'I'll swallow my words now,' Steven said as they walked to the parking lot. 'We really should've hit her harder when we had the chance. Then we wouldn't be in this mess.'

'I agree with you on that,' Ingrid said. 'But we really couldn't have known that she would get that phoenix as a focus.'

‘No time for regrets now,’ Samantha put on her helmet. ‘Mount up and let’s get them.’

The roadstore was a small run-down building close to the road. The parking lot was almost empty and gave the impression that it was that way most of the time. Walking around inside Ash had the feeling that she had traveled back in time. The souvenir number plates were of a design which hadn’t been in use for almost two decades, the wristbands with letter beads spelled names which she associated with the elderly and the clothes they sold had prints on them of rock concerts which probably hadn’t seen a digital camera. Ash wondered how this store had survived all those years.

‘Right, first things first: you have to call your parents,’ Philip said as he walked to the counter and rang the small copper bell which stood next to the cash register. ‘During the drive I came up with a cover story, but if you’ve come up with something better you don’t have to use it.’

‘I have absolutely no clue what to tell my parents,’ Clara was getting a little nervous again.

‘Me neither, I really don’t like lying to my mother,’ Ash said.

‘Ah, how can I help you?’

They looked around in surprise, there was no-one to see.

‘Over here.’ The voice said.

They looked over the counter were a small man was climbing up a stepladder which leaned against the cash register. The only things Ash could see properly were his bald head and small eyes. The rest was hidden behind a large white beard.

‘Archibald, at your service.’ The man said when he had reached the top of the ladder. His head now only just reached above the counter.

‘We would like to make a couple of phonecalls.’ Petra said. ‘Do you have a public phone?’

‘Ah, yes. Phonecalls. Follow me,’ Archibald jumped off the ladder with surprising agility and trotted to the open door behind him.

The back of the shop was a small room filled to the brim with boxes, chests and other containers. The only empty space was where a small desk stood against the wall. Above it hung an old rotary phone which Archibald indicated.

‘You don’t need to pay, phonecalls are for free.’ He said as he walked back into the shop.

‘Allright, what is our story?’ Clara asked.

‘At school you were told that to celebrate the opening of the new semester the next few days would be a surprise camping trip.’ Philip said. ‘You have

bad reception there and so couldn't call with your mobile phones. That would also explain why you won't be contacting them during the week.'

Clara thought for a moment. 'Hmmm, they might even believe that.' She said as she reluctantly picked up the horn.

Clara wasn't very good at lying, but surprisingly her parents did believe her; they were hurrying towards an important meeting when she called and they weren't paying much attention to what she said. Ash's mother was a little more observant. During the phonecall Ash could hear by her reaction that she didn't believe a word of what she was saying. Somehow though, she didn't ask any questions and only told Ash to be careful. Ash felt a little guilty when she hung up, she never lied to her mother and really didn't like that she had to do it now. Ash and Clara went back into the store, where Petra had already stocked up on powerbars and Philip was rummaging through the racks of clothes and looking at the labels.

'I think these might be of your size.' He indicated a couple of racks in the back of the shop. 'Don't worry about money, we'll pay for them.'

Ash realized that even if she wanted to, she couldn't

pay for the clothes. Her money was still with the rest of her belongings in the locker at school. She took a look at the clothes. They weren't really her style, there were too much skulls and revolvers for her taste. After a little searching Ash found a plain dark red t-shirt which was only a little too large. Trousers was easy: there was only a single type of dark blue jeans. Finding a good vest was a little harder, after a while Ash settled on the least offensive one she could find: it was black and had embroidered wings at the back and continuing on the arms. Clara had managed to find a blouse her size with a black and red checkerboard pattern, she wore it open over a black t-shirt with a dark grey skull at the front. In the meantime Petra and Philip had filled four identical backpacks with an assortment of food and drinks, including lots of powerbars. Ash had also seen them put in survival supplies like matches and rope. She wondered where they would need that for.

After they had paid for the supplies they each took a bag and went back to the parking lot. Instead of going to the car Philip walked in the direction of a small forest path.

‘Where are we going?’ Clara asked.

‘A place where we can safely test your powers

without people seeing what we're doing,' Petra said. 'We'll need to go a little into the forest to keep the light of the flash from reaching the road.'

'Flash?' Ash said.

'It's a way of viewing auras. You make a small energy flash and any auras hit by it will flare for a short while,' Petra explained.

After they had walked along the path for a while they reached a small clearing.

'Alright, this will do,' Philip said as they walked to the middle of the field. 'Make a circle, please.'

Ash and Clara stood next to each other facing Philip. He extended a hand and a dark blue glow started spreading over his body. Ash saw that his aura was strongest near his chest, small glowing dots were slowly orbiting him. A small silvery orb appeared in his hand where it hung, slowly pulsing.

'Close your eyes,' Philip said.

Ash had only just followed his advice when the orb exploded in a flash of bright white light. Even with her eyes closed Ash still could see the glow. When she had blinked away the after images she looked at Philip and Petra, their auras were now both glowing bright. Then she realised that they were silent and staring at her and Clara. Ash looked down at herself. Her aura was a pure black which streamed from her skin like a dark fire. She had

half expected the color, what with her eyes being black too, but actually seeing it flare up around her was quite awesome. Then she looked up at Clara and froze. Clara's aura was a pure white radiating like light from her whole body, even brighter streaks slowly moved across it. Clara looked up at Ash and caught her eye, she raised her eyebrows in question. Her pupils were still mostly brown but they had a strange white outer circle. At the same time they both looked back at Philip and Petra who were still staring at them.

'Is something wrong? What color is my aura?' Clara asked uncertainly.

They snapped out of it.

'If by "wrong" you mean the fact that your aura colors are considered to be impossible, then yes,' Philip said, clearly confused.

'I wouldn't go as far as impossible,' Petra supplied. 'But in the long span of human history they have never been seen before.'

The auras now slowly faded out again, the effect of the orb having worn off.

'What colors?' Clara was now concerned.

'Yours is pure white and radiant,' Ash said. 'Mine is black and acts like fire.'

'Now I really want to see them,' Clara said as her concern changed into excitement.

‘Apart from the impossibility of your aura’s there is another strange thing though,’ Petra said. ‘Both your eyes stayed brown while your aura’s were flaring.’

‘That would be my lenses,’ Clara said while she looked at the ground. ‘When I said that I understood you concealing your eye color I really meant it.’ She now looked up at Ash who was watching her with surprise. ‘They’re actually pure white and, like you said, it really gets on peoples nerves.’

‘Wait, you’re both wearing colored lenses?’ Philip said.

Ash nodded.

‘Maybe it is better that way, if you two would show up with your natural eyecolor in a place where people know about auras you would get more than just strange looks,’ he continued. ‘Not in the least because you two would be the most powerful persons in the room.’

‘How do you know?’ Ash asked.

‘Most of the auras are not a single color and consist of two or more colors swirling through each other,’ Petra said. ‘The pureness of an aura is an indication of the strenght of that person. And there is nothing more pure than white or black. I honestly have no idea what one of you is capable of doing alone. And if both of you work together...’ She let

the words hang in the air. 'Let's just say that it's a good thing we found you when we did, if Hekate would have gotten her hands on you we could all be lost.'

Philip started walking back to the path.

'Now that we know how strong you are, our next step should be to activate Clara's aura as quickly as possible,' he said. 'We know a guy living fairly close by who might be able to do just that.'

After about half an hour driving on the highway Philip took an exit which had no signs indicating where it went. They were in a really foresty area now and as they followed the small road the trees got more and more densely packed. After another five minutes Philip slowed the car to a crawl. Ash looked around, there was nothing to see but trees. Philip and Petra were looking out of the window as if they were searching for something.

'What are we looking for?' Ash asked.

'A secret entrance,' Philip said. 'It should be here somewhere...'

'Over there.'

Petra pointed to a completely inconspicuous looking tree at the side of the road. Now that Ash looked a little longer at it she saw that there was something

odd with this tree and the ones closes to it. It wavered a little, as if she saw it trough rising air on a hot day.

‘Those are not real, are they?’ She asked.

‘Got it in one,’ Philip said as he slowly steered the car towards them.

‘Wait, what are you doing? Were going to hit them!’ To Clara the trees looked as solid as always.

She flinched the moment the bumper hit the first tree, and went straight through it. Philip slowly drove the car through the illusion. When they were through they stood on a similar road as where they had come from, but here the trees were even closer to the road and formed a tunnel of branches above them. Ash looked through the rear window. From this side the illusion was slightly transparent, she could see the road through the shimmering wall. Clara opened her eyes again.

‘Next time you’re going to to something like that, explain it to me beforehand. This whole surprise bussines really get’s on my nerves,’ she said.

‘When you’r aura is active you will be able to see the illusion,’ Ash said. ‘By the way, where are we?’

‘The mechanic’s hideout,’ Petra said. ‘One of the few places Hekate hasn’t found yet.’

‘Why is it called like that?’ Clara asked.

‘Because this is where Skylar the mechanic lives,’ Philip said as he let the car creep along the road. ‘He is quite a strange person. Was born without an aura and as such he can’t conjure on his own. That would be a major handicap if it weren’t for his uncanny ability with machines. He made up for his deficiency over the years and is now actually one of our strongest allies. You’ll like him I think.’

As they moved further along the track Ash had the distinct feeling that they were being watched. She also thought she saw small movements between the trees.

‘Does he know we’re here?’ she asked.

‘Almost certainly.’ Petra confirmed. ‘As soon as we got within a ten kilometer radius he was alerted of our presence. This hideout is actually one of the best defended ones we have. This road for example only exists when he wants it to. Sadly enough it’s also one of the most remote ones and was only recently build, so most of the time its only Skylar who’s here.’

They drove into a large clearing. Ash and Clara looked around in amazement. on the field stood a couple of low buildings with slanted sides that looked like they were made out of metal. Around the buildings stood an assortment of strange machines which glowed in different colors or crackled with electricity. Roughly in the middle stood a large mast with leaf

shaped devices at the top which gave it an overall impression of a tree. But the strangest of all where the workers: all around the complex were human like figures either hauling stuff, fixing machines or any other task that needed doing. The figures were made of a strange greenish metal and each had a green glowing crystal embeded in it's chest, their eyes were made of smaller crystals and glowed the same green.

'You are probably wondering what those are,' Petra indicated one of the workers. 'They are intarite golems, Skylar build them to help him with his larger projects. The glowing crystal is filled with aural energy and is their power source.'

'So that greenish metal is intarite?' Ash asked.

'Yes, it's one of the few metals that easily conducts aural enegries, which makes it quite valuable,' Petra answered.

'Let's see what he is up to this time,' Philip said as they got out of the car. 'He is probably in there.'

He pointed at the building directly opposite the entrance, it was the biggest one and it had the highest concentration of golems around it. As they walked towards it the golems went on with their business around them, some looked up from their work for a moment as they went by.

'How intelligent are these actually?' Ash said as

she took a closer look at one of the golems working next to the entrance.

The golem stopped with the welding he was doing and looked at her.

‘How can I be of service?’ Ash heard a low voice say in her head.

‘It talked to me,’ Ash said surprised.

‘They can do that,’ Philip confirmed. ‘Say something back.’

‘I was just looking at what you were doing,’ Ash said to the golem.

‘I am welding this support beam to the building,’ the golem said while he indicated the steel beam he was working on. ‘As for intelligence, we score slightly higher than average on a human IQ score. Our social facilities on the other hand are quite lacking. If you are looking for Skylar, he is inside.’

The golem focused back on his welding, the light coming from the torch was strangely diffuse and didn’t hurt the eyes like a normal welding torch would. The big steel doors of the building were wide open to let all the workers through. Walking in they saw that almost the entire internal space of the building was filled with one big hall. Next to the entrance golems were standing on hexagonal pads from which energy flowed in green streams towards the crystals in their chests. The rest of the room was filled with devices

of every shape and form in different states of construction. One of the golems pointed them towards the back of the hall where a large amount of screens and workbenches had been arranged in a circle. When they got closer they could see two legs sticking from underneath the closest machine.

‘I’ll be with you in a minute,’ a pleasant voice said from the recesses of the machine. ‘Just don’t touch anything.’

Ash looked at the screens, it was clear that these were not your average computer. Some displayed complex schematics and readouts while others showed lines flowing across the screen like those on the screensavers. The machine Skylar was working on mainly consisted of two giant tubes with two larger versions of the golem crystals floating inside.

‘What are you working on old friend,’ Philip asked while he leaned on one of the workbenches.

‘A new energy capacitor. That lighting harvester I showed you last time is working too well, I have nowhere to store all the excess charge,’ Skylar said.

He pushed himself from under the machine and gave his wrench to a passing golem.

‘I saw you brought visitors,’ he said as he walked towards them.

Skylar didn’t look like he could be older than twenty. He had a smile on his face that didn’t reach

his eyes, because they were covered with strange goggles. He wore a dark blue coverall and heavy steel nosed work boots. On his waist he had a toolbelt which was filled with tools Ash had varying familiarity with. On his left arm he had a glove-like device which had more of those crystals embedded into it. His chest glowed the same green as the golems did, Ash suspected another crystal.

After Philip had introduced them to each other Skylar said: ‘They probably told you some things about me, am I right? That I have no aura an such?’

Ash and Clara nodded.

Skylar took of his goggles, his eyes glowed the same green that everything else around here was. Ash thought he was actually quite good looking.

‘No doubt they also told you that I have fixed that a long time ago.’

They nodded again.

‘And now your wondering why my chest is glowing like that.’

‘I don’t see any glow,’ Clara said. ‘But that’s probably because my aura isn’t active.’

‘I see it,’ Ash said. ‘It’s another one of those crystals, am I right?’

‘Ah yes,’ Skylar answered. ‘I discovered these while I was working on a shield projection device. They are marvelous at storing aural enegies. At first

other people had to charge them for me, but then I discovered a way to charge them with normal electricity. With the one in my chest and these on my arm,' he waved with the glove. 'I can conjure anything I want. Anyway, I think I know what you're here for,' he pointed at Clara. 'You want your aura activated, right?'

'I think so, yes,' Clara answered.

'I presume she is strong enough?' he looked at Philip and raised his eyebrows in question.

'I'm quite sure,' he said. 'In fact, I think you will be hard pressed to find anyone stronger than her. Except for Ash here of course.'

'Okay, now you're making me curious. What color are they?'

'Better brace yourself,' Petra said. 'Ash is black and Clara is white.'

Skylar looked from the teens back to Philip and Petra.

'You must be kidding, right?'

'Not at all,' Philip said. 'At first we didn't believe it either, but here they are.'

'But their eyecolor...'

'Lenses,' Philip interrupted him. 'They wear them to hide the actual color.'

Skylar looked at Clara again, then he seemed to reach a decision and turned around.

‘Well, at least we’ll be sure she survives, follow me.’

He walked to a door in the back of the hall. Behind it was a stairway leading down into a smaller but much taller hall. A couple of meters up the roof was the slanted insides of one of the other buildings. This room was mostly occupied by a big machine in the center. It consisted of a couple of concentric circles with a platform in the middle.

‘Most of the time auras are activated by another person,’ Skylar said as he walked towards a console on the side of the machine. ‘But I found a way to do it with a machine. It is much more delicate and reliable than a human and after some fine calibration I have achieved an almost hundred percent success rate.’

‘*Almost* a hundred percent?’ Clara asked uncertainly.

‘Yes, it only fails with people with very weak auras. That’s why we don’t even try it with them.’

He picked up a device which looked almost like a geigercounter.

‘Now, let’s see how strong you really are. Stand at least three meters away from each other,’ he told the girls.

He activated the device and pointed it at Clara. He looked at the dial, and looked again. He shook

the device. Pointed it at Ash. Shook it again and pointed it back at Clara.

‘Something wrong?’ Ash asked.

Skylar now pointed the device at Petra and seemed reassured.

‘Well, I think it is stil working...’ he said. ‘But when I try to read one of you the needle just sticks to the right side of the dial and stays there. If my readings are correct your enegries are literally of the scale.’

He had sounded sceptical when he was told the color of the auras, but now he was beginning to get exited. He was almost jumping when he returned to the terminal of the activation machine.

‘If this is real you absolutely have to find someone to train them,’ he said. ‘So much potential shouldn’t go to waste.’

He pushed a couple of buttons and a ramp extended from the platform to the ground. He motioned from Clara to the device.

‘All set. Stand on the platform and we can start. Leave your bag here please.’

Clara looked at Ash, who nodded encouragingly.

‘All right, here goes.’ She said after she had dropped the bag on the ground.

Clara slowly walked up the ramp and turned to face the others when she reached the platform. Sky-

lar gave the others a couple of really black sunglasses.

‘You better wear these, otherwise you might go blind,’ he said.

He walked back to the machine and made the ramp retract.

‘Are you ready?’

‘I think so...’ Clara replied.

‘Okay, brace yourself.’

Skylar put on his own goggles and pushed the big red button on the terminal. There was a high pitched whining noise as the rings slowly started turning around Clara. When the rings were so fast that they were a blur Skylar looked at the monitors and put his hand on a big lever.

‘All readings green, ramping up the power...’

He slowly pushed the lever all the way up. The crystals embedded in the rings started glowing a bright green. Clara slowly floated up from the platform as streams of energy flowed from the rings into her. In response her aura flared up even brighter than before, casting a sharp light over everything. Skylar was jumping now.

‘Man, you weren’t kidding when you said she was strong. Look at that!’ he shouted over the noise of the machine.

He pointed at the dials on his screen which were without exception rapidly increasing.

‘Better close your eyes! Reaching critical energy levels in three... two.. one...’

Even with her eyes closed and the ultra black sunglasses Ash could feel the glow of Clara’s aura etching itself on her retina. When the glow had faded away and Ash thought it to be safe she opened her eyes and removed the sunglasses. Clara was lying on the platform and didn’t move. Skylar was already extending the ramp again.

‘You better get her to a bed now, she will be out for a good day,’ he said. ‘You can take her to one of the guestrooms.’

Ash ran up to the platform and kneeled next to Clara. She was out cold and hung limply when Ash carried her down.

‘Will she be alright?’ she asked. Clara really didn’t look too well.

‘Tomorrow she will be right as rain,’ Skylar said. ‘It is quite a shock, suddenly having so much power flowing through you. This way.’

He pointed to a door next to the stairs. Philip helped Ash carry Clara through the hallway and into one of the small rooms that opened to it. Together they put her on the bed. Skylar came in after them with a golem trailing behind him.

‘I will have C7 here look after her,’ he said indicating the metal man.

Now that Ash was pointed at it, she saw that the golem had his name etched in the metal above the crystal.

‘Now let’s get some dinner, you lot must be getting hungry.’

As they went back into the corridor the golem sat down next to the bed, Ash lingered in the doorway and looked at Clara. Skylar saw her concern.

‘He will notify me when something happens,’ he pointed at his glove. ‘At this moment the only thing she needs is rest. When she wakes up though she will probably be hungry enough to eat a four person meal all on her own.’

They followed him through the tunnel and up another flight of stairs. Ash saw they were now in another one of the buildings, this one had been divided up into multiple rooms and furnished to be a combination of living room and kitchen. A golem with a chef’s hat was busy making a meal in the kitchen area.

‘Hello A51,’ he said greeting the cook. ‘What do we have today?’

‘I am just finishing the lasagna,’ the low voice said in Ash’s head.

‘Perfect,’ Skylar walked to the table and indicated the chairs. ‘Have a seat.’

The lasagna A51, as Skylar called him, had made was vegetarian. Ash noticed that she didn’t miss the meat at all, in fact she found that even if there had been meat she probably wouldn’t have taken it. She mentioned it to Petra.

‘Ah yes, that’s a common side effect of having an active aura,’ she said. ‘In fact, most sorcerers are vegetarian. It’s got something to do with being able to feel the life force in the animals your eating, makes your appetite go away real quick.’

After the meal Petra and Philip stayed talking with Skylar. Ash went to the guest quarters to check on Clara. She was still unconscious and was lying in the same position as they had left her. C7 still sat motionless next to the bed. The golem looked up when she came in and saw her concerned expression.

‘Don’t worry, her vital readings are all stable,’ the golem said.

‘Do you have any idea when she will wake up?’

‘At this rate, tomorrow morning. She is recovering remarkably quick.’

Ash walked out again and went to the room Skylark had told her to use. It was right accross the

corridor and with the doors open Ash could keep an eye on Clara. She lay down on the bed and thought about the events of the day. Had it only been a single day? The events of that morning felt as if they had happened days ago. The world had been simple then, all she had to worry about was getting good grades while avoiding bullies. Now she had discovered that she and her new friend were the most powerful sorceresses on the planet and things had gotten complicated fast. She took another look at Clara and closed her eyes.

4.

It hadn't been too difficult to follow the trail, Ingrid's ravens had been on their heels the whole time. Samantha hadn't been surprised when they went into the forest, Philip had always been predictable. What had surprised her was the result of the energy test. She hadn't seen Ash's aura before she was blasted into the wall and hadn't even begun to suspect Clara. After they had told Anubis their findings he had immediately called for more agents. Midland was quite far from the usual posts though so it would take a while. In the meantime Samantha and the twins were to keep tabs on the four of them, but they weren't to interfere until backup had arrived. Now they were driving over the highway on their new motors. They had just passed the roadstore where the fugitives had stopped when Ingrid called over the helmet radio.

'Eh, guys. They have disappeared,' she said.

'How do you mean, disappeared?' Steven said.
'They can't have just vanished.'

'Well that's what it looks like, one moment they

were there and the next my ravens can't see them anywhere.'

'They must have some kind of magic cloaking device in the area,' Samantha said. 'I didn't even know they had a hideout here.'

'Must be a pretty strong field then, in the area where I last saw them I can't get a connection to any animal,' Ingrid sounded irritated, she didn't like being kept out.

'Lead us to the place where you saw them last,' Samantha said. 'We will wait there for the reinforcements. They can't hide forever.'

The next morning Ash got woken up by the golem she now recognized as C7.

'Your friend is waking up,' he said. 'You might want to be there.'

Ash looked across the hallway to Clara. Indeed, she was moving now. She got up and sat on the chair where the golem had kept watch. Clara moaned and opened her sleepy eyes a bit. She looked around the room until she focused on Ash.

'Good morning,' Ash said. 'How do you feel?'

'Like I haven't eaten in days,' she yawned. 'Where are we?'

‘In one of the guest rooms of Skylar’s place,’ Ash looked at the clock next to the bed. ‘You were out for twelve full hours.’

‘Really? I feel like I could sleep another twelve.’

A golem with A52 on it’s chest came in carrying a tray full with an assortment of different sandwiches and croissants. In his other hand he carried a two litre bottle of orange juice.

‘Skylar said you would be hungry,’ A52 said as he put the tray on the bed in front of Clara.

He gave the bottle of juice to Ash, who thanked him as he walked back out. Clara immediately started on one of the croissants. After she had finished it she put out her hand to Ash, who gave her the bottle.

‘Before I started eating I didn’t realize how parched I was,’ Clara said after she had emptied half the bottle.

‘Man, this stuff tastes fresh. I wonder how they get it.’ She gave the juice back to Ash who had now started on a sandwich.

‘No idea,’ Ash said. ‘Delivery services probably don’t come down here, and I didn’t see any orange trees around either.’

‘I think the activation has worked,’ Clara sounded excited. ‘I could see the glow on the golems crystals.’

‘Awesome!’ Ash said. ‘I’m glad you’re alright. You really had me worried when you passed out.’

‘I only remember the rings starting to spin, then a feeling of being ripped apart. Next thing I know, I wake up here.’

‘Philip says that when you’re feeling up to it we should be moving again. We need to be taught how to use our powers, and Skylar obviously can’t help with that.’

‘Indeed,’ Petra said as she entered the room. She nodded at Clara. ‘I see your up already. Quite impressive, Skylar thought you would be under for at least another day.’

She took a sandwich from the plate.

‘Philip and Skylar are stocking the car with supplies, he also said he had something special for you two.’

Ash wondered what that could be, with a guy like Skylar you never knew.

‘Where will we be going next?’ Clara asked.

‘To Charleston,’ Petra answered. ‘We know someone there called Kzao who can give you the training needed to control your new powers.’

Clara took another sandwich, the pile on the tray had shrunk considerably in the last few minutes.

‘I think I’m able to stand now,’ Clara said. She took the juice bottle and emptied it. ‘All right, let’s

try.'

She gave the tray to Petra and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. With a little support from Ash she got up and stood a little shakily. Together they walked towards the stairs to the living area.

When they got to the top of the stairs Skylar just came in from outside. He was carrying a box in his hands. When he saw them he looked surprised.

'Good morning,' he said. 'didn't expect you to be up and kicking so soon.'

He nodded at Clara.

'It must be the extreme strength of your aura that kickstarted you again.'

They sat down at the table and Skylar opened the box. He pulled two necklaces from it.

'I made these last night,' he said as he offered them to the girls. 'I thought it would be appropriate.'

Ash and Clara looked at the necklaces. They had the shape of a tear and were made of metal. One was colored black with a white dot and the other white with a black dot. Together they formed the yin yang symbol.

'With these necklaces you will always be able to find each other,' Skylar said. 'The only thing left to do to make them work is to infuse them with your

auras. This will give them the information they need to locate you.'

He gave Ash the white half and Clara the black one.

'Hold the hanger in your hand and concentrate on it,' he instructed.

As Ash focused on the white tear her aura lighted up around her hand. Black flames wound across the silver chain and into the small black dot on the hanger. She looked at Clara who's hand was glowing white. Beams of light were shining from her fingers at the white dot. Clara looked at Ash with large eyes.

'That is amazing!' she said. 'This stuff is way cooler now that I can see what's happening.'

The flow into the hangers slowly stopped and their auras died down again.

'If you now swap hangers, you will both be carrying a small part of the other,' Skylar said. 'The only thing you have to do to find the other person is to concentrate on the hanger.'

Ash and Clara exchanged necklaces and put them on.

'Let's try it out then,' Clara said.

Ash concentrated on her half of the yin yang symbol and immediately she felt a slight pull in the di-

rection of Clara, as if she had some kind of internal compass.

‘I think they work,’ Ash said. ‘Do you feel it too?’

‘I do,’ Clara looked at the hanger. ‘What is the range on these things?’

‘Pretty much infinite,’ Skylar sounded proud as he said it. ‘They only don’t work when one of them is inside a magical cloaking field. However they will regain the connection once the other one is inside the same field, as is the case in this hideout.’

‘This place is cloaked?’ Ash asked.

‘Indeed,’ Skylar sounded like he liked to boast. ‘this location can’t be detected in any human or magical way. If it wasn’t hidden, your pursuers would have been here yesterday already. Man, I really like this era, the things possible with the technology these days.’

There was something about the way he said “this era” that made Ash’s hair stand up. He made it sound like he had experienced other eras personally.

‘Anyway, I recall that the twin girl has the ability to use birds as scouts.’

‘What happens when one of the birds flies over here?’

‘She will lose the connection to it. Which means she still has a general idea of where you are and she

and her friends are probably waiting for you outside. That's why I have put a smaller version of the cloaking device in your car. It has a limited battery life, but it will get you past any ambushes they may have set.'

'So... What do we do when it runs out of charge?' Clara wanted to know.

'That's when we're on your own.' Petra said. 'We can't take too much devices with us or they might fall into Hekate's hands. Which is something we have to prevent at all costs.'

The outside door opened and Philip came in.

'Ah, your up already?' he said when he saw Clara sitting at the table. 'How do you feel?'

'Still a little weak,' Clara said. 'but it's getting better with the minute.'

'Are you feeling good enough to be going again? I just filled the tank I think we're ready to go.'

'I think if I ride shotgun it might just work. If I'd sit in the back after eating all those sandwiches I don't thrust myself to keep it down.'

'Actually I'm already impressed that you can stand,' Ash said. 'You've eaten a whole weeks worth of bread back there. I've no idea where you keep it.'

'It's being converted to energy right now,' Skylar explained. 'Imagine a big reactor fueled by food charging the giant battery that is your aura. Clara's

aura was drained almost halfway during the activation. Her digestive system is working overtime right now to get it back to full.'

'What happens when it get's drained completely?' Ash asked.

'Then there are two options. Either wathever you're casting just stops working and you drop unconscious, or the magic starts feeding on you instead of your aura and you basically get consumed by it. It all depends on what it is that your conjuring.'

'Let's not worry about that right now,' Petra said. 'Our main focus should be to get to Charleston as quickly as possible and preferably stay undetected along the way.'

Ash helped Clara up and helped her walk to the car. She noticed Clara didn't lean on her as much as earlier, she really was regaining her strength. Clara got into the passenger seat. Ash sat next to Philip on the backseat. Petra was going to drive this time. As they drove away Skylar and a couple of his golems watched them go.

5.

Samantha wasn't in the best mood, they had camped all night next to their motorcycles. Ingrid hadn't picked up anything anymore and they had parked a small distance from the highway exit where she had last seen the car.

'Well, those reinforcements sure take long to arrive,' Steven said as he got up from his sleeping mat. 'Who do you think they'll send?'

'I guess it'll be some minor agent and his soldiers,' Samantha said.

Anubis didn't like them too much, so whoever he sent would probably be a major pain in the ass.

'I'm getting something...' Ingrid sat some distance away from the motors and was communicating with her scouts. 'I think a helicopter is coming this way.'

'A helicopter? So they're bringing in the big guns after all,' Steven got up and walked to where his sister sat. 'How far away are they?'

'We should hear them any moment now,' she said.

And indeed, a couple minutes later they could hear the distinct sound of rotor blades slicing the air. After another while a military helicopter appeared over the trees. They got up and waved to get the pilot's attention. The helicopter expertly landed on the road a small distance from their makeshift camp, its noise dropped a little as it went into idle. As they walked towards it the door opened and a small man jumped out of the heli. Samantha nearly jumped as she recognized the suited figure, it was Anubis himself! Of course she had never seen him in real life before, as she and the twins were too low in rank to merit compromising his secret identity for. But she had heard fairly detailed descriptions of him and this man fitted that profile exactly. When Anubis saw them walking towards him he indicated that they should move back to their bikes, where normal speech would at least be somewhat possible.

When he got near them he shouted: 'All right, have they moved yet?'

He didn't sound too happy about the whole situation. Samantha waited until he was within speaking range.

'No sir, Ingrid still can't find them,' she said.

'Ugh, then I will have to patrol the area,' Anubis sighed. 'You know that if it was up to me I would have sent you my meanest agent. But Hekate wanted

me to handle this personally.'

'Wait, I can see them again,' Ingrid's gaze went blank. 'They're about twenty-five kilometers southeast from here. I have no idea how they could have gotten there undetected.'

'We'll talk about failures later,' Anubis said. 'Right now you should get on your bikes and go after them. I'll follow with the helicopter.'

As Samantha and the twins broke up camp and mounted their bikes Anubis walked back to the helicopter and instructed the pilot to take off again. The three of them rode on the highway with the helicopter overhead.

'We got company,' Petra said as she looked into the rear-view mirror.

The cloaking device had ran out of charge about half an hour ago, plenty of time for their pursuers to find and catch up with them. Ash looked through the rear window and indeed saw three tiny figures on bikes in the distance.

'How are we going to stop them this time?' she asked.

'Well, we are all rested and recharged,' Petra said. 'Let's see if they can take another thunderbolt.'

‘Change of plan,’ Clara said. ‘They’re not alone.’

She pointed to the right where a military helicopter was visible over the trees. The sound of its rotors was now audible and it was closing in fast. Petra floored the gas and the car jolted over the highway. This early in the morning there was only sparse traffic and at the moment they had the whole road to themselves.

‘I think I know a way to get that helicopter down,’ Philip said. ‘Let’s just hope there isn’t a powerful sorcerer on board.’

The heli was now pulling in behind them. Ash could see the pilot and another person in a suit sitting in the cockpit.

‘I think you’ll have to do something fast,’ Petra said. ‘I can see that thing has missiles equipped.’

Philip turned around in his seat and raised his right hand. His aura flared up as he made a fist and thrust it in the direction of the helicopter. A large gust of wind suddenly pushed the helicopter out of course. Philip kept aiming his fist on it and slowly but steadily the heli was blown to the ground. Suddenly the wind stopped and the helicopter lurched up again.

‘Someone is countering me,’ Philip said. ‘And he is quite strong too.’

‘Could it be that guy next to the pilot?’ Ash asked.

The man in the suit was now surrounded by a dark red glow.

‘Oh, no. I know that guy,’ Philip said when he saw it too. ‘That is Anubis, one of Hekate’s agents. And a quite powerfull one at that.’

The helicopter was now flying steadily behind them.

‘He must have a lock on us by now,’ Petra sounded very tense. ‘He could fire any moment.’

‘Why don’t you swerve?’ Clara asked.

‘No use, those are heat seeking missiles,’ Petra replied. ‘Once they have us targeted we would need to be in a fighter jet to outmaneuver them.’

Clara looked in the rear-view mirror just in time to see a missile detach and launch itself at them. She raised her hands protectively, knowing it to be a futile reflex. She closed her eyes and willed the missile to stop. It stopped. And exploded...

It was as if the missile had hit a wall in mid-air. The fire hit a barrier of bright white light and was cut off sharply. Then the light spread further until a glowing dome of woven light surrounded the car. Clara opened her eyes when she realized she was not

dead. She looked around in confusion until she saw that the others were staring at her. Then she looked at her raised arms. Her tattoo of the silver bracelet was glowing brightly and her aura had flared up all around her. She looked outside and saw the magical barrier. In shock she dropped her hands and the dome vanished. The sudden movement made the others snap out of their surprised staring.

‘Whatever that was, can you do it again?’ Philip asked insistently. ‘He has still got missiles on that craft.’

‘I don’t know,’ Clara said, totally confused now.

‘Calm down and think deeply,’ Petra said as she tried not to sound panicked herself. ‘What did you do before the shield appeared?’

‘I don’t know,’ Clara said again. ‘I raised my hands in reflex and wanted to stop the missile from hitting us.’

‘Try it again,’ Petra said as she looked in the side mirror. ‘I think he has regained the lock and will fire soon.’

Clara slowly raised her hands and concentrated on stopping things from hitting the car, she imagined the shield of light enveloping them again. To her own surprise her aura flared up and her tattoo started glowing with it. Around the car streams of light appeared and slowly formed a woven dome. Then

the next missile hit. Clara could feel the force with which it slammed into her shield, but this time she held it up.

‘I don’t know how long I can keep doing this,’ she said. ‘We need to shake of that helicopter fast.’

‘When I see a road into the forest, I will take it,’ Petra said.

‘I am beginning to doubt if our friend in Charleston can actually teach you anything,’ Philip said, and he sounded honest. ‘I needed years of training to make an energy shield like that, and I’ve never been able to make one this big.’

Another missile hit the dome. Clara felt it getting weaker as the impact shook her.

‘I think I can only hold one more,’ she said.

‘There!’ Ash pointed to the front. ‘That exit leads into the forest.’

Petra took the exit and as soon as they were between the trees Clara dropped her hands. The shield disappeared and she sagged into her seat. They could hear the helicopter hovering behind them. Ash dug up a couple of power bars from her bag and offered them to Clara.

‘Here, take these,’ she said. ‘If my experience of yesterday is anything to go by, you’ll want to eat at least ten of those.’

‘You’re learning quickly,’ Philip sounded impressed. ‘My estimate would have been twelve.’

‘Don’t relax just yet,’ Petra warned, ‘we still have to deal with Samantha and her gang.’

She was right, Ash could see the three motorbikes entering the forest behind them.

‘I think I know how I did the fireball,’ she said. ‘Can I try it?’

‘Go ahead,’ Philip said. ‘As long as you don’t blow us up.’ He sounded only half serious.

Ash rolled down her window and leaned her upper body out of it. She raised her right hand and tried to recall the rage that she had felt when the dodgeballs had hit her. Her aura flamed up around her and she imagined the flames of it clumping together. The black fire flowed from her palm to form a flaming ball floating in her cupped hand. When she thought it was big enough Ash took aim and threw.

The resulting explosion not only blasted Samantha and the twins off their bikes and into the tree-tops, but the shockwave also splintered the rear window of the car and the force of the impact caused Petra to lose control over the steering wheel. They swerved to the side of the road and came to a halt against a large oak.

* * *

Samantha was really starting to hate that fireball trick. As she slowly recalled the events before she had gone unconscious she opened her eyes and saw that she was no longer on ground level. She and the twins had been neatly deposited in the branches of a giant maple tree. She remembered the car they were chasing and looked around. A little further on the road lied some parts of their exploded motorbikes. She hoped she would get money for those from Anubis, but she doubted it. Through the leaves in front of her she saw to her surprise the wreck of the car sitting against a tree.

‘Hey, wake up,’ she prodded Steven who was hanging on a branch next to her. ‘They’ve crashed their car, they might even still be in there.’

Steven opened his eyes, blinked a couple of times and nearly fell of the branch when he realized where he was.

‘Whoa! What happened?’ he said as he gripped the tree firmly.

‘The explosion, remember?’ a voice from somewhere above them said. ‘That girl threw a fireball at us. We should have seen that one coming.’

Samantha looked up, between the branches she

could just make out Ingrid. She was hanging in a tangle of vines and was busy with getting herself loose.

‘You know I had only something against lightning,’ Samatha said. ‘Anyway, let’s have a look if they’re still alive.’

She pulled herself to the trunk of the tree and started climbing down. Ingrid got out of the tree close behind her, Steven took a little longer and made yelling noises as he fell short distances from branch to branch. After he had dropped the last two meters to the ground he picked himself from the dirt and walked after the other two.

‘You know that I can’t climb trees,’ he said when he got to the car. ‘A little help would have been nice.’

‘You got down safely, didn’t you?’ Ingrid said as she looked through the passenger window. ‘Nope, they’re gone already.’

‘Let’s see if they have left anything for us,’ Samatha walked to the trunk and wrenched it open.

It was empty.

‘Damn, they must have gotten around way earlier than we did,’ she said. ‘Or they must have had no supplies with them, which I doubt.’

They could hear the noise of the helicopter coming in from the distance.

‘He must be searching for them,’ Ingrid said. ‘But he can’t see anything through the trees.’

She indicated the tracks which led from the car straight into the forest.

‘Can you see them with your birds?’ Samantha asked her.

‘Just after waking up from a blow like that?’ Ingrid replied. ‘I have a headache like you wouldn’t believe. Linking with animals? No thanks.’

‘Let’s get back to the highway then and wait for the helicopter to come back.’

Samantha started walking along the road.

‘There isn’t a lot more we can do now.’

Ash woke up with a head feeling like it was filled with hot lead. She opened her eyes and saw the grinning face of Clara looking down on her.

‘Welcome to the land of the living,’ she said. ‘This time, it was you who was unconscious.’

‘What happened?’ Ash asked as she slowly sat up.

‘You made your fireball a little too big,’ Clara answered. ‘The shockwave made us hit a tree and you hit the back of your head when you flew through the car.’

Ash could indeed feel that the pain was the most sharp at the back of her skull. She looked around, they were on a small clearing in the forest. Petra and Philip were sitting a small distance away.

‘So... where are we?’

‘Lost, actually,’ Clara said. ‘After the crash we got everything out of the car as quickly as we could. Then we ran of into the forest. Petra and Philip carried you.’

They had noticed that Ash was awake now and were walking towards them.

‘How do you feel?’ Petra said. She sighed. ‘We’ve had to use that phrase way too often in the last few hours.’

‘Apart from my head feeling like it is going to explode, I’m quite okay actually.’

‘That fireball of yours was a bit too much,’ Philip said. ‘For the time being I think it would be best if you kept conjuring to a minimum. You are strong but untrained and as we have seen today, things get out of hand really quick.’

She heard the sound of the helicopter and looked up.

‘Don’t worry,’ Petra said. ‘He has been going over this piece of forest about four times now, but he can’t see anything through the leaves.’

He indicated the thick canopy above them.

‘That’s why we stopped in this clearing, because it gives us space but still conceals us from the sky.’

‘So what is the plan?’ Ash asked.

‘Well, we’re lucky we took a compass with us from Skylar’s place,’ Petra showed her the small pocket compass in her hand. ‘So we at least know in which direction we’re walking. But apart from that, we have absolutely no idea where we are.’

The helicopter had been gone for a while when they heard another, even heavier one, flying over.

‘It sounds like they’ve ramped up the search,’ Philip said as he caught a glimpse of the chinook through the branches. ‘If you’re feeling up to it, we better get moving.’

He gave Ash one of the bags.

‘We’ve taken all the supplies and distributed them over the bags,’ he said as he picked up his own. ‘The cloaking device we’ve hidden in a hollow tree some way from the road, it was slowing us down considerably.’

Petra looked at the compass.

‘Okay, this way,’ she said and started walking into the forest.

After about thirty minutes of dodging tree branches and trying not to trip over roots they came to a

small path. They broke the tree line just where the track made a bend in the direction they had been traveling.

‘Alright, that’s convenient,’ Petra said. ‘Let’s follow it.’

After about another ten minutes the path opened up into a fairly large clearing. Through the middle of it ran a gurgling stream and where the path crossed it was a stone bridge. On the other side of the water stood a small wooden cottage. The strange about it was that the wood it was made up of was still living. It was as if someone had planted four trees in a square and somehow coaxed them into growing walls and a roof. Ash almost bumped into Philip, who had stopped walking.

‘I have the distinct feeling we were meant to find that path,’ he slowly said. ‘I have no idea who lives there, but he or she must be quite powerful to lead us like that.’

‘Let’s see if someone is in,’ Petra started walking again.

As they crossed the stream the door of the cottage opened and a tall woman walked out. She in the door opening for them to approach. Her loose hair was nut brown, she wore a green dress with a leaf pattern and her skin had the same color as the wood of her house. The overall effect was that she

blended into the background like she was part of the trees.

‘A wood nymph?’ Philip said. ‘I thought those lived inside trees.’

‘Well technically she is living inside one,’ Petra replied. ‘But I agree that it’s strange.’

‘She’s a wood nymph?’ Clara asked. ‘I thought those only existed in fairytales.’

‘Two day’s ago we thought magic didn’t exist either,’ Ash said. ‘And look at us now, we’re sorceresses! We can add wood nymphs to the list of things out of stories that turned out to be real.’

Now that they were close enough for normal conversation the wood nymph greeted them.

‘Welcome, I am Selina. I was expecting you.’

Selina had a strange deep voice you wouldn’t expect when looking at her. There was also a slight echo to it, as if two persons were speaking at the same time.

‘Amanda, Clarice,’ Selina nodded at them. ‘Please come in.’

Ash and Clara looked at each other in surprise. How did this woman know their names?

Ash voiced under her breath: ‘Clarice?’

‘I’ll explain,’ Clara whispered back.

Philip and Petra seemed to have some kind of wordless discussion, then they reached a decision.

‘If you know so much about us,’ Philip said as they followed the woman in. ‘Then you can probably tell us what we should do next.’

The inside of the hut looked fairly normal. With the exception that all the furniture still had twigs on. Selina sat down at the table and motioned at them to do the same.

‘I haven’t seen the future,’ she said. ‘I do however know the past.’

She raised her arms and the leaves on her dress started to detach.

‘Let me show you,’ her voice was even deeper now and Ash could clearly hear another, lighter, voice speaking at the same time.

Selena’s eyes started glowing a bright green as the translucent leaves flowed around the table and through the room. They formed a thick cloud and spun faster and faster. Ash thought she saw flashes of different places in the openings between the leaves. Scenes of thick lush jungles, scorching deserts and icy plains. Then the leaves, the room and the table were gone.

They were standing on a high hill overlooking a medieval battlefield just before the battle. The two armies were standing at either side of the valley, ready

to charge when the order was given. One side was human, the other side not so much. Ash caught glimpses of fur, claws and tailons underneath the bloodred armor they were wearing. Selena stood next to them, she pointed at the hill behind the red army.

‘Long before Hekate rose to power there was another, even stronger, sorcerer.’

Her voice had returned to normal, as far as “normal” applied to her.

‘His name was An’dur and his army of monsters was unstoppable.’

On the hill stood a lone figure in the same bloodred armor as his army. Dark red streams of aural energy flowed around him and into his weapon, a staf with one of the now familiar crystals embedded at the top. This one however wasn’t glowing green, but pulsing the red of spilled blood.

‘He tried to take over the world, and he had all but won. The final battle was to be over the crystal city, the last place human.’

Behind the opposing army a giant blue spire was visible in the distance.

‘When everyone had given up hope, two powerful sorceresses appeared out of nowhere. One white, one black.’ she looked at them in turn. ‘They rallied the

forces and build an army to withstand the imminent attack of An'dur.'

Selina now pointed at the hill behind the human army and indeed, between the leaders of the army two figures stood out clearly. One was wearing shining white armor and the other was clad in flaming black robes.

'Is that us?' Clara said astonished. 'That can't be me, I could never lead an army like that.'

'I don't know.' Ash said while she kept her gaze at the flaming woman. 'But she looks awfully familiar to me.'

The horns sounded, the armies charged and the scene vanished. They were back in the nymph's tree house.

'Who won?' Ash asked.

Selina shrugged.

'I have no idea, I've shown you all I know.'

'I know about the crystal city,' Philip said. 'Kzao even practices the ancient arts taught there. But I've never heard about An'dur or that war. How do you know all this?'

Selina smiled, 'As you've probably noticed: I'm not your average wood nymph. My brothers and sis-

ters live as spirits inside the trees and rarely ever assume their physical form.'

She gestured at the room.

'I however have decided to take a more modern approach to things. It's way more exciting than hanging around your tree all day.'

She smiled.

'About the prophecy though, I don't know where it comes from. I've always been able to pick up little pieces of what has been, and what is to come.'

'Won't you get into trouble with Hekate for this?' Clara asked.

Selina stood up and started to make tea.

'Probably, but she already hates me so this won't make that big of a difference anyway. She once threatened to burn down my tree, but I gently reminded her that the other wood nymphs wouldn't take that kindly and she saw sense.'

As Petra asked Selina why she decided to live in physical form Ash let the conversation drift into the background and nudged Clara.

'Are you actually called Clarice?' she asked her. Clara nodded.

'Clarice is my birth name. I was named after my grandmother, as is the tradition in my family. My parent's didn't like it though, they thought it sounded too much like a warrior. So they always

called me Clara. And that's been my name ever since.'

Clara sounded depressed, it looked like her family had had some kind of dispute about it. And it hadn't involved Clara's opinion.

'I like Clarice though, it sounds a lot stronger than Clara. And I think it fits you better.'

Clara looked up from the table.

'You really think so?' she asked.

'Yes,' Ash said. 'Is it okay if I call you Clarice from now on?'

Clara sniffed and sounded a little more upbeat.

'If you want to,' she said, 'but don't do it around my parents. I don't know how they would react.'

'You got it, Clarice.' Ash gave ex-Clara a friendly punch on the arm.

6.

‘Aargh! I can’t believe he left us like that.’ Steven punched the tree again.

They were standing a little way into the forest next to the highway exit. They been waiting for Anubis to pick them up with the helicopter. Samantha had just commented on how long he was taking when Ingrid had regained contact with the ravens.

‘I can now see two helicopters,’ she said while she sat down. ‘The new one is one of them double-rotored types.’

‘Probably a chinook,’ Steven said. He wasn’t the brightest kid, but he knew his facts.

‘Where are they?’ Samantha asked.

‘Ten kilometers from here and...’ Ingrid frowned. ‘Somethings wrong, they’re flying away from us!’

‘Really? He knows we’re still here and he couldn’t get lost with a helicopter like that,’ Samantha was getting annoyed now. ‘He is leaving us here.’

That’s when Steven had snapped and started punching trees. Samantha leaned against a birch and watched him knock off pieces of bark. Indeed, not

the smartes kid. She sighed. Of course she should have expected Anubis to let them fend on their own. After all, they had failed him for the third time now. She shook her head. It had all looked so glorious when they got recruited, the tales of a new world order and riches for everyone. Now she was starting to doubt if they hadn't been tricked. Misled by pretty stories to do Hekate's bidding.

'Why don't you stop your brother from molesting the forest?' she said. 'Then we can concentrate on what we have to do next.'

Ingrid put her hand on her brothers shoulder.

'All right, that's enough,' she said.

Steven kicked the tree a last time and followed Ingrid. Samantha started walking along the highway and called them over her shoulder.

'Come on, we got a long way to go if we want to be in Charleston before nightfall.'

'But how could that have been us on the hill? As far as I know time travel is not possible,' Ash said.

Selina had asked them to stay for lunch and the conversation had logically drifted back to the vision. It was weird to see Selina make sandwiches. She used normal bread but when she needed a cucumber or tomato she didn't take one out of the refrigerator.

Instead it just appeared on one of the branches just before she needed it. When Ash asked her about it she explained that, even though she was in physical form, she still was the spirit of this tree. In a certain way she *was* the tree, so she could grow anything she wanted.

‘That is a good question,’ Selina said as she put the sandwiches on the table. ‘And one I’m afraid I can’t answer. What I do know however is that it is vitally important that you are present at that battle. For if you are not there to stop An’dur, the human army will lose for sure.’

‘But it has already happened, right?’ Clarice asked. Though she sounded not so sure about it.

‘In a way, yes. On the other hand, no. If the past is changed, the present will change with it.’

‘Meaning?’ Ash asked, although she had a feeling she knew what the answer would be.

‘Meaning that the world you know will no longer exist. It will never have existed in the first place.’

‘Then how does this work,’ Petra asked. ‘When do we need to go back in time? Is there a deadline in the first place or is there always time to change the past?’

‘Again, I do not know that. You will have to find that out...’

Selina froze.

‘Selina?’ Philip said. ‘Are you alright?’

Selina’s eyes started glowing a dark green and there was a noise as if a breeze was blowing. Selina’s body swam in and out of focus as the sound of the wind picked up. Her hair and dress wavered in the unfelt storm. Then suddenly everything was over again.

‘...on your own,’ Selina finished her sentence.

‘What was that?’ Clarice said. ‘Everything went crazy for a few seconds there.’

‘Another vision,’ Selina said. ‘The past has changed.’

She quickly shook her head as if she had to ground herself into reality again.

‘The past changed?’ Ash asked. ‘But aren’t *we* supposed to do that?’

‘I thought so, yes. But something has changed the course of history, you weren’t at the battle anymore.’

‘Show us,’ Philip said.

Selina raised her hands again and suddenly they were back on the hilltop. This time there were no armies, no banners, no generals. The only thing in the valey were the remains of a small human force, slaughtered by the forces of An’dur. In the distance Ash could see smoke coming off the crystal spire.

‘Without your guidance the humans were unable to raise the forces necessary to stop An’dur,’ Selina

said. 'The army of monsters marched into the crystal city and the last remaining rebels were soon exterminated. An'dur was master over the world.' Selina sounded defeated herself too.

'How could this have happened?' Ash said as she looked at the burning city, half occluded behind its own smoke.

Selina shrieked as if she had been stabbed and the vision was gone.

'I suddenly felt a big disturbance in the flow of time,' She said when she had regained her breath. 'Somehow someone has opened a portal from the past to the present. That must have caused the change in history.'

'Is that even possible?' Petra said.

'As far as I know traveling back in time can't be done,' Selina explained. 'I have no clue about traveling to the future.'

'Who would want to go to the future to change his present?' Philip really sounded baffled. 'It makes no sense at all.'

'I think it makes perfect sense,' Ash said, she was really confident about this one.

'I think I know what you mean,' Clarice replied.

'It's An'dur,' They said in unison.

Ash and Clarice looked at each other.

‘Okay, you explain them,’ They said, at the same time again.

Ash frowned at the same time as Clarice did. That was weird, she knew what Clarice was going to do before she did it. Somehow she also knew Clarice was experiencing the same thing.

‘Let’s try this,’ she thought.

They faced the others in sync.

‘It’s An’dur who opened the portal,’ Clarice said.

‘He is trying to prevent us from going into the past,’ Ash continued.

‘So that we are not there to stop his army. Then he can rule the world,’ Clarice finished.

‘Okay, what’s going on?’ Petra said.

Suddenly Ash couldn’t feel Clarice anymore, the interruption had broken the link.

‘That was really weird,’ Clarice said. ‘I knew what Ash was going to do, I could almost hear her thoughts.’

She looked at Ash again.

‘You felt it too, right?’

‘I did,’ Ash said. ‘And you’re right, that was weird.’

Clarice looked at her hanger.

‘Maybe it has something to do with these necklaces Skylar gave us,’ she said slowly. ‘They make some kind of connection, right?’

‘Whatever it was, it couldn’t have been caused by your hangers,’ Philip said. ‘When Skylar packs special features in his devices you will know about it because he won’t stop bragging.’

‘Don’t make it sound like that’s a bad thing,’ Petra laughed. ‘It’s good because you will never get any surprises when using his stuff. Anyway, It could be that it has something to do with your auras and those visions. Now it’s even more important we get to Charleston, this kind of thing is Kzao’s specialty.’

Fifty kilometers to the north-east Skylar was standing from his middle up in a very sleek looking machine which resembled a sci-fi spaceship. It was his newest invention and when ready would in theory be able to get two people around the world in twenty minutes. He had just figured out a way of keeping the board computers from overheating due to the powerful magical field required to maintain the high speed. Now the only thing that was missing was a power source strong enough to drive the whole thing. Suddenly his glove started beeping insistently and an indicator light was blinking red. Skylar startled and hit his head against the cooling fins he had just been installing. He untangled himself from the craft and looked at his glove. It was displaying the

radar and had highlighted three craft which had entered the range of the cloaking field. The information next to the blips informed him that this were three helicopters heading directly for the base and that there were people with active auras on board. Skylar cursed in a language which had not officially been spoken on the earth for three hundred years and pushed the red-alert button. The alarm lights in the facility turned red and Skylar's voice sounded over the intercom.

‘All golems battle stations. We have three hostile helicopters approaching from the west. This is not a drill. I repeat, this is not a drill. The expected time of their arrival is in five minutes. Route all excess power to the shield generator and ready your weapons.’

The golems that had been working on the craft carefully put down their tools and hurried towards the circle with monitors where they started working on the various terminals. Skylar ran after them and took the middle seat.

‘How are we doing?’ he asked the golem standing next to him.

‘Shield systems are up and running,’ the golem with indication C12 said. ‘All golems will be in position in two minutes.’

‘Good,’ Skylar called up the radar view on the

main screen. ‘I’ve been wanting to test these new turrets for quite a while now.’

The other golems had activated the camera’s. The screens showed views of every area of the complex and the sky and forest around it. Large hexagonal patches of grass were retracting into the ground and out of the holes rose double barreled turrets with crystals attached to the backside. All over the place the golems entered the intarite bunkers underneath the turret-emplacements.

‘Man, that looks even cooler than on the test runs,’ Skylar said while he followed the proceedings on the screens.

He looked back to the radar. The helicopters were now only two kilometers away.

‘We have visual,’ the golem monitoring the cameras said.

The lighting gathering mast was just high enough for the cameras to look over the forest. In the distance the three helicopters were now just visible above the trees.

‘They shouldn’t be able to see us,’ Skylar said. ‘But still they are headed straight for the base. Somehow we must have been compromised.’

‘They’re flying extremely low,’ C12 said. ‘They want to keep off our radar, that’s why we picked them up so late.’

‘But they still think we haven’t seen them,’ Skylar said. ‘Otherwise they would have started flying higher to be able to fly faster without risking hitting the treetops.’ He smiled. ‘They don’t know I’ve attached an aural scanner to the radar dish. And while they wanted to ambush us, the advantage of surprise is all ours.’

‘Sir?’ A golem named C27 said. ‘I think you might have spoken too soon, the scanners are showing movement in the trees.’

‘Oh, no...’ Skylar said under his breath when he saw the shapes on the monitor.

That’s when the western tree line went ablaze. Flaming giants stepped from the roaring inferno.

‘Fire elementals!’ Skylar said, he turned to C12. ‘How’s the shield doing?’

‘It’s at maximum power,’ C12 reported. ‘We should be able to withstand their blasts.’

The biggest fire elemental raised his right arm and brought it down in the direction of one of the turrets. A stream of white-hot flames sprouted from his hand and flew towards the holed-up golems. About halfway the fire hit an invisible wall and spread out along the dome of the shield. That had been the order to attack. The other giants now also shot their flames forward. Some didn’t shoot a stream but instead threw fireballs which exploded when they hit

the barrier. Now that the turrets had a target they turned towards it and started firing. The energy crystals glowed a bright green as beams of light shot from the barrels. The lasers cleanly penetrated the shield and several elementals took direct hits. After about half a second the beams had cut through the giants and went out the back.

‘Oh yeah,’ Skylar said. ‘Take that Hekate!’

As the first turret cut the beam to recharge the elemental it had hit had a clearly visible hole in its chest. As Skylar and the golems watched the hole filled back up with fire and the giant went on blasting the shield as if nothing had happened. The same thing repeated when the other beams cut out. Skylar was silent for a moment and then said:

‘Right... that clearly doesn’t work against them.’

He thought for a while and turned to the golem running communications.

‘C5, tell the guys to stop shooting the turrets at the elementals. They better try the concussive charges against those.’

C5 instructed the troops and the turrets stopped their ineffective barrage. Inside the bunkers the golems deployed the cannons embedded in their arms. They took aim through the slits in the walls and fired. On the screen Skylar could see a swarm of small rockets launching from the closest bunkers. These too went

straight through the inside of the shield and hit several attackers. Each rocket exploded with a bright flash. The resulting shock waves traveled over the giants, clearly visible in the flames on their skin. One of the elementals took several full on the chest and a couple on what could only be called the head. He staggered and fell backwards, during the fall his skin stopped burning and he fell apart into large chunks of coal. When they hit the ground they crumbled and in a couple of seconds the only thing left of the giant was a cloud of ash joining the rest of the smoke. The other hits were less concentrated and only weakened the elementals. The giants expected the next wave of rockets and tried to dodge them. Some even started shooting the small charges out of the air with well aimed bursts of fire. All the while the elementals that were non-engaged kept blasting away at the shield.

‘Sir,’ C12 said with an urgent tone in his voice. ‘The shields are already down to seventy percent, we can’t take much more of this.’

‘Blast it,’ Skylar said, ‘And the sorcerers in the helicopters are so confident that they don’t even help them.’

Indeed, the three helicopters were hovering behind the smoke just outside the turrets firing arc and didn’t look like they were going to move any-

time soon.

‘Keep hitting them,’ Skylar said. ‘Maybe we can weaken them enough for the beams to have an effect. If we do not defeat them soon though we will have to resort to our final defense, charge the aural disruptor.’

‘I took the liberty of giving that order as soon as the alarm went off,’ C12 sounded a little flustered, as far as a metal golem could be flustered. ‘The capacitors are already at ten percent.’

‘Good call,’ Skylar said. ‘You guys are really getting a grasp on the whole independent thinking business.’

‘Thank you sir,’ C12 said. ‘But I don’t know how much longer there will be golems around to do the thinking.’ He indicated the shield readouts which were now at sixty percent.

‘And I see you also picked up on pessimism,’ Skylar said, a little less exited now.

The aural disruptor was a device which Skylar had installed as a last hope measure for desperate times like these. It used a massive amount of power and as such took a long time to charge. But when the weapon was activated it released all that energy in a single massive blast. The sudden spike in energy would overload the aura of anyone standing in the blast radius. Skylar, having no aura, would be unaf-

fected. The golems and the elementals however were intrinsically magical and would be vaporised when hit. That was why Skylar used it only as a final measure. He had built and perfected these golems over the years and had become quite attached to them. That's also why C12 had surprised him when he said they had already started charging it. Apparently the golems had decided that any threat, no matter how innocent looking, could be the final stand and had already been prepared even before the situation turned grave. Skylar felt that he was proud at his creations for their forethought and willingness to self-sacrifice. He had never had any kids, but maybe this was how it felt to see them mature.

The shield was weakening fast now. The golems had managed to take out two more elementals, but it wasn't enough. Slowly but surely the flaming giants were blasting their way through the barrier. All this time the helicopters had kept their positions behind the army. The sorcerers in them overlooking the devastation but not taking part in it themselves. Skylar sat back in his chair and watched the disruptor charge. This was it. Hekate had finally gotten one step ahead of him and had been prepared for all his inventions. He looked at the readouts, only fifty percent now. Soon his golems would be gone.

* * *

Back in the treehouse Selina was giving directions to Charleston when she suddenly shot upright, her expression turned from kind to furious in an instant and the leaves on her dress started moving. Above them the others could hear the tree starting to rustle angrily.

‘What is it?’ Petra said a little frightened.

She and Philip were both restless and looked like they were about to jump up and run out of the room. They both knew out of experience what an angry wood nymph was capable of and they weren’t planning on sticking around if it turned out they were the cause of Selina’s sudden mood swing.

‘Someone has set the forest on fire,’ Selina said, her voice sounding more powerful than ever. ‘About fifty kilometers north-east from here a massive inferno is consuming the trees.’

‘How do you know?’ Ash wasn’t quite sure it was the right time to ask this, but her curiosity won from caution.

‘The souls in every forest all over the world are connected with each other,’ Selina calmed down a little but her dress was still moving in an unfelt wind. ‘Together they form what you humans would call

“Mother nature” or “Gaia”. If something hurts a tree a lot the trees around it can feel it as well. This forest fire is not natural, over all this distance I can still feel the pain.’

‘Wait, north-east? That’s where Skylar’s hideout is,’ Philip said. ‘He would never set the trees on fire. If there is a magical inferno there he could be in major trouble.’

‘You’re right,’ Selina hissed. ‘I can now see fire elementals in the flames. Hekate must have sent them after your friend. I knew she had no respect for nature, but this?’

‘Fire elementals?’ Petra was now even more worked-up. ‘Skylar can never hold up against those monsters, he will be crushed!’

‘No he won’t.’ Selina was moving to the door now, she no longer walked but floated a couple of centimeters above the ground. Her aura had flared up around her and the leaves on her dress were detaching again. ‘Gaia normally doesn’t react when humans hurt her, she knows that your race is unstable and that eventually you will defeat yourselves. But if there is anything she hates more than her forests burning, it is her forests burning with magical fire. This time Hekate has gone too far, and she will feel the consequences.’ Selina was now floating through the door opening.

Ash and Clarice looked at each other and followed Petra and Philip outside. They almost bumped into them as they had abruptly stopped next to Selina. When Ash looked around the clearing she saw wood nymphs detach themselves from their trees. They were translucent and glowed different shades of green and brown. They all hovered a small distance from the trunk of their respective tree and looked towards the north-east where a red glow was lighting up the undersides of the clouds. Large clouds of smoke were already rising above the treetops, illuminated from the inside by the flames.

‘My brothers and sisters are feeling it too,’ Selina had now two echoes in her voice, which was even more powerful than earlier. ‘The pain is waking them up.’

More and more wood nymphs joined the silent crowd until there were as much souls as there were trees. They all watched the distant flames silently and with angry looks on their faces...

‘Sir, the shields are only at ten percent.’ C12 said and he sounded scared, he was really getting the hang of “emotions” now.

‘How are we doing on the disruptor?’ Skylar asked C27.

‘Almost ready sir, just two more minutes.’ C27 replied.

‘We might just make it then,’ Skylar said.

Outside the elementals were still pounding the shield relentlessly, their fire had set the whole surrounding forest ablaze now and the sky was thick with smoke. Skylar’s golems had managed to take out another three, but it wasn’t going to be enough. The fire of the elementals was starting to seep through the shield.

‘Get the golems out of there,’ Skylar told C5. ‘We have to fall back to the central bunker.’

C5 gave a few commands into his microphones and on the monitors they could see the golems evacuating the turrets and running through the tunnels towards the main building. Sensing that they were close to victory the giants raised both hands in unison and together fired one last blast at the dome. It shattered with a sound of breaking glass and a high pitched whine which had been out of hearing range until then dropped through the frequencies and slowly died out. The elementals, now no longer facing the barrier, took revenge for their fallen friends at the turrets.

Skylar saw one cannon after the other get destroyed in balls of fire. They had never been designed to withstand an elemental attack and most of

them gave in after only one or two hits. Skylar oversaw the destruction. This base in general had never been prepared to fend off an army of fire elementals. Skylar hadn't thought Hekate would ever risk letting the flaming giants loose in a forest. He looked at the indicators, the disruptor still needed a full minute to charge. They wouldn't have that minute.

The eyes of the floating nymphs glowed bright and one by one they started moving towards the flaming area. They accelerated and more and more nymphs joined the rush until there was a stream of forest souls raging through the clearing. The movement of all those bodies made the wind pick up and after a while the gale was so strong Ash and Clarice had to hold on to each other in order not to fall over.

'Here, so you can see what's going on,' Selina said as she cast a smaller version of the vision spell in the air where she was hanging. Then she too took off with the other souls in their surge towards the glowing ash clouds.

'Oh no,' Petra said as she saw the ravage on the shimmering hologram.

The others couldn't hear her above the roar of the wind but they didn't need to. They fully understood the severity of the situation as they saw

the fire elementals approach the central building of Skylars complex.

The bunkers underneath the main building were streaming full with the golems from the turrets. It would only delay their destruction, but along with emotions and independent thinking something else had also dawned on them: the idea of self-preservation. They weren't going to sit in the bunkers to be destroyed by the first impact. If moving to the main bunker gave them a few more minutes, they were going to take it.

That's when they felt the disturbance in the ambient energy field. Skylar felt it too: something big and ancient was coming their way. He had just been on the brink of firing the aural disruptor. Now his hand was moving back from the big red button. Maybe they weren't lost after all.

Outside the fire elementals got the impression that something was wrong. They weren't the brightest of creatures and their feel for magical energies would at best be graded with an F and a note saying "Almost, better luck next year." but this sudden concentration of auras was so big that even they picked up something.

The ground began to tremble and suddenly the

flames in the forest were blown out by a wind so strong the elementals closest to the tree line got flung into their friends like small cars in a hurricane. From the now smoldering trees came thousands and thousands of wood nymphs. They all flew to the center of the clearing where they started flying around each other in a vibrant green and brown tornado. As more and more souls added themselves to the swarm the tornado started to form a shape. The lower section of the living storm split into two and two more appendages detached themselves from the higher regions. As the stream of nymphs started thinning out the shape had taken on a very solid appearance. Skylar looked in disbelief at the monitors as the figure rose to it's full length. It resembled a male wood nymph, but then seen from frog-perspective. He had heard myths about these towering giants. But he had never thought they actually existed. This was a tree atronauch, the combination of all the individual nymphs of the surrounding woods, the guardian of the forest, the physical representation of the soul of the land.

Now that the atronauch was fully formed it let out a roar which made even the monitors inside the bunker tremble on their connection arms and focused it's huge glowing eyes on the fire elementals. The fire giants turned to face the new threat, they looked

up and looked further up until they were eye to eye with the colossus. As has been hinted at, these creatures are not too bright. The leader raised his fist and mimicked the atronauch's roar. As was to be expected, this failed to have the intimidating effect the first roar had. Nonetheless the fire elementals rallied and charged their new enemy.

Skylar and the golems were now clustered around the main screen which showed different angles of the ensuing battle. The fire elementals unleashed their flames at the feet of the giant nymph. The white hot streams wrapped around the legs having seemingly no effect at all. The atronauch looked down and chose the leader as the most obvious target. It brought around a giant fist and slammed the biggest elemental with pinpoint accuracy over the leftmost helicopter. As the leader flew further and traced a nice arc of smoke in the air it looked for a moment as if the Chinook was unscathed. Then it became clear what the atronauch had been aiming at: the rotors of the heli had been cut clean of the hull. The helicopter dropped like a two hundred tonne rock and exploded when it hit the forest floor.

Skylar felt he had stared to smile. He was beginning to like this giant: it had a sense of humour, albeit a bit strange.

The other helicopters were now turning around

and trying to get away as quickly as possible. The atronauch grabbed another elemental, wound up and threw. The unlucky giant sped through the sky and hit the heli on the right square in the middle of the hull. Both elemental and helicopter exploded and fell down in a rain of hull pieces and lumps of elemental already trailing clouds of ash. The remaining giants now started to realize their mistake and were turning around to run. The atronauch picked up two at the same time and was clearly going for the third helicopter, which had now fully turned and was speeding away. He threw the first one at the rotors, trying the same trick as with the first heli but when the elemental came close to the craft it fell into pieces which all missed the Chinook. Someone in there had been one step ahead of the forest guardian. It didn't look taken aback but instead flung the second elemental at the heli. This one traced a straight line towards the hull, but about halfway was suddenly redirected towards the ground where it hit a giant oak and exploded into a cloud of ash.

The atronauch was getting a little annoyed by now and decided that one shot at a time was not going to work. While the helicopter pilot was desperately trying to gain height and velocity at the same time the forest guardian scooped a couple of the running elementals of the ground and loosely

packed them into a ball. He took a stand like a pitcher, aimed and threw. When the ball left his hand it broke the sound barrier and the unfortunate elementals broke apart in mid-air. During its flight the ball of giants turned into a supersonic hail of large chunks of coal. A large portion of the shot was deflected by the same forces that had shielded the craft earlier. But the pieces that made it cut cleanly through the hull and left gaping holes in the helicopter. At first nothing happened, it seemed as if the helicopter took a while to realize it was defeated. Then it exploded. As the fireball engulfed the craft something shot from the cockpit. An ejection seat flew away from the now falling craft. When the seat got at its highest point it flashed brightly and was gone.

While the atronauch rounded up the last of the elementals Skylar looked at C12.

‘Almost flawless execution,’ he said. ‘The only problem is that Hekate got away.’

He turned towards one of the golems at the back of the circle of interested golems which had now formed around the main screen.

‘D5, see if you can trace the energy of that flash,’ he said. ‘We may be able to find her base this time.’

The addressed golem motioned to a couple of his fellow golems marked with “D” and they walked to-

wards the entrance of the tunnel network.

‘Alright, now lets survey the damage.’

Skylar called up the status reports and the golems went back to their respective terminals. Together they begun the tedious task of getting all the systems back up and running again.

7.

Back at the tree house Ash, Clara and the adults had followed the events at the vision screen in stunned silence. Now that the fight was over the tree atronauch looked around to see if there were any more enemies. When the guardian had made sure that he had rounded up all the elementals he slowly started to become translucent again. The individual nymphs that had made up the giant nymph were slowly breaking up and returning to their respective trees.

After another long period of silence Ash broke it by saying: ‘What... was... that...’ She said each word individually as she regained her bearings.

‘That,’ Philip said, equally disoriented. ‘Is what happens if you make Gaia angry.’

Selina had sped back in front of the other nymphs and was now entering the clearing again.

‘We couldn’t find Hekate anywhere,’ she said as she waved away the screen. ‘She must have been the one that teleported away. Anyway, now that is dealt with I should start making dinner, you can stay in my tree for the night.’

Something was bugging Ash, it wasn't the fact that she had just witnessed one of the biggest magical fights in recent history, it was something else. She looked at Clarice and saw that she had the same puzzled look on her face. Then she realized what it was. Selina had said it was time for dinner, but they had only just finished lunch. She told Clarice and now that they were alerted to it they saw that the sun had moved towards the horizon much faster than it should have. The fight had only lasted thirty minutes at the max but at the same time multiple hours had passed. After they had followed Petra and Philip inside they mentioned it to Selina.

'Ah yes,' Selina said. 'That is one of the reasons why tree atronauchs are not seen often; The combined strenght of the thousands of individual nymph auras all combined in a single entity generates such a large magical field that it slows down time itself. In fact, any concentration of aural energy large enough will have that effect. But the forest guardians are one of the only cases where it is actually noticable.'

'Wait a minute,' Clarice said. 'Strong magical fields affect the speed of time?'

'I see where you're getting at,' Ash said. 'Is there a possibility that, given a high enough concentration of magic, someone could actually travel into the future?'

Philip made a face palm. ‘Of course,’ he said. ‘Traveling forward in time is no different from slowing down time for yourself. That’s a way An’dur could have used to get into the future.’

‘So he might actually be here,’ Petra said. ‘Selina, as much as we’d like to, we cannot stay here tonight. We have to get Ash and Clara trained as soon as possible.’

‘I understand,’ Selina said. ‘And now that everyone has been woken up anyway, I think I know a way for you to get to Charleston within the hour.’

Ten minutes later they heard the sound of two pairs of large wings outside followed by the distinct thumps of eight paws landing on the dirt.

‘That’ll be your transport,’ Selina said and she walked towards the door.

Ash and Clarice stepped outside into the fading sunlight and were stopped in their tracks for the second time that day. On the clearing stood two large winged animals which Clarice recognized from Greek mythology. The majestic creatures had the head and wings of an eagle, but the body of a lion. Petra and Philip had clearly seen them before as they walked straight towards them. As they came close the real size of the creatures became visible. When their

heads were upright they were twice as high as an average human, and the bulk of their body's looked like each could easily support three people.

Clarice and Ash slowly walked towards Selina, who was stroking one of the Gryphons on the head.

'The day isn't over yet, but the list of things that turned out to exist after all has grown more today than during my whole life up until now,' Clarice said.

Ash nodded and said: 'Do you know what these are?'

'Gryphons,' Selina answered before Clarice could. 'They normally don't wake up before it's fully dark, but with all the excitement going on they were awake early.'

Only now that they stood next to it could they appreciate the full might of the creature. The white feathers sparkled with orange in the evening sun and where they stopped they could see the powerful muscles moving underneath the skin. The Gryphon turned its head and looked at them in turn with a surprisingly kind gaze. The golden eyes had that certain sparkle which betrayed intelligence and as it looked them up and down it seemed to be determining whether they were worthy of being carried by him. Apparently they were deemed to be alright because the Gryphon made a short shrieking noise, shook its head to rearrange its neck feathers and

focused it's attention back at Selina.

'Petra and Philip will ride on that one,' Selina pointed to the Gryphon that was now judging Petra. 'You two can take this one.'

'We have never flown on a Gryphon,' Clarice said.

'That's not a problem,' Selina assured them. 'Gryphons are the most gracefull flyers there are. And you don't have to give them directions either, there actually quite intelligent.'

'Does he have a name?' Ash wanted to know.

'They don't really have names in the human sense of the word,' Selina explained. 'But they do have indications for each other. This one is actually female and her name is best translated as "First sunlight of the day."'

'Let's call her Morning-sun then,' Clarice suggested, Ash thought that it sounded appropriate and agreed.

Philip had gone back inside and now came out with the bags. When everyone was ready to go Ash asked Selina how they were supposed to get on the back of their Gryphon.

'Just walk towards her,' Selina said. 'They can read your intentions and know what to do.'

Ash and Clarice walked towards the side of Morning-sun. The Gryphon folowed their movements with

it's eyes and turned it's head when they got next to it. Morning-sun blinked at them and slowly walked backwards until they were in front of it's right shoulder. Then it lowered it's back slightly and raised it's front paw in such a way that it could be used as a step up it's shoulders.

'Climb on board,' Petra said from the back of the other Gryphon. Philip was sitting behind her.

Ash went first and with some effort got on the back. Clarice then climbed up a little more skillfully and mounted behind her. She could feel the warmth radiating from the beast underneath her. They said goodbye to Selina and when they were ready Selina indicated to the Gryphons that they were clear to fly.

Morning-sun raised her huge wings, tensed and jumped into the air.

They were flying! At first Ash and Clarice had clamped themselves to the back of the Gryphon and hadn't dared to look down. After a while though the smooth movements of the Gryphon and the rythmic sound of the wings had calmed them down a little and they relaxed a bit. Next to them the other Gryphon was slicing gracefully through the air and Philip and Petra looked like they were enjoying it immensely. Ash

felt Clarices grip on her relax a little and she looked behind her. Clarice had a huge grin on her face and Ash felt that she was also smiling. They had both flown earlier, but that had been with a commercial passenger jet. This was totally different and, Ash had to admit, surprisingly smooth. The initial climb had been a bit rough, but after they had reached their altitude the Gryphons had switched to a slow gliding wing motion that made them feel steady as a rock.

Underneath them they could see the forests and the small towns lit up red in the last light of the day. They had a considerable speed and they could hear the wind wistling through the feathers. The Gryphons had straightened out their necks to be as aerodynamic as possible, but the passengers at their backs were still in the lee due to their build. When they reached a more populated area the Gryphons steered up and went into the clouds. For a moment all they could see around them was white. Then they pierced the upper layer and were flying in the full sun again. They glided around the bulk of a higher cloud, the wingtip making spiral figures in it as they passed by. Clarice let out a cry of joy and laid back on the huge bulk of morning-sun.

After about ten more minutes flying Ash saw the lights of Charleston through a gap in the clouds. The

Gryphons had seen it too and started their approach. They flew towards the town center and aimed for an unremarkable building with a flat roof located a couple streets away from the main square. The landing was done with great care and Ash almost didn't feel the paws connect with the roof. When the Gryphons had fully stopped they folded their paws under their belly and lied down. Ash and Clarice jumped of the high flank of their mount and walked towards it's head. Morning-sun regarded them with an inquiring look in her eyes, as if asking: 'Did everything go to expectations?' Ash carefully held out her hand and the Gryphon nudged it with it's forehead. The feathers were amazingly soft for their size and Ash slowly stroked the eagles head.

'I hate to come in-between,' Petra said as she dropped from the other Gryphon. 'But they need to be in the air again as quickly as possible. We don't want them to be seen by bystanders.'

Clarice also put her hand on the Gryphon's head. They stood like that for a while until the other Gryphon made a soft shriek, as if it was whispering. This apparently meant that it was really time now and together the two Gryphons took off again. They pushed themselves into the air and flew straight up. After only ten seconds they were gone in the clouds.

'That was amazing,' Ash and Clarice said at the

same time.

Philip looked at them in surprise. 'Linked again?' he said.

Ash checked her thoughts and feelings, none of those were Clarice's.

'Not this time,' Clarice said, coming to the same conclusion. 'Flying a Gryphon is just that awesome.'

'Let's get inside,' Petra said. 'Kzao doesn't know that we are coming so we probably shouldn't hang around on his roof uninvited.'

They walked towards the door to the stairs. The paint on them had seen better days and the wood underneath was showing through. Strangely enough it was unlocked. The wallpaper inside was of the same quality. Ash's expectations of what Kzao looked like were getting some readjustments as they descended the stairs. At the bottom they came in a long hallway with doors on either side. This clearly was an old apartment building, judging from the rusty iron digits next to each door. It had the distinct look of something abandoned years ago, no-one lived here anymore.

'We need to be at room 31,' Petra said as she started walking through the corridor.

When they were halfway through and next to room 38 Petra and Philip stopped. When Ash wanted to walk further Philip held his arm in front of her.

‘You wouldn’t want to continue,’ he said.

Clarice was stopped with his other hand. She looked at him with a curious look on her face and said: ‘Why not? Number 31 is over there.’

She pointed at a door further down the hallway.

‘During the last few days you have probably noticed that things are not always what they seem,’ Petra answered. ‘Take this hallway, as you say: it looks innocent enough. But in reality it has been booby trapped to the brim.’

‘Say we would walk further,’ Philip said as he picked up a piece of loose floorboard. He threw it on a slow ark through the corridor.

There was a click and a swishing noise. The piece of wood was picked cleanly out of the air and pinned to the right wall by an iron crossbow bolt.

‘Wow,’ Clarice said and she took a step back.

Ash carefully looked at the wall the arrow had come from. After some time she saw that there was a small hole in the wooden paneling, carefully disguised by putting it in a natural knot in the wood. Now that she knew what to look for she realized that the whole corridor in front of them was peppered with small holes. And Ash now knew that each of them was a potential death trap.

‘And that’s not all,’ Petra said. ‘Say we crawl over the floor.’

She picked up an iron letter which had fallen on the ground and sent it sliding over the ground. As the piece of metal crossed the corridor small sparks shot from various locations in the floor and discharged on the iron number.

‘From room 36 on the whole floor is rigged with wires and electrically charged,’ Petra explained.

‘So how do we get to room 31 then?’ Ash asked.

‘We don’t,’ Philip answered. ‘At least not to *that* room 31.’

He turned to room 37 and slightly rotated the 7 so it resembled a 1. Then he tapped twice on the 3 and pushed a complicated pattern on the doorbell. A section of paneling next to the door moved back silently and slid to the side, revealing another flight of stairs. This time however the panelling on the walls looked new and well cared for. As they walked down they reached a landing without doors or windows. They followed the stairs to the next landing. This one had another sliding panel embedded in the wall. That would be the entrance on street level, Ash guessed. Petra and Philip ignored it and continued down the stairs. After a couple more flights they were well below ground.

‘Who made this building?’ Ash said. ‘And why did they put a secret stairwell in it?’

‘Oh, the original company who build this build-

ing is long bankrupt,' Philip said. 'This stairway was installed afterwards by Skylar. Contrary to Skylar, Kzao likes to be among the people, so he lives in the middle of the city. He also likes a little privacy from time to time though, as it is difficult to meditate with Hekate's tugs bursting in through the windows, so he had this underground temple built.'

They went down the final steps and came in a hallway built in an entirely different style. The walls and ceiling were made of a blue-white material that gave the impression of ice. The floor featured an abstract mozaic in different shades of blue and white. Jagged arcs of a translucent substance were spaced out at regular intervals along the corridor. Embedded in them were small glowing orbs which illuminated the scene in a cool light. Ash felt her jaw drop, after that run down building this was a totally unexpected level of grandeur.

'As I have hinted at earlier,' Philip said when he saw her surprise. 'Kzao really likes the ways of the crystal people. Going so far as building his hideout in their style.'

'In the old times this would all be made of a special kind of quartz,' Petra said as she made a gesture encompassing the whole hall. 'We don't know how to make it anymore, so we have used glass and a lot of clever tricks to achieve about the same effect. We

also had to do some magical strengthening to keep it from breaking. Don't hit it too hard though, it's still glass.'

'It looks impressive though,' Clarice said as they walked along the corridor. 'Are these lights similar to those aural crystals Skylar used?'

'Sorry to disappoint you,' Philip smiled, 'but these are just normal lights powered by electricity. Nothing fancy I'm afraid.'

At the end of the corridor were set of large double doors. They had the same icy sheen as the walls and had been engraved with complicated patterns and symbols that Ash didn't recognize. The doors had no handle or any other obvious way of opening them. Philip put his right palm on one of the symbols and his aura came alive around his hand.

'Aural identity check,' he explained. 'It's similar to a fingerprint scanner, but this device uses the unique properties of someones arua to identify them.'

Different symbols started glowing and the doors smoothly slid back into the wall.

'It's actually one of the more successful projects that Kzao and Skylar worked on together,' Philip continued as he stepped through the widening opening. 'And it's also one of the few that didn't blow up during the first testrun.' He laughed. 'Skylar's mechanical skills and Kzao's magical abilities are both

top of the line, but after all those years they still have to learn a lot about cooperation.'

There it was again, Ash thought. They way Philip had said "all those years" seemed to imply that the timespan he was talking about was a little bigger than when someone else used the phrase. Ash made a mental note to discuss it with Clarice when they had a private moment. Now there were more important things to do. Like trying not to be awe-struck.

The corridor had been jaw dropping, the next room threatened to unhinge it. The doors opened up into a large octagonal space. Ash and Clarice's eyes were immediately drawn to the middle of the floor. There a large yin-yang symbol had been embedded into the floor. It was made from huge slabs of black and white marble and seemed to radiate with an inner glow. Around this central symbol was a ring of what could only be silver. The rest of the floor was covered in the same mosaics as in the hallway, with the exception that here they formed a radial pattern around the ring. Eight blue pillars supported an octagonal balcony and continued towards the ceiling where they merged with eight beams of the same material laid out in a radial pattern. Around the lower region of the pillars curved the silver bodies of dragons, their eyes inlaid with what looked like

diamonds. In between the eight support beams was what looked like a skylight, except that it didn't open up to the sky. That would have been impossible anyway, this far underground. Instead Ash looked up into a crystal clear night sky that somehow looked more real than the one outside. A large full moon illuminated the room in a bright white light. Four corridors radiated from this room. Each had a similar set of double doors as the ones they had just entered through, except that these had handles and were already wide open. Around the doors the walls were covered with engravings of different mythical animals. One piece depicted a Gryphon standing next to a couple of nymphs. The rest Ash didn't recognize, although one picture looked eerily similar to her phoenix tattoo. In fact, now that Ash looked a little longer at the images, she got the weird feeling that whoever had made the designs for these engravings had a similar drawing style to her.

'Impressive right?' Philip said. 'This temple was made after a blueprint we found in ancient Mayan ruins. Everything had been described in detail, up to and including the engravings on the walls. They even gave instructions on the spell to use to get that hologram in the skylight.'

'Let's see where Kzao is,' Petra said and she and Philip started walking towards the rightmost corri-

dor.

Clarice nudged Ash and they trailed a little behind.

‘Do you also have the feeling something strange is going on?’ she said under her breath. ‘That yin-yang symbol on the floor is a little too big of a coincidence don’t you think?’

‘You’re right,’ Ash whispered back. ‘I have the feeling I’ve seen this before. And those engravings on the walls? Look at that phoenix. It’s an exact copy of my tattoo.’

‘I get what you’re feeling,’ Clarice pointed at the ceiling. ‘That skylight with stars instead of sky? I’ve had that idea for quite a while now. I’ve even made a sketch that had the exact same octagonal pattern.’

‘Let’s see what this Kzao guy has to say about it,’ Ash said. ‘Apparently he knows about the crystal people and after all, he is the one that’s living here.’

Ash and Clarice caught up with the adults and followed them through the corridor. On either side were engraved doors. The third one on the left was open and sound was coming from the room behind it.

As they approached someone said: ‘Come in, I was expecting you.’

They walked through the door and immediately Ash’s image of who Kzao was had to undergo a ma-

jour readjustment. From the looks of the temple and the bits of information Philip and Petra had dropped Ash had expected Kzao to be an old monk type including shaved head, robes and everything. What she saw now completely contradicted that view.

Kzao had a shaven head alright. But that was the only monk-like thing about him. He sat on a comfortable looking couch and was busy playing some kind of shooter on the large flatscreen mounted to the opposite wall. He wore a dark blue t-shirt and, instead of the expected bare feet, was wearing black sneakers. Like Skylar, Kzao didn't look like he could be older than twenty, maybe twenty-five, but the way he held himself said otherwise. The furniture did not follow the crystal style at all, in between the tv and the couch stood a dark wooden coffee table which had indeed a mug of coffee standing on it along with a pile of books. Around the room stood several cupboards which were laden with even more books. If Ash had seen the titles three days ago, she would have thought Kzao to be a big fantasy geek. But now that she knew that a book saying "On the aerodynamics of Gryphon wings" was not joking about, she was not sure what to think anymore. On the cabinet next to the door stood what could only be a speaker of a surround sound system and the wall behind the couch was covered in a wooden lattice on

which ivy grew.

‘Ah, Philip and Petra,’ he said after he had paused the game. ‘It has been quite a while.’

Kzao looked at Ash and Clarice. ‘I take it you two need training, yes?’ he said. ‘I’m Kzao, but you probably knew that already.’

Clarice and Ash introduced themselves. Ash was slightly surprised when Clarice used her birth name instead of Clara and judging from her face she had surprised herself too.

‘How did you know we were coming?’ Philip asked Kzao after he had invited them to sit down with him on the large couch.

‘Oh, I didn’t know that specifically you were coming. But I knew someone would be on their way.’

‘How did you figure?’ Petra said. ‘Last time I checked you weren’t psychic.’

‘I watch the news,’ Kzao said as he switched the television to the local news network. ‘Look, they’re showing it again.’

The reporter was standing in front of the Svallbard Academy sports hall. They were telling a story about a gass leak as they showed the hole in the wall and the scarred floor.

‘Gass leak, my ass,’ Kzao said. ‘I know a magical explosion when I see one, who of you was that?’

Ash raised her hand apologetically.

‘Nice job,’ Kzao said, and it sounded like he meant it. ‘Some real power there. Anyway, then I heard the reports about a helicopter shooting missiles at a car on the highway and I figured that whoever it was in the car, they were in need of some magical expertise and probably coming this way. Awesome shield by the way, if that’s what you did that is. You left the witnesses thinking it was a movie stunt, because the missiles didn’t destroy the car.’

He looked at Clarice’s tattoo.

‘Judging by the focus, that was your doing,’ he said. ‘It couldn’t have been Petra or Philip anyways, they’ve never gotten the hang of solidifying air.’

‘Actually,’ Philip said a little agitated. ‘I think it was made of woven light.’

‘Woven light?’ Kzao looked at Clarice. ‘Even better, good choice of element there.’

‘Eh, actually I didn’t choose to do it,’ Clarice said. She was a little taken aback by Kzao’s natural enthusiasm. ‘I got scared and it just happened.’

‘I know,’ Kzao said. ‘I can feel by the energy you’re radiating that you are both extremely powerful, but completely untrained. And given the fact that you’ve clearly attracted Hekate’s attention, I think we should get you up to speed as soon as possible.’

He stood up and started walking to the door.

‘Follow me,’ he said, and then gestured at Petra and Philip. ‘You two know where the guest rooms are. Make yourselves at home.’

Ash and Clarice looked at Petra and Philip who indicated that they should follow Kzao. They were quite blown out of the water by the man’s quick uptake on events and followed him a little dazed back to the central hall.

‘Alright,’ He said as they walked through the hall to the door on the opposite side. ‘Now that we have the formalities out of the way, let’s start with the basics.’

He opened the first door on the right, which revealed a spiral staircase to the second floor. When they got up ther Ash saw that this level of the hall was layed out exactly the same as the bottom one. With the only exception being that instead of the yin yang symbol there was the balcony in the center.

Kzao walked through the open door on the opposite side of the corridor. The room behind it was a weird cross between a dojo, a backwater alley and a shooting range. There were mats on the floor to break the falls. But there were also random objects standing everywhere: Crates, potted plants, there was even a car in the far corner. In between the obstacles were target dummies of various sizes and shapes: Among them were a couple of humans, but

there was also on of a big spider like creature standing behind an empty oil drum.

Kzao saw the looks on their faces and said: ‘This is where I train my fighting skills, I personally find it isn’t much fun without some targets to hit and obstacles to jump over.’

Ash pointed at the spider. ‘Do these really exist?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ Kzao said. ‘They’re called archids and yes, they are as scary as you imagine them to be. That’s also why I have a practice dummy here, you don’t want to face one unprepared.’

As they walked in he closed the door behind him and propped another mat against it.

‘I once had a small aiming mishap and have experienced that these doors are not as sturdy as the walls, even though they look as if they’re from the same material. Since then I’ve taken precautions.’

He walked towards the middle of the room.

‘Before we even start, I want to tell you the most important thing there is to know when practicing magic.’

He pointed at Clarice’s tattoo.

‘Petra and Philip have probably told you that you need those to focus your aural energy into a shape, am I right?’

‘Eh, yes?’ Ash said, not sure what was going to come next.

‘Well, I’m telling you that what they’re saying is complete nonsense.’

He saw the confusion on their faces.

‘Originally the crystal people used these foci as a way to train their pupils. This was because the shapes on your skin make it easier for you to shape your aura in that particular way.’

He let a scroll appear out of the floor and unrolled it. It showed stylised drawings of what could be considered the classical elements: earth, fire, air and water. Along with symbols like lightning bolts and leaves.

‘They used a different shape for every element that they wanted to teach to their students. These “elements” were actually arbitrarily chosen and have nothing to do with the underlying magic. These foci were drawn on their skins with non permanent paint. Once the teachers were confident a sorcerer could conjure certain elements without the foci they would wash off the patterns and the students would continue training without them.’

He threw the scroll back at the spot where it had appeared and it vanished again. He saw them looking and said: ‘The storeroom for scrolls is exactly underneath here.’ As if that explained everything.

‘The problem is that over the centuries historians have misinterpreted the ancient scrolls and taken the foci as a necessity. I’ve tried to get it through to them but the only one who seems to understand me is Skylar, and he officially doesn’t even *have* an aura.’

He calmed down a little.

‘What I’m trying to say is that it doesn’t matter whether you have a tattoo on your skin or not. What matters is what’s in here.’ He tapped at his skull.

‘If there is one thing that is more important than how strong your aura is, it’s the extent of your imagination and the strength of your will.’

Ash and Clarice weren’t sure what to say and just stood there.

‘Let me demonstrate,’ Kzao said. ‘You saw me pull that scroll from the library below and are probably now wondering how on earth I did that without even activating my aura.’

They nodded, that was indeed weird.

‘Truth is, I actually *did* activate my aura,’ he said. ‘I just used so little power that to anyone not currently doing an energy scan on me it appears as if I used no magic at all.’

‘To start practice we won’t be doing anything fancy like fireballs or magic shields. Not only because you won’t learn to be subtle that way but

mainly because I can feel how strong you are and I don't want any holes in the walls.'

He pointed at a row of soda cans standing on a crate a few metres away.

'The aim of the exercise will be to lift one of those cans in the air and, without crushing it or spilling any of the contents, make it float to the barrel over there.' He indicated a sturdy wooden barrel standing about half a meter from the crate.

'You, Ash, take the leftmost can and you, Clarice, have the rightmost. To prevent you nudging each others can by accident. Now, stand on the line between these two mats.'

As they walked to the spot he had indicated he moved next to them.

'Now try to relax. Clear your head and focus on the target,' he said.

Ash breathed slowly in and out again and tried to only think about the can of soda. Clarice beside her did the same.

'Good, now imagine the can slowly lifting into the air. Do not only think about it happening, *will* it to happen.'

Ash imagined the can of juice defying gravity and levitating up from the crate. Nothing happened. Both cans stayed on the crate. They tried again, with the same result.

‘It won’t work,’ Clarice said, who wasn’t someone to go on with an exersize she deemed pointless.

‘Of course it doesn’t,’ Kzao said and he seemed to be enjoying himself. ‘This is what a person without an aura would try to do. I let you do it too to make clear the difference in feeling between when you don’t and when you *do* use your aura.’

‘Try it again. Except this time don’t imagine the can floating on it’s own. Imagine your energy surrounding it and lifting it up.’

Ash focused back on the can and this time imagined herself reaching out with her mind and picking up the can, she focused hard on the small cilinder and tried to lift it with her will. Clarice was also staring very intently at the row of tins. Simultaneously their aura’s flared up. Ash’s can exploded in a shower of water and bits of aluminum. Clarices can was smacked right into the ceiling and stuck there for a while until it fell to the ground as a flat piece of shiny metal.

They looked at the effects in surprise.

Kzao was silent for a moment, then he regained his upbeat attitude and said: ‘Black and white eh? Well that explains the strength alright. And here I was thinking there wouldn’t be any destruction with this exercise. Okay, try it on the next can in line. But please use a little less mental force this

time, I don't want any ballistic pieces of metal flying through the room at this stage. With your kind of power you have to be gentle.'

The girls turned back to the row of cans and focused. Ash tried to be a little more careful this time and slowly increased her willpower as if she was turning up an amplifier. Clarice now had a really concentrated look on her face. Again their auras came alive at the same time, but it was as if they were set on a slow burn instead of full power. Both cans started floating up into the air. Ash and Clarice started to smile and for a moment lost their concentration. The can Ash had been holding up turned into lead, dropped and made a hole in the crate. Clarice's can turned slightly translucent and disappeared in a puff of smoke. Ash raised an eyebrow and looked at her friend, who had the same puzzled look on her face.

'Interesting,' Kzao said. 'Now *that* is what happens if you lose focus in the middle of a spell. Over time it gets easier and you will be able to conjure multiple things at the same time, but right now you have to keep your attention at what you're doing or you get unwanted side effects.'

'I also notice that you seem to be synchronized in some way or the other, your auras activate simultaneously and you both lost your concentration at the same time.'

‘Ah, yes,’ Ash said. ‘We wanted to ask you about that. Petra thinks that it might have to do with the rarity of our auras.’

‘Could be, could be.’ Kzao said. ‘Have you ever heard each other’s thoughts or something similar?’

‘Actually, yes,’ Clarice said. ‘Just this afternoon we had the same idea at the same time and said it simultaneously.’

‘I could hear her thoughts and she mine,’ Ash continued. ‘It only lasted until someone else said something. It’s weird though, since that moment I feel like I can predict better what she is going to say or do.’

‘And it has never hapened before?’ Kzao wanted to know.

‘No, we only met each other this monday,’ Clarice said. ‘Though to me it already feels like we have been together for years.’

‘Hmmm,’ Kzao thought for a moment. ‘Normally this kind of thing doesn’t happen this abruptly, or this strong.’

‘What kind of thing?’ Ash asked, just as Clarice wanted to do the same.

‘Those who know it exists simply refer to it as a twin-connection. That being because it occurs most commonly in people who have known each other for a long time and shared most of it, mainly twins.’

It has actually nothing to do with your aura's, it happens to people who don't know anything about magic just as much as to people who do. Normally it manifests itself in an uncanny ability to predict what the other is going to do. And for most twins it stays this way. Sometimes though the connection grows stronger and the two can experience moments in which they can hear each others thoughts. I have seen it happen quite a lot. But in all my years and all the books on the subject, never has it happened to people who have only just met each other.'

'So, it isn't harmful?' Clarice asked.

'No, though sometimes it can lead to confusion. Or uncanny periods of synchronisation, like you two just showed. I have no idea what can happen when it get's stronger though. Let's try the exercise one more time and then we'll take a break and make dinner. We'll be out of cans by then anyway.' There were indeed only two intact tins standing on the crate.

8.

Samantha and the twins were now also watching the news, they had reached a roadside cafe and had ordered three large mugs of coffee. The local news network was showing the story about the gas explosion.

‘It’s always nice to see what they come up with,’ Steven said. ‘They just can’t believe that someone threw a fireball, so they make up something themselves.’

‘What are we going to do next?’ Ingrid asked to no-one in particular.

‘I don’t know,’ Samantha admitted. ‘I can’t seem to get Anubis on the phone, and he hasn’t called back either. It looks like we’re on our own, again.’

Samantha and her friends had failed Anubis earlier in a similar incident. That time they had also lost their motorbikes and had to walk home again. That time though Anubis had ranted at them over the phone and had told them to get back to Midland and wait until he needed them again. This time was different, they hadn’t heard from him since he had

left them in the helicopter.

The anchorwoman on the screen stopped talking and put her finger to her earpiece. "Breaking news!" it said on the scrolling bar at the bottom of the screen. The anchorwoman nodded to someone off-camera and addressed the viewers again. The helicopter that had been seen attacking a car earlier that day had been found crashed down in the forest. Both the pilot and copilot had died in the accident.

The three of them looked at each other. It couldn't be him, could it? Then the image on the screen cut to a reporter on-site who was standing several meters away from the wreck. Soldiers were inspecting the craft and a team of paramedics were just putting a body in pilot uniform on the stretcher.

'I can't believe it,' Steven said. 'He's dead.'

Samantha got an idea.

'Are there any birds in the area that you can use?' she asked Ingrid.

Ingrid closed her eyes and concentrated, the further away she was the more difficult it got and right now she was pushing her limits.

'I think I have one,' she said. 'You should actually be able to see it on the television. It's the crow on the rotorblade.'

'I see it,' Samantha said. 'Is Anubis still in the helicopter?'

‘Yes, they have only taken the pilot out at the moment.’

‘Alright, then we have to act quickly. Can you try and get his wallet?’

‘I like the way you’re thinking,’ Ingrid said. ‘I’ll see what I can do.’

Behind the reporter the crow hopped off the rotor and glided behind the screens that had been put up around the cockpit. A moment later it reappeared again, but now it was holding a black rectangle in its claws.

‘Got it,’ Ingrid said. ‘I’ll instruct the crow to bring it to us.’

‘So let me in on this,’ Steven said. ‘What exactly is the plan?’

‘We’re taking his cash,’ Samantha said. ‘And then we’ll empty his bank account.’

‘But won’t Hekate know we did it?’ Steven’s voice always got a little higher in pitch when he got scared.

‘You would think so, yes. But it turns out that Anubis is the only one who knows who we are.’

‘How can you be so sure about that?’ Ingrid asked.

‘During one of Anubis’s rants he said a little too much,’ Samantha said. ‘He told me that time with the waterscooters that Hekate didn’t know who these

incompetent agents were, but that she was tempted to let him terminate the ones responsible for wrecking her equipment.'

'So what you're saying is, now that Anubis is dead...' Steven was slowly improving on his uptake speeds.

'We're basically anonymous. No one knows that we were the ones working for Anubis, and until they find out who he is one will even know that his money is gone.'

'But won't they have the security footage of us withdrawing large sums of money?' Ingrid said. 'Oh wait, I see...'

'Yup, we will be using an invisibility spell,' Samantha said. 'That footage will be useless.'

When Kzao and the girls stepped into the kitchen, Petra and Philip had already started making dinner.

'So how did it go?' Petra said while she chopped the leek.

'They are actually really quick learners,' Kzao said.

'We are?' Clarice said in surprise. 'But we didn't even manage to lift a can without something strange happening to it.'

‘Indeed,’ Kzao confirmed. ‘But you have to realize that what you two did back there usually takes someone several weeks of meditation and careful guidance to accomplish. And even then they can only lift the can, not turn it into a small thundercloud. I have to admit: that was actually quite fancy.’

‘He’s right,’ Philip reluctantly confirmed. ‘It took me two weeks before I could lift the can. And then I had only enough power to get it up half a centimeter, any more and I got the feeling I was pushing my brain into my shoes.’

Kzao pulled open a drawer labeled “Targets”. Ash saw that it was full with empty beer bottles, tin cans and other small easily destroyed objects. Kzao started filling a plastic bag with a bunch of soda cans.

‘Do you really need that much?’ Philip asked when he saw the full bag. ‘With us you only ever had about six in a row.’

‘That’s what I had this time too. But with the cool side-effects they are showing, I’ll need at least a pile of twenty more.’

‘So you had more interesting things happening?’ Petra said and she sounded curious.

‘Yes,’ Ash said. ‘I made the first one explode and Clarice vaporized another one.’

‘Quite the show,’ Kzao said. ‘The problem at the

moment is not that there is not enough power, but that there is too much power. Now it's all down to being delicate.'

During dinner they discussed Selina and the visions she had shown them.

'We have never heard about the war she was talking about,' Philip said. 'But we thought maybe you might.'

'No, I've never read about anything like that anywhere,' Kzao said. 'And you know I've got quite an extensive collection of scrolls about the crystal people. It kinda makes sense though, there isn't much known about the end days of their reign and whatever there is is fuzzy or incoherent.'

Kzao filled his bowl for the third time.

'So let me get this straight: In this war the crystal people are facing An'dur, who has an army of monsters. An'dur is almost victorious when two misterious sorceresses appear: one black, one white. They rally the troops and together manage to defeat the intruders.'

'That's one version, yes,' Petra said.

'And the other version,' Kzao continued. 'Is the one in which the two saviours aren't mentioned and the human army is crushed by An'dur's forces, who

then proceed to destroy the city and rule the world from then on.'

'Correct,' Philip said. 'Now the timeline switched between the two versions at the moment that someone traveled from that time to the present.'

'Now your theory is,' Kzao looked at Ash and Clarice. 'That this person is An'dur or one of his followers. And that his aim is to prevent you two from going back in time to become the mysterious saviors of the crystal people.'

They nodded.

'Actually, I think that makes sense,' Kzao said after he had been silent for a while. 'I didn't look surprised when I saw your auras for the first time, but actually I was. There is only one mention of black and white auras in the whole of my library, and it might have something to do with that war.'

Kzao held out his hand and an old parchment came flying through the wall. He cleared a piece of the table and rolled out the yellowed scroll. It showed building plans of some kind of elaborate hand mounted cannon. Kzao looked at it in surprise.

'Hmm, that's not the right one. Must have misplaced it last time,' he rolled the scroll back up and placed it under his arm. 'We'll have to go and look for ourselves,' he stood up. 'Everyone done eating?'

Kzao had been the only one who had taken a

third portion so the others were all ready and stood up too.

The library was one of the most amazing ones Ash had ever seen. Instead of books most of the walls were filled with rows upon rows of scrolls, each in their own recess to keep them apart. Skylar walked down one of the isles until he arrived at the place where there was a hole without a scroll in it. He tapped the hand cannon plans against the inside of the empty spot.

‘This is where it should have been, and where I got this scroll from instead,’ he looked around searching. ‘So that means what we are looking for is instead over in the blueprint section.’

They walked after him to a section labeled “Blueprints and device drawings.” Here some parts of the walls were covered in complicated drawings of various devices. When they passed a number of scrolls stuck together to form a canvas of about two meters across Ash recognized something. This were the building plans for the temple they were in. Ash nudged Clarice and pointed. The two of them let the others walk on and took a closer look at the schematics. Next to the various parts of the temple were measurements and comments in a language they had

never seen before.

‘This looks a little bit like Greek,’ Clarice said, pointing at a piece of text. ‘But there are strange symbols that I don’t know and I can’t read any of the words.’

‘You know what’s strange?’ Ash said. ‘It looks like it has been made by more than one person. There are two different drawing styles.’

The others had noticed that they were no longer with five and had walked back.

‘Ah, you’ve found the map of this place,’ Kzao said. ‘Amazing isn’t it.’

‘Actually, we find it a little unnerving,’ Clarice said, while still looking at the text. ‘Do you have a piece of paper and something to write with?’

‘Of course,’ Kzao said, he held out his hand again and a noteblock and pencil came flying along the shelves. ‘What for?’

Clarice took the writing utensils and scribbled down her name and a few other random words. She held the noteblock next to one of the comments on the blueprints and turned towards the others.

‘Do you see something odd?’ she said.

‘Apart from the fact that I can read what you’ve written, but only half of what is on the blueprint?’ Philip said. ‘Not really.’

‘I do,’ Said Kzao. ‘That handwriting is eerily similar.’

‘Let me try,’ Ash said and she too wrote down some words and held it up next to one of the texts that had been written by the other designer. Ash’s text was written in the same blocky manner as the comment on the blueprint.

Kzao looked at it for a while.

‘You’re right,’ he said. ‘That *is* unnerving. When we found those plans in the mayan temple we were unable to determine it’s age, but the mayan’s were good trading partners of the crystal people, even when their power was fading. It’s actually where they got the inspiration for their piramids.’

Something had been bothering Ash, now she realized what it was.

‘Wait a minute,’ she said. ‘If the crystal people won the war, how come their empire still fell?’

‘Ah, but there is a difference between winning the war and keeping your power,’ Kzao said. ‘If what Selina has shown you is correct, then An’dur had already destroyed all the other cities before he was defeated. The crystal people would have nowhere to go.’

He waved with the scroll he was carrying.

‘Anyway, I found what I was looking for. This scroll mentions a legend the crystal people had.’

He rolled it out on a nearby table. The scroll was completely filled with undecipherable writing except at the very bottom, where the yin yang symbol had been drawn.

‘It tells about two warriors who would come when their need was greatest. I first thought it was some kind of fairytale. They really liked their stories, you know. When we found the plans for this temple I got a little suspicious but I didn’t think about it very much. The yin yang symbol pops up all over the place in ancient history, so I thought it of not much significance that it featured in this tale. If those visions are real though, this is more than just a story. And if An’dur really is walking around in the present, we have a major problem.’

Somewhere in a run-down part of an unknown city Hekate was looking through the window of an old factory hall. Someone had contacted her and said he had a very lucrative proposal for her. She wasn’t used to people contacting her directly, most of the time she had them go through her agents first. This guy however had, in one way or the other, managed to get hold of her personal number. That meant that she had to change it again, get companies to delete the old data and so on. She sighed, that was the

trouble with this modern digital world: the humans had become annoyingly good at keeping tabs on who was where and especially why. In the middle ages it had been easy, she just had to go to a different town and she could pretend to be a different person. To pull that trick at this point in time though you had to go through all kinds of complicated channels to get a fake passport, drivers license, sim-card and all kinds of other things. She signalled to the guards that she would go further on her own. Their leader saluted and they disappeared behind chimneys, iron beams and all the other hiding places abundant in any old industry complex. This guy had said that she should take no company, but of course she wasn't so foolish as to listen to that. After the incident with the fire elementals Gaia had been added to her growing list of forces that wanted her dead. It had been quite a shame actually, she had lost many good agents back there. She normally would have thought two of her personal guard to be sufficient, but with nature slowly taking over this complex she wasn't taking any chances. Now that her small force was properly hidden she opened the window and stepped on the metal walkway inside. The directions she had gotten had mentioned a large metal door. Hekate looked around the large hall. It was largely empty and spider webs hung between the metal trusses that held

up the roof. The light that fell through the skylights was slightly muddy and made everything look like it had been taken through a sepia filter. In one corner stood a large steel tank, Hekate didn't know what had originally been in it, but it was now leaking a strange oil-like substance. Behind the tank she saw what she was looking for: a large steel sliding door was fastened to the wall on long tracks. Hekate climbed down the rusty ladder that went up to the walkway and cautiously crossed the hall. The dust had been undisturbed for so long that she left clear footprints on the floor. She had to make sure that got cleared up when this was over. She couldn't risk focusing more attention on her operation, what with the helicopter crash all over the news. When she got to the wall size door she grabbed one of the handles and pulled. Surprisingly it was well oiled and the large slab slid back without making any sound. The hall behind the door was completely dark. The light that spilled in around her barely managed to reach the corners.

'Welcome, Hekate,' a low rumbling voice said.

Hekate looked around. Now that her eyes had adjusted a little to the darkness she could see a man standing in the shadows of the far corner. She couldn't quite make out his shape but the size indicated a lot of muscle.

‘Now that I’ve come here, make yourself known,’ Hekate said. She wasn’t the person to be intimidated easily and her tone was calm and had the edge of someone used to their commands being obeyed.

‘As you wish,’ the man said, but the smile in his voice made extremely clear that he was only following her order because he had been planning on doing it anyway.

He focused his eyes on Hekate and she saw them lighting up in the dark like two red car lights. He slowly moved out of the shadows. Hekate had been right about the muscle, the man had the build of a bull and a very big one at that: he was easily over two metres and towered over Hekate, who, with her above average length was normally the one looking down on people. Whoever he was, he was clearly not up to date with the latest fashion trends. He was wearing a large cloak made out of what Hekate guessed to be wolf skin. Underneath he was wearing a rough black robe with a split down the middle so that he could ride a horse. Why he would want to do that wasn’t clear to Hekate. On the whole the man looked like the typical image of a battlemage, the ones in the fantasybooks that was.

‘My name is of no importance to you, you wouldn’t recognize it anyway,’ the man said in his low animal-like voice.

Hekate looked a little longer at his face and realized what it was about it that had been bugging her. The man had two fangs protruding from his upper lip. Together with his red eyes and pointy ears they gave him the expression of a wolf. This also explained why he talked in this strange growling manner.

‘That is fine by me,’ Hekate answered. ‘Let’s get down to business. You had an interesting proposal?’

The man’s lips retracted in what Hekate thought could be a smile, although it was hard to say. With those fangs it could also easily be a threat.

‘Yes, you have recently encountered two girls with unusual aural colors.’ This wasn’t a question, merely a statement of facts.

‘I have,’ Hekate nonetheless confirmed. These two girls had popped up out of nowhere, the agent responsible for that area, Anubis, had alerted her when his furies had spotted them. The trouble was that by then Petra and Philip had already found them and were on the run. Those two always managed to get into her way at the worst possible times. The girls were very powerful and if she could persuade them to join her side they could become useful tools in her plan to dominate the world. Now that they had been taken by the rebels, that was going to be a little bit more difficult. The whole mess had

given her one thing though: she now knew the location where that half machine of a Skylar was hiding. It didn't matter that her first attack had failed, she now knew where to strike and would do so until he and his golems were all but a pile of scrap.

'But that is not of your concern,' she added.

The wolf man now was clearly smiling.

'Oh, but it is,' he said as he walked closer. 'You see, these two girls, if left unchecked, will grow up to be powerful sorceresses. And if they do, they will be unstoppable. I can't let that happen.'

'So your proposal is?' Hekate asked.

'You will destroy those girls for me. Don't just kill them, burn their bodies and spread the ashes into the sea.'

'And in return I will get?'

'Let's just say that if your service is satisfactory I won't kill you.'

He still smiled, but this time it was a cruel one.

'And why would I accept that?' Hekate was getting angry now. How dare this half human creature threaten her! She was almost queen of the world and the most powerful sorceress currently alive. He should know he was no match for her.

'Because I am stronger than you,' he said and his smile vanished.

He was either very brave, or mad. Hekate made her aura flare up around her, it was silver and had long streaks flowing through it. The light of her aura illuminated the dark hall suddenly in a strong light, the wolf man in front of her cast a long shadow on the dusty floor.

‘You dare challenge me?’ Hekate said, and she used one of the earliest spells she had learned to make her voice boom through the hall.

The man hadn’t moved a muscle and clearly wasn’t impressed by her show.

‘I do,’ he said, still completely calm.

He stretched out his hand and out of the air appeared a long black staff. It had strange runes in it which Hekate recognized as an ancient dialect of the language spoken by the crystal people. At the bottom the staff slowly flowed into a sharp blade, on the top the cylinder split in three parts which flowed around an energy crystal which was glowing a deep red. The stance of the man suddenly changed from the relaxed pose he had had up until then and flowed into a lightly crouched predator like stance.

Hekate had had enough of this nonsense and aimed her hand at him. Before she could unleash the blast of plasma she had planned to incinerate him with, the wolf man moved in a blur, the staff glowed brighter and a sudden gust of wind blasted Hekate back-

wards and onto the floor.

‘You let yourself be fooled so easily,’ he said as he slowly walked towards her, suddenly all at ease again. ‘Don’t bother calling for your guards,’ he said when he saw Hekate open her mouth. ‘I took care of them before you even opened that door.’

He pointed the staf at her and she got lifted into the air.

‘Now let’s try that again, shall we?’ he said and his cruel smile had reappeared. ‘You do as I say, and I won’t kill you.’

Hekate struggled and tried to loosen herself with her aura but he was too strong. He saw her try and put the staff a little closer to her. Hekate felt as if she was slowly being crushed. This wasn’t possible, she had always been the strongest one! The only two that could even think about standing up to her were only teenagers. Now suddenly this guy showed up and beat her without even activating his aura. Hekate considered her options and took the one of self preservation.

‘Alright, you got me,’ she said between clenched teeth.

‘A wise choice,’ the man dropped her on the floor and walked back to the shadows.

‘Now get to work,’ he said. ‘You won’t dissappoint me.’ Again a statement.

As Hekate slowly moved backwards towards the exit and tried not to upset any of her strained muscles he said, as if he had just thought of it: ‘Oh and make sure you take a look at your guards, they might need some medical attention.’

Then he walked into a dark corner and was gone.

Ash and Clarice had continued their practicing again. The pile of cans was slowly shrinking as they tried again and again. It was quite funny actually to see what would happen this time. One of Clarices cans had actually turned into a small pink elephant which had walked straight through the wall. They seemed to slowly get the hang of it though: they could now levitate the cans halfway accross the gap between the crate and the barrel before they turned into fireworks or just simply went up in smoke. After another three attempts it suddenly clicked and they slowly lowered the tins on the barrel.

‘Good job there,’ Kzao said. ‘Normally I would make you do this for another two days or so, but with Hekate and An’dur after you it is important that we move on.’

He walked to one of the test dummies and pointed at the rings on its head.

‘Now it is time to learn precision,’ he said. ‘Lift

a can and try to shoot it at the bullseye.'

'Wait,' he said as he saw Ash looking at a can already, 'until I'm next to you. I have no idea what will happen, but I suspect I don't want to be standing next to the target when it does.'

When he was back at where the girls were standing he said: 'Alright, go ahead.'

Ash concentrated on one of the cans and made it levitate. Now she looked at the dummy while she tried to keep the tin in the air at the same time. She imagined the can flying at the target and was a little surprised when she indeed saw it happen. This of course made her lose her concentration and instead of a can the dummy got hit by a rain of loose shrapnell.

Clarice didn't do any different. She hit the dummy straight on target, but somewhere in its flight the can had changed into a bouquet of flowers.

'Well, that won't do much harm,' she said as Ash tried to keep in her laughter. 'Let's try that again.' The two of them were now starting to see the fun in the random effects their power had on the soda cans and actually didn't mind that they failed to do the exercise properly.

'That's the spirit,' Kzao said. 'Although we may need to take a break from throwing cans and have a look at your strange synchronizations. Or we might

see that somewhere down the line one of you is going to blast lighting around while the other is the one being startled.'

He walked to the door and removed the mat, and removed the other one. He had put an extra in front of it because the first exploding can had actually driven a piece of aluminum straight into the door, despite his precautions.

'I think I know the perfect spot to get your connection going,' He said as they walked through the corridor. They took the stairs and went back to the central octagon.

'Now take a guess,' Kzao said as he walked to the edge of the silver circle. 'Where would I want the two of you to stand.'

Ash and Clarice looked at each other and back at the yin yang symbol. Judging from the love for drama Kzao had displayed they could take a pretty solid guess. Ash moved to the white marble circle in the black half while Clarice went to stand in the opposite black circle.

'I see I'm getting predictable,' Kzao said. 'Right, now sit down in a way you find appropriate and face each other.'

Both Ash and Clarice sat down in cross legged position. It simply seemed the best way to sit with all this mystical stuff going on. Kzao also folded

his legs underneath him, but his body stayed at the same height, making him float about half a meter above the ground.

‘Now focus on each other and try to go back to when you first connected.’

‘Don’t focus too hard,’ he warned when he saw the same expression on their faces as during the exercises. ‘Although I don’t think you could do each other much harm, I’m in the same room too.’

They looked at the completely earnest face of Kzao and had to look away quickly to keep themselves from laughing. Then they did as he had told them and focused back on each other.

9.

Samatha and the twins were standing in the dark in a small alleyway somewhere in the city centre of Charleston. The crow had managed to deliver the wallet to them even though it had clearly weighed him down. When they had opened it they had seen why: It had been filled to the brim with a pack of hundred dollar bills. Now they were about to use his credit card to withdraw as much as they could before his bank account was blocked. They had found an ATM somewhere off the main streets and were now waiting for the bar next to it to empty out. It wasn't that they were scared to be seen, they would be using an invisibility spell after all. But there was a chance that someone would see the cash machine suddenly spew money and that was something even the most drunk of customers wouldn't hesitate and go have a look at.

'Allright there goes the last of em,' Samantha said as the barman flung out the last of the customers. It was only about one in the night now, but the cafe's in this part of town were no nightclubs.

Steven gave her the thumbs up and his orange aura lighted up. Samantha and Inrid had never gotten the hang of bending light, but luckily Steven was so good at it he do it in his sleep. And that was no metaphor, he *could* do it in his sleep.

Steven made weaving motions with his hands and slowly but surely Samantha started disappearing in an orange cloud of light. Then even the light faded and she was gone.

‘You’re good to go,’ Steven said as his aura died down. ‘But remember: It only lasts for ten minutes so be quick. And it doesn’t prevent people from hearing you, or bumping into you.’

Samantha nodded and then realized that they couldn’t see the gesture. ‘I get it,’ she said. ‘I’ll be back in max five minutes.’

And indeed, five minutes later Ingrid startled as someone she couldn’t see suddenly tapped her on the shoulder.

‘Wen’t as smooth as we wished,’ Samantha said as Steven removed the invisibility cloak.

She showed the two of them the packs of bills.

‘I have no idea why, but that ATM had about a twenty thousand stocked in hundred dollar bills.’

She gave them both a pack worth five thousand.

‘You two keep these with you, If one of us gets caught it will lower the suspicion. Let’s now seek a

place to sleep. Tomorrow we will buy some backpacks and see what the daily limit is on this bank account.'

Philip walked out of the guest bedroom, yawned and stretched his arms. Kzao really knew what a good bed was. That minibar was also a nice touch. He walked towards the stairs to go and get breakfast down in the kitchen. When he walked across the balcony in the central hall he had the feeling something was not quite right. He couldn't quite put his finger on what was amiss until he entered the lower section of the hall. Ash and Clara were lying on the ground on the marble, both sound asleep. Kzao was nowhere to be seen. Philip knew that Kzao had strange teaching methods, sometimes involving making his students try to blow him up, but this beat everything. Philip strode determinedly to the door where he knew Kzao's bedroom to be. It wasn't locked and he pulled it open. Kzao was sound asleep and after shaking him several times Philip had to resort to dropping him on the ground.

Now that he got Kzao's attention he said: 'I thought you were going to train them? I know you have weird ideas on how to practice sorcery, but surely making students sleep on the floor isn't one of them?'

Kzao looked at him with slightly fuzzy eyes, then his mind got into gear and he stood up.

‘Actually I hadn’t planned on it,’ he said as he rummaged in his closet. ‘During the training I noticed that when they got the same assignment their auras activated at the same time. And then when they were halfway through moving the can they would lose concentration in sync too.’

He put on his clothes and walked out the door, Philip followed him.

‘Then I thought that if I got them to understand their connection better, they would be able to learn more quickly too.’

They now entered the main hall again where the two girls were still snoring. Kzao gestured at them.

‘So I had them sit on the yin yang symbol, as the colors are quite appropriate, and asked them to try and get back the feeling they had when they were connected,’ he explained. ‘Then after a while fatigue took over and they fell asleep. Then it struck me that there was no better way to get a mystical connection than to fall asleep on a magical symbol while thinking of each other. So I left them here.’

Halfway through Kzao’s story Philip had already made a face palm.

‘I’ve seen you do a lot of weird things,’ he said. ‘But sometimes you still manage to amaze me. I

know you well enough to notice you just made that up.'

'Yes alright, I admit I have no idea how to do this,' Kzao said. 'It might still work though.'

'One of your crazy ideas again?' Petra had just walked through the door and was looking at the girls with half a smile on her face.

That's when the door exploded.

Pieces of hardened glass flew through the hall and got deflected by the shield Kzao had reflexively put up. Crouched in the entrance was the bulk of a small troll, it had slammed the doors with his hammer and on the back swing had managed to bury it in the wall. It was now trying to pull it loose while keeping his other eye focused on the small group in the hall.

'Well, we've been compromised,' Kzao said in his usual not-so-serious tone.

He dropped the shield and looked at Philip.

'You know what works well against trolls?' he turned to the door and raised his hands in a quick forward pushing motion.

'A kinetic blast!' he said as the shockwave hit the troll square on it's chest and made it slide back through the corridor.

It only just managed to keep on two legs and it stopped itself by holding on to one of the arches. It looked at them in surprise.

‘It always catches them off-guard,’ Kzao explained as if there wasn’t a two tonne bulk of muscle getting ready to charge him.

Behind the first troll they could now see more of them coming down the stairs. The one in front was now trundling at them with considerable speed. Philip got ready to duck out of the way but Kzao’s hand stopped him.

‘You seem to forget this place was built by Sky-lar,’ Kzao said. ‘Wall up!’ he yelled when the troll had almost reached the doorway.

A large slab of metal shot out of the side of the corridor and blocked the trolls path. On the other side the five of them could hear a loud bang as it slammed into the sudden blockade with the force of a run away steam train.

‘He never forgot the essential bits,’ Kzao said as Philip calmed down a little. ‘This should keep them out. Long enough at least for us to get to the emergency exit.’

The metal of the door started glowing a deep red. Then it went up through red, bright red, yellow and then eye burning white. A hole melted in the slab and a long blue flame shot through the hole.

‘Or they might have a sorcerer...’ Kzao said and then: ‘Run!’ as he jolted to the corridor opposite to the entrance, dragging Petra and Philip with him.

When they got through the doorway Kzao stopped and started to close the doors, these ones had been strengthened with metal on the inside.

‘Wait,’ Petra said. ‘The girls are still there.’

They looked around the corner of the now half closed door and saw a troll hammer slamming through the remainder of the barrier. Then they looked at the center of the hall.

‘They’re gone...’ Philip said. ‘How...’ he left the rest of the question hanging in the air as a troll burst into the hall.

‘Run now, ask questions later,’ Kzao was closing the door again.

They ran towards the back of the corridor and entered a large hall. This was the main place of worship of the temple. Kzao only used it for his meditations. It was even more grand as the central hall. The altar, which consisted of a crystal yin yang symbol, was placed between eight pillars. The pillars had those same long dragons strung around them and went all the way up to the roof, where a ball of pure white light illuminated the space. The ceiling was held up by crystal arches which went down the walls and merged with the floor, where they continued as

blue streaks in the complex mosaic. In between the arches the walls had large windows which showed different places and seasons on the planet. A boreal forest covered in snow, a desert baking under a red hot sun, a blue green ocean with small palm covered islands and so on. The spaces around the windows had been filled with more elaborate carvings.

The tree of them walked towards one of the pillars on the right and Kzao pulled the tail of the silver dragon. The closes window went dark and started sliding into the wall. This emergency exit wasn't on the original plans, but Kzao had made Skylar install it in case they got invaded like they were now.

The metaphorical temperature of the room dropped several degrees when the opening revealed three more trolls.

'You didn't expect that, did you?' A female voice said from the entrance of the altar room.

Hekate entered the hall with behind her a hand-full of trolls. She was wearing a flowing dress made form black silk. Her sparkling silver hair was tied together in a long braid reaching to her waist. She would have been quite beautiful if it weren't for the cruel look in her eyes.

'Right,' she said. 'Now that I have you're attention: where are the girls?'

The three standing near the pillar kept silent.

‘I am actually on a schedule you know,’ Hekate sounded annoyed. ‘So tell me where they are or I might have to get angry.’

‘Funny thing that,’ Kzao said, who was always the first to get back to his wits. ‘We have actually no idea where they are. And if we did, we wouldn’t tell you anyway.’

‘You want to play this the hard way?’ Hekate raised her right hand. ‘Fine by me.’

Her aura flared up and a stream of white hot flame shot from her palm. About halfway to Kzao the flames hit some kind of invisible hole and vanished into it.

‘Don’t think so,’ Philip was holding up his hand too. ‘You were always quite predictable Hekate.’

‘I know,’ she said. ‘But so are you.’

The flames reappeared on the other side of the small group and spew all over the shield that Kzao had put up in front of it.

‘Give up already, you know I’m stronger than you,’ Hekate said while she kept the flames aimed at them. ‘You know I can keep this up longer than you.’

‘And let you kill us,’ Philip said while he reflected the flames back at Hekate. ‘forget it.’

Hekate stopped the stream before it hit her.

‘You forget that I have an advangate,’ she said and she motioned to her trolls to move in.

The eight trolls formed a circle around the pillars and slowly walked towards the center, forcing Petra, Phillip and Kzao to move towards the altar.

‘And once again you brought the wrong creatures for the job,’ Petra said as the trolls crossed the space between the pillars.

She raised her hands and her aura flared up. As she brought them back down in a double handed overhead slam, her fists started crackling with electricity. When they hit the ground a shockwave spread out from the point of impact. The wall of fast moving air crackling with electricity sped towards the trolls and send them flying back against the walls of the hall. Several slumped on the ground and stayed there. Five however shook their heads and stood back up. The leader, which was slightly larger than the others, put his head back and roared in anger. Petra slumped to the ground from exhaustion and philip quickly caught her.

‘We need to get out of here fast,’ he hissed to Kzao.

‘We’ll first have to clear the entrance then.’

Kzao pointed at the secret door, the two trolls who had been deposited next to it had moved together and were now blocking the door with their

bodies. When they saw Kzao pointing at them they raised their hammers, as to say: 'Yeah, try to get through us, you puny human.'

'I told you you couldn't keep it up,' Hekate laughed.

She raised her hand again and this time shot a beam of pure darkness at them. It was all Kzao could do to stop it with his shield. Philip saw that he was quickly losing his strength under the pressure of the beam. Hekate was right, they couldn't keep this up. As the remaining trolls moved in again Philip prepared to make one last explosion.

'Now, that I got you,' Hekate said as she moved in with the trolls. 'Tell me where they are and I might even be tempted to let you go. If you don't I'll have to kill you.'

'Looking for us?'

Two voices had spoken in unison. Hekate looked surprised and dropped the beam, now that the pressure suddenly disappeared Kzao fell to his knees. The echoing nature of the hall made it hard to localize the source of the sound and Hekate looked quite puzzled.

'You might want to turn around,' the two voices said, still talking at the same time.

Hekate turned around and started smiling triumphantly. In the entrance of the hall stood Ash and Clarice, who looked at the scene in front

of them in an unsettlingly relaxed manner. Philip now saw them too and something about their expressions made the hair on his back stand up.

‘So, you decided to give yourself over in an attempt to save your friends,’ Hekate said as she walked towards them.

‘Sorry to dissapoint...’ Ash began.

‘...you, but no,’ Clarice finished.

Philip tried to warn them with hand signals while at the same time holding up Petra. This was going to end badly, they had connected again and weren’t thinking straight.

‘You dare defy me?’ Hekate actually sounded baffled. ‘You, who aren’t fully mature and completely untrained, want to go toe to toe with the ruler of the world?’

‘Indeed,’ They were speaking simmultaneosly again. ‘But we wouldn’t call it untrained.’

Their auras flared up. Now that they were this close to each other the two energy fields connected in the middle. They turned to face each other. Both put the inner foot back and crouched a little. Then they turned their heads again to face hekate. Philip could see that they were still wearing their lenses, the brown occluding the shining white and light sucking black behind them. Hekates expression changed from ulitimate triumph into a mix of surprise and dis-

belief. The girls put out their hands and in between started to form an silvery orb. The light around their auras slowly started to bend as the ball grew bigger. Hekate had now decided that the whole thing was fake and shot another stream of black light at the two of them. When the beam got close to the disformed space however it curved around and got sucked into the orb which now grew even faster. Hekate suddenly stopped the beam in surprise and the recoil made her stagger backwards. Time seemed to slow down.

Ash and Clarice moved the orb back and in one fluid motion stretched their hands forward. An invisible beam shot from the orb and made its way towards Hekate, it's path only visible because it bent the light around it. Hekate saw it coming and had the presence of mind to put up a shield just before it hit her. When the ray struck the shield light and non-light scattered everywhere, putting the hall in a moving pattern of light and dark spots.

Philip shielded his eyes with his hand and squinted through his fingers. Hekate evidently hadn't seen this coming and she was taking a heavy beating. Even though she had a shield up the sheer force of the beam was sliding her backwards over the floor. It was clear from the way she held herself that it was taking a considerable effort just to keep stand-

ing. Then there was a shattering noise as if someone had dropped a giant sheet of glass and the beam cut straight through Hekate's barrier. The moment the ray touched her the girls cut the beam. There was a loud bang and a crash from somewhere behind Philip. When the after images had subsided a little he could see that Hekate was no longer where she had been standing. Ash and Clarice were slowly walking towards him and they pointed to the other side of the hall. He turned around and saw that there was a Hekate shaped indent in the largest window. The image it had originally displayed was now replaced with a rainbow of colors and patterns flashing across its surface. Then there was a sizzling noise and the window went to black.

When the girls got to them their auras had died down again. Philip had lots of things to ask them, but there was thing he wanted to know first.

'What the hell was that?' he said. Normally he was all against swearing, but he felt this was one of those moments when it was quite appropriate.

'No idea what the official name is,' Ash said as she looked at Petra and Kzao with a concerned face.

'But we think it can best be described as a "negative energy beam."' Clarice finished.

'Will they be alright?' she asked.

'Yes,' Philip said. 'It's just that they're auras got

nearly drained during the fight, after a good meal and about two days rest they'll be back to their old selves. You might want to keep an eye on the trolls however.'

'I don't think that's necessary,' Ash said. 'They look quite intimidated.'

Indeed, the trolls that were not already unconscious were doing their best to merge with the walls. When one of the girls looked at them they cringed as if they expected some kind of attack.

'What did that beam actually do to Hekate?' Philip said as he looked at the indent in the far wall.

'Taking into account that we hit her for about ten milliseconds,' Clarice began.

'She'll probably feel like she's been overrun by a steamroller and then drowned in molten lead,' Ash finished. 'And as a side effect her aura is almost drained, any longer and we might actually have killed her.' She didn't sound like she liked the prospect.

A moaning noise made them look up to the broken window again. Hekate was peeling herself off the backside of the crater she had made.

'Or she could just feel like all her bones are broken,' Clarice said. 'I think we might have hit her just a millisecond too short.'

'Let's see what she has to say,' Ash said as the two of them walked to the window.

Hekate had now managed to pull herself free and dropped to the floor like a ragdoll. The thump she made when she hit the ground made Philip cringe, despite this being their enemy who got hurt. Hekate managed to pull herself up to the wall and looked with weary eyes at the approaching girls.

‘Alright, you got me,’ she said when they they next to her. ‘I know when I am defeated. What is it you want to know?’

‘Hmmm,’ Ash said, ‘I would have thought the ruler of the world to put up more of a fight.’

‘That’s not really true anymore,’ Hekate gritted her teeth as she tried to sit upright and pulled a bruised muscle. In fact, there was not a single muscle in her body that didn’t feel like it had been hit with a sledgehammer.

‘How do you mean?’ Clarice said. Though the two of them did have their suspicions.

‘There’s this guy who contacted me,’ Hekate no longer cared what she should or shouldn’t say, “that guy” wouldn’t kill her when she came back in failure, he would want to keep her alive as long as possible. Hekate knew from experience that it was way more fun that way.

‘He said he had an interesting proposal for me, so I went to see him,’ she continued. ‘Instead of negotiating he defeated me like it was nothing. Then

he ordered me to kill you two.'

'Wasn't that already your plan?' Ash asked.

'Not really,' Hekate gave up trying to find a comfortable position, it was useless as everything hurt. 'My original plan was to get you over to my side, the same way I did with many others. You would have been great assets in my army and killing you would have been quite the waste.'

'So, this guy,' Clarice continued the interrogation. 'What did he look like? Any red stafs perhaps?'

The dilation in Hekate's eyes showed that her surprise was genuine.

'How do you know that?' she said. 'I didn't even know the guy existed before he crushed me.'

'You see, this is the fun part of asking questions this way,' Clarice said. 'We don't have to tell you. But since it wouldn't do you any good anyway...'

'We saw him in a vision,' Ash explained. 'He is called An'dur and he is a very powerfull sorcerer. The reason that no-one has heard of him before is that he actually lived in the far past.'

'So what is he doing in the present then?' Hekate's mind was running at full speed, as far as that was possible with her body crying for attention all the time.

‘It turns out that the two of us are actually featuring in a prophecy which tells of his downfall,’ Clarice answered.

Hekate started to ask something but Ash interrupted her.

‘Don’t ask why or how,’ she said. ‘We don’t know either. All we know is that somehow we must travel to the past to defeat his army and make sure that this world comes into existence. Now he has traveled into the present to prevent us from doing exactly that.’

Hekate raised a single eyebrow. ‘And why exactly are you telling me this again?’

‘Because you will help us find him,’ Clarice said.

‘And why would I help you?’

‘Because if you don’t we won’t be happy,’ Ash said. ‘And if what we heard about An’dur is true he’ll be pretty mad at you for failing to finish us.’

‘And that means that if you don’t do what we say,’ Clarice continued. ‘You’ll basically find yourself between a rock and a hard place.’

‘“Pretty mad” would be quite the understatement,’ Hekate said. ‘Alright, you got me. What do you want me to do?’

Ash gesticulated at the trolls on the ground and cowering against the walls. ‘First you’ll order your thugs to go back to whatever bridge you found them

under. Then you'll guide us to the place where you met An'dur. From there we'll follow his trail to his hiding spot.'

Hekate motioned to the trolls to pick up their unconscious friends and go. She had to apply quite the stare to make them move against their fear for Ash and Clarice, but eventually they pulled their fallen friends off the ground and went through the door.

Ash and Clarice indicated to Hekate that she should stay down and moved back to the others at the altar. Philip had now put Petra against the altar and was sitting next to her himself. Kzao was lying on his back and his mouth hung open.

'This is probably going to feel a little weird,' Ash said as they approached Philip.

She and Clarice both put a hand on his shoulder and let their auras light up. Philip suddenly felt a rush of power as his body lighted up black and white at the same time, which surprisingly didn't result in grey. When their auras died down again he felt a lot better.

'What did you do?' he said as they continued with Petra.

'Aural energy transfer,' Ash said as Petra gasped and regained some color. 'You'r aura should now be about halfway charged.'

‘But I didn’t even know that was possible,’ Philip said, quite stunned.

‘Neither did we,’ Clarice said. ‘To be honest, we have no idea what we’re doing and are just figuring it out as we go along.’

‘That beam we pulled on Hekate?’ Ash said as Kzao underwent the same treatment. ‘That was just a lucky guess.’

‘Weh... Wah... What happened?’ Kzao managed to say as he slowly sat up.

‘I think your crazy idea worked after all,’ Philip answered.

He went to look over Petra as she regained consciousness. She opened her eyes and went through the necessary self check everybody, except Kzao, makes after waking up from being knocked out. She concluded that she was still alive and that, somehow, every limb was still firmly attached. Then she followed a rule about waking from unconsciousness that even Kzao confirmed to and asked: ‘What happened?’

‘Ash and Clarice saved us at the last moment,’ Philip told her.

‘How?’ Petra asked the next logical question.

‘That’s something they don’t know themselves yet,’ he looked at the girls. ‘How are you two feeling anyway?’

‘Surprisingly okay,’ Ash said. ‘Considering we slept on a marble floor last night.’

‘Just joking,’ Clarice said when she saw Kzao’s face. ‘That meditation thing actually worked. By the way, sorry for almost getting you killed, but when we woke up and saw the troll in the dooropening the first thing we did was hide in one of the rooms.’

‘And only when we were standing still did we realize that our vision was swapped,’ Ash continued, not aware of how absurd what she was saying sounded. ‘We were both looking out of the wrong pair eyes. I could see me, and she could see herself too.’

‘When we finally had sorted that out we silently sneaked back to the hall and were just in time to see the trolls going into this corridor,’ Clarice said. ‘Then we encountered a minor hiccup where she tried to walk with my legs, which resulted in us both falling over repeatedly.’

‘But we think we’ve finally figured out which body parts belong to whom,’ Ash added. ‘So that shouldn’t be a problem anymore.’

The became aware now that they were being stared at by three pair of eyes.

‘You remember the time we spoke simultaneously?’ Ash asked and looked at Kzao. ‘Which you called a twin-connection?’

Petra and Philip looked at Kzao.

‘You made that one up, didn’t you?’ Petra aksed him.

‘Maybe...’ Kzao said and had the decency to look embarrassed. ‘I only read about it once and I thought the term was aproprate.’

Ash and Clarice looked at him in surprise.

‘But you said you’d seen it lots of times,’ Clarice said, and there were knives in her voice.

‘Wow, wow, easy,’ Kzao said as he raised his hands apologetically. ‘You don’t get very far as a sorcerer without making things up sometimes. It worked out alright though, didn’t it?’

‘No idea really,’ Ash said. ‘Things feel okay, but because now no one can tell us how this works we wouldn’t know when they are not okay.’

‘Eh, excuse me?’ A weak voice called from the back of the hall, it was Hekate. ‘Normally I do not ask anyone for help, or are so polite while going about it, but under the circumstances I think it is quite justified. I saw what you did to your friends here, would you mind getting me back on my feet as well?’

Philip looked at Hekate and turned to the girls.

‘Don’t do it, it’s just a ploy to strike at us again.’

Ash and Clarice moved back to where Hekate lay underneath the window.

‘I understand that you don’t trust me enough to give me any power,’ she said as the girls approached. ‘But at least get me strong enough so that I can walk on my own. I’ll just hold you up otherwise.’

‘I think we can get you about a quarter of the way full without you becoming a threat,’ Ash said.

‘Wait, you can actually charge my aura?’ Hekate said surprised. ‘And you’re even willing to risk it on me?’

‘Twice correct,’ Clarice said as they put their hands on Hekate’s shoulders.

Their auras flared again and Hekate gasped at the sudden influx of energy.

‘You see, you are no longer a threat for us,’ Ash explained. ‘Straight of the bat it would be a very stupid thing for you to do and turn on us now, but in case you’re still thinking about that I think we can easily do another one of those rays. Now get up and tell us where you met An’dur.’

10.

Sti'pan Derau was about half way through his guard duty. He had been stationed on the easternmost guard tower of the fort and was looking out over the lands in the relaxt manner of a man who knows there won't be any atacks today. The scouts had returned yesterday with the message that within a range of three day's worth of horseback riding there was not a single foreing encampement to be seen. It was to be expected really, the legions of the great city of Ankh hadn't encountered any real resistance in five years. Their domination over the region was close to absolute. Only the desert tribes in the south could directly challenge their army, and they rarely ventured this far north. Sti'pan made a few swings in the air with his Kich, just to keep the circulation going. The Kich was the weapon of choice for the Ankh foot soldiers. It consisted of a long straight blade fastened at the end of a spear shaft and was primarily used against mounted targets and large groups of enemy soldiers. The reason why it was such a formidable weapon was that the top part of

the spear could be quickly removed if necessary, even in the heat of a fight. You were then left with a shortsword and a long sturdy pole, the first deadly in close quarters and the latter good for city based fights. Ank soldiers were expected to be skilled with all three weapons and formed thus the most versatile and feared army in a large area. Sti'pan had volunteered for the army as many boys did when they turned fifteen. It was a logical thing to do, the first two years you got a top of the line military training and got reasonably good food and shelter for free. Then when you were seventeen and were the superior in any one on one fight with a foreigner you were send out on guard duty along the lengthy borders of the empire. The work was actually quite honorable, there wasn't much fighting and, that had probably been the decisive factor for many boys, it was well payed. The reason for this was that the empire of Ankh had originally been a small city state. No larger or more important than the others around it. Then Chi'in Seda had rose to power and under his leadership the city of Ank had crushed and assimilated many of it's neighbours. Now, after a period of a hundred years of expansionism the new leader Cha'dun Seda had declared that they wouldn't venture out further. They held the most vertile lands in the area and it was now time to secure their

borders and build up the land. The problem with getting their borders guarded was that the original Ankh had at most only had an army of three thousand men, and then the harvest would be left to the wives and children. The extra soldiers needed had to come from the former city states which now fell under Ankh control. And the men there needed some additional persuasion. Ankh was now rich and Cha'dun had made the wise choice of offering the men more money. This opposed to making duty in the army compulsory, which would certainly be taken the wrong way. Sti'pan of course didn't know all these political decisions going on, he was just a simple soldier glad with the extra tsira he made on a relatively low risk job.

Low risk... Until today.

He was just taking a last look over the deserted fields before the guard of the next shift would take over. Everything was as calm as ever. Then he noticed something moving on a far away hill. He didn't think much of it but, in contrary to most armies, the soldiers of Ankh had been trained to be curious. He got his looking device from his belt. It had been a recent invention by some wise guy back in the capital. Sti'pan didn't claim to know how it worked, but he knew that there were two pieces of carefully shaped crystal in there and that if you looked through one

end you could make far away objects seem really large. He pointed the far'ke as they called it at the figure in the distance and turned at it to get a sharp picture. It took a while for him to convince himself that what he was seeing was real.

'Hello Sti'pan,' a voice behind him said. 'What are you looking at?'

It was Sti'dan, a fellow soldier and friend, who came to take over the watch.

'Ah Sti'dan,' he said and offered him his far'ke. 'Take a look at that hill and tell me I'm not crazy.'

Sti'dan took the looking device and pointed it in the indicated direction. He looked was silent for a while and then lowered it again. He turned to Sti'pan.

'If you're too seeing a fully clothed wolf walking on it's hind legs then either we are both seeing things, or there is something weird going on over there.'

Sti'pan took the far'ke back and started climbing down the ladder.

'You stay there,' he said. 'I'll go and inform commander Na'dor.' Under his breath he added: 'And see if he beleives me.'

When he got close to the room from where Na'dor issued his orders he almost bumped into the guard from the northern tower.

‘You saw it too?’ Said the man who Sti’pan now recognized as Sti’dar.

‘We did,’ Sti’pan confirmed. ‘At first I didn’t believe my eyes, but then Sti’dan saw it too.’

They got to the commanders office and knocked on the door.

‘Come in!’ a low voice said from inside.

Commander Na’dur was sitting behind his desk and was busy writing letters. After he had finished his sentence he looked up at them with his eyebrows raised in a question.

‘Something amiss?’ he asked when he saw the faces of the guards.

They both saluted.

‘Sir,’ Sti’pan took the word. ‘The eastern and northern watch towers report a strange sighting of a fully clothed and upright walking wolf about fourty aman from the fortress.’

‘From your expressions I can see you’re not joking,’ Na’dur said. ‘But I certainly want to see this thing with my own eyes. A clothed wolf you said?’

‘Yes sir, at least four men have seen it sir,’ Sti’dar said as Na’dur stood up and indicated to follow him.

They walked at a polite distance as Na’dur quickly strode towards the eastern watchtower. As he climbed up Sta’dan was looking through his own far’ke and

only noticed them when Na'dur was already standing next to him.

'What's the status Sta'dan,' Na'dur said.

Sta'dan startled and saluted when he saw the commander standing next to him.

'It's still at that hill sir,' he said and he offered the looking device. 'You might want to see this yourself.'

Na'dur put the small end of the cylinder to his eye and looked at the hill the guard had indicated. He too remained silent for a moment.

'This is certainly strange,' he said while keeping the far'ki to his eye. 'wait, now he is pulling something from under his clothes.'

The three guards stood around their commander and weren't quite sure what was expected of them. Normally they were the ones telling the commander what they saw. Now that it was the other way around they looked a bit sheepishly at each other.

In his excitement Na'dur didn't seem to notice that he was in fact reporting to his inferiors.

'It looks like a white flag,' he said. 'It actually *is* a white flag and now he is waving it around. He probably wants to talk with the commander.'

When he heard the deep silence around him he lowered the far'ki and looked at the puzzled guards.

The he realized what he had just been doing and how awkward it must have been for the soldiers.

‘Sorry for that,’ he said. ‘Lost myself in the excitement a bit.’ Then, all commander again, he said: ‘Ready a party, we are going to see what this civilized wolf has to say.’

Ash, or half Clarice, or whatever they would indicate Ash’s body with, was walking behind Hekate as they went through the tunnel. Hekate wasn’t made to be someones agent, in her rush to get into the temple she had blown an outside wall out of the apartment building which had attracted every single press mosquito in the ficinity. Not to mention all the bystanders with cameras on their smartphones. Walking out of that building would certainly get them noticed, which would inform An’dur that Hekate had failed and that they were on their way to him. Best to let him think Hekate had been killed in the incident too. The emergency exit however ended up in a building two blocks away so they had decided to take that instead. Clarice was walking just behind Kzao and came to the spiral staircase first. It wasn’t too wide and they wondered how Hekate had managed to get three trolls in via this way. It had been a weird experience, waking up with two minds and two bod-

ies instead of one. It had taken them quit a while to figure out that it was best to let each of them controll their own limbs without the other trying to step in and help. Senses were a bit more difficult, when Ash had knocked her head while they were running from the trolls Clarice had been the one saying 'ow'. That still needed some sorting out, but they had at least gotten so far that if you startled one of them, the correct body made a reflex move. Memories, now that was interesting. Both of them had acces to the complete set of their combined experiences and they were quickly learning some really intimate details about each other. Clarice for example had already been to bed with a boy and Ash was taking apart the experience in minute detail. That was until Clarice thought it enough and put a mental note on the memory saying that this one was sensitive: That boy had broken up with her without aparent reason, and if she thought about those memories too long they would still drag up feelings of anger. That was still a minor problem: if one of them got angry, the other started getting agitated as well. So they had to be a little carefull what they thought about and had to keep their emotions under controll or risk dragging the other one with them.

'So, where are we going,' Ash aksed Hekate when they had emerged from the fake service door in the

side of a shop.

Talking was fun too. At first they had made it a sport to finish each others sentences, but they saw it made the others uneasy. At the moment they had resorted to talking as if the two of them were separate. They didn't blame them, it would be quite a shock to discover that talking to the one was like talking to both of them. And their companions hadn't really figured that one out at the moment.

'Well, I am to lead you to the place where I met An'dur yes?' Hekate said, and from her voice was clear that there were going to be complications. 'That was in Washington.'

'Aw, come on,' Kzao said. 'That's like a twelve hour drive from here. You could never go there and back in a single day.'

'As you probably have guessed,' Hekate continued. 'I was the one in the ejector seat that teleported away.'

'Teleporter one way, airplane the other,' Clarice, and in extension Ash, guessed.

'Correct,' Hekate confirmed. 'But that puts us in front of a problem. If we go by car there will be enough opportunity for An'dur to notice I failed and to decide to finish you himself. We cannot go by plane either, because the private jet I took here is now also An'durs property.'

‘So what you’re saying is that we’re basically stuck here.’ Philip said. ‘Unless we can get another private jet or something.’

‘Regrettably so yes,’ then something dawned on Hekate. ‘And all my assets are being monitored too, so if I hire one we’ll have agents on our necks in no time.’

‘Why are you even helping us anyway,’ Petra said.

‘It’s as the girls said,’ Hekate answered. ‘If I do not help you I’m on my own against An’dur, and he has my complete networks of spies at his disposal. I wouldn’t stand a chance. You at least have a plan to stop him.’

‘At least we have an idea of what we have to do next,’ Clarice said. ‘“Plan” is a big word.’

‘So you have no place where you can get money without alerting An’dur?’ Kzao tried.

‘No,’ Hekate said a little downcast. ‘I kept tabs on every agent’s bank account and further assets. An’dur will be able to oversee everything.’

Then something dawned on her.

‘Unless...’ she said, and got a quite devious smile on her face. ‘I’ll need to make a phonecall, I think I know someone who can get us money.’

* * *

Samatha and the twins were now riding on the highway on their shining new bikes. The bags on their backs for the most part filled with hundred dollar bills. It had turned out that there wasn't really a limit on Anubis' bank account, and as long as it didn't get blocked they could pull large sums of money out of any ATM. They were now extra careful and along with the invisibility spell also masked their scent when withdrawing money. Samantha always wore gloves, so she didn't have to think about fingerprints.

After half a day emptying out every cash machine they came across they had gathered an incredibly large sum of money that they hadn't yet had the time and place for to count properly. What they *did* know however was that they could buy three ten grand motorcycles with it and not make a noticeable dent. Their plan was now to get as far away from Charleston as possible and to lay low until Hekate's agents were no longer investigating Anubis' death.

Then her phone rang.

'Eh guys,' she said via the helmet microphone. 'I'm getting a phonecall here.'

'Any idea who it might be?' Ingrid asked.

'No,' Samantha said, and then realization dawned.

'It's the phone I only use for Anubis,' she said, and knew that she was sounding way to hysterical.

‘Shit,’ Steven said. ‘Maybe he isn’t dead and then we’re screwed.’

The phone went to voicemail.

‘Let’s stop here,’ Samantha said as they came across a roadstore. ‘Maybe some other agent knew of our connection with Anubis.’

As the others pulled into the parking lot behind her she removed her helmet and fished her phone from the deep pockets of the motor suit. The phone indicated a missed call, but also a text message. Both from a number Samantha hadn’t seen earlier. It was unusually long and started with 271828. She read the text message and kept silent for a while. Then she turned to the twins.

‘Guys?’ she said. ‘When I said Hekate didn’t know we existed?’

‘Yes?’ Steven asked. Ingrid had already gotten the message and was going very white.

‘I might have been wrong...’

11.

Riding out of the gates, Na'dur saw the wolf still alone on the hill. From this distance he couldn't be quite sure, but it looked like it had sat down. Not on it's hind legs, like a dog did, but in a strange human like way. It made his hairs stand on end, seeing an obviously feral creature walking and acting like a human.

The party consisted of him plus ten guards. Even though he was only going a couple of aman from the gates, he didn't risk going underdefended. All of them were mounted on tsa'nigs, the main battle mount of the Ankh army. Tsa'nigs had been created by a sorcerer back in the city state days. They looked like a white leopard, only much, much bigger. At first there had been some problems with taming them, but after that had been sorted out they had proven to be strong and fearless warriors. They had been a great asset during the phase of expansion. No foreigner would dare stand in the way of someone seated on a beast that could kill you without moving it's other three paws. For scouting missions they

still used horses though, as it turned out that while a tsa'nig could win a sprint from any horse, it got tired more quickly and in long runs the horse would win on endurance. This minor flaw had something to do with their size and they still hadn't gotten rid of it in the breeding. It however didn't matter in the bulk of the army, as the men would get tired even quicker and the beast made up for the deficiency in the strenght and striking speed departments. It's all round usefulness had made the tsa'nig riders, along with the skilled foot soldiers, the backbone of the Ankh legions.

As they came closer they could see that the wolf was indeed sitting. It had stuck the white flag in the ground a couple of metres away from him, as if to say: to here, and no further. Na'dur indicated to his guards that they should stay at a distance. He dismounted and slowly walked towards the flag. The wolf saw him aproaching and stood back on his hind paws. It followed Na'durs movements with the piercing gaze of a predator. He stopped next to the flag and looked at the negotiator. He was wearing a long mantle made from dark red wool. Underneath he had leather armor of quite considerable craftsmanship. On his breast he wore an small golden pin which probably indicated he was of some kind of rank. Overall he held himself almost like a

human would, only a slight crouch betrayed his animal origins. That, and his more obvious snout and furry skin. Having no idea how you greeted such a creature Na'dur resorted to no greeting at all.

'I'm Na'dur, commander of this fortress,' he said. 'What is it you want?'

The half animal angled his head as if he was listening. Thinking about it, Na'dur wasn't even sure this creature could understand, or even speak, human language. The negotiator opened his mouth and in a speech that was half growl, half understandable language, it said: 'My master sends me to negotiate.'

'Who would your master be then?' Na'dur said.

The wolf creature regarded him with a gaze that Na'dur could only barely read as amazement.

'You don't know him?' it growled. 'My master is An'dur, the greatest and most powerful sorcerer of this age.'

'Never heard of the guy,' Na'dur said in a matter of fact way.

The negotiator made a growl, Na'dur guessed he had committed some kind of sacrilege by calling the great master "the guy". He didn't really care.

'It doesn't matter,' the wolf said. 'He and his army will be here soon.'

There was a threat in that sentence, Na'dur didn't like being threatened. Especially not in his own territory.

'Then he better come in peace,' he said. 'We don't take kind to strangers marchin an army into our lands. Anyway, our scouts can see him coming. So why are you here then?'

The half wolf made an attempt at a smile. It looked more like he was clearing his teeth in a growl.

'He has given me orders to deliver a proposal to you.'

'And what would this proposal entail?'

The wolf didn't attempt smiling anymore, his expression was now one of cruel amusement.

'In His generosity An'dur gives you two options,' the wolf somehow managed to pronounce the capital 'H'.

'Either you surrender and he will let you live, or you withstand him and you will die.'

Na'dur looked at the wolf in surprise and was finding it hard not to laugh. This negotiator came to him all alone and simply declared that his master would do what many armies in the past years had failed to do: capture an Ankh fortress.

'We'll take the third option,' Na'dur said. 'We will stand against him, and win.'

The wolf man didn't seem taken aback by the answer. He bowed to him and his guards and said: 'So be it.'

The negotiator turned around and, without looking back once, walked back the way he had come. He left his white flag standing in the dirt at Na'dur's feet.

Na'dur watched the creature go, looked down at the fake sign of peace and kicked the flag into the dirt.

Hekate had let them to a parking lot only accessible by a small alleyway, she had chosen this because she knew there were no cameras around. At first they didn't want to give her permission to use the phone, thinking that she would betray them. Luckily Ash and Clarice seemed to trust her, why exactly they were so sure she wouldn't call someone else was still a mystery though.

'So, who are these people again?' Philip wanted to know as they were waiting in a shadowy corner of the parking lot.

'Furies,' Hekate said. 'They were under the command of an agent called Anubis. He died however in the attack on your friends base. He was supposed to keep his distance, but he wouldn't listen and got

hit by a stray beam. When they got to his body everything was still there, except his wallet. He was one of my richer agents, so I had the news footage looked over and his bank account checked. It turned out that his money was stolen by a crow.’

Hekate shifted her weight to a more comfortable position: despite the energy transfer she still hadn’t fully recovered from the hit.

‘After an agent dies, I normally remove all ties with him or her,’ Hekate continued. ‘This to prevent secret agencies from getting suspicious. Before I could do this however, a large withdrawal was made from Anubis’ bank account at an ATM somewhere in Charleston. Combined with the bird, I am quite sure which furies are responsible for this. Then I wiped all evidence of this bank account ever belonging to Anubis, An’dur has no idea.’

Ash and Clarice did their deduction too and came to the conclusion that these furies might be a little more than just “known” to them.

‘They wouldn’t be called Samantha, Ingrid and Steven, would they?’ Ash asked in a way that said she had already resigned herself to it.

Hekate looked up with a surprised look on her face.

‘How do you know them?’ she said.

‘Well...’ Petra begun. ‘Remember when you had

Anubis shoot us down on the highway with his helicopter?’

Hekate raised an eyebrow.

‘He wasn’t supposed to do that,’ she said. ‘He was supposed to get you to me alive. He was always one for spectacle, but he never pulled a thing like that without notifying me.’

Hekate sighed.

‘Well, makes sense then that he got killed,’ she continued. ‘He was getting reckless.’

‘Anyway,’ Philip continued with the story. ‘He had those three furies tailing us on their motorcycles.’

‘They probably won’t be very happy when they see us,’ Ash said. ‘I kinda hit them with a fireball twice.’

‘No time for talking anymore,’ Kzao said. ‘They’ll be here soon.’

Indeed, in the distance they could hear the sound of three motorcycles getting closer.

Samantha really wasn’t looking forward to this meeting. The message had been from Hekate herself, saying that they had to get their asses over to her immediately and that they had to take the money with them. Samantha had really thought that Hekate

hadn't known who they were, and from the way Anubis had talked to them she now deduced that maybe even he didn't know the extent in which Hekate was monitoring everything. The location specified had been in somewhere in the center of Charleston. They had already been driving for quite long when they had gotten the message, so it took a while for them to get back to the city. Samantha thought it wouldn't really matter anymore if they got late, because Hekate would skin them anyway. But nonetheless they floored the gas and an hour later they turned into the small alley leading to the indicated parking lot.

As they slowly rolled their motors out of the alleyway Samantha looked around the walled concrete space and frowned when she didn't see anyone.

'You took your time,' a voice said from behind them.

The three of them startled and turned around. The speaker had been hiding behind a low wall and no that they saw her they instinctively knew this had to be Hekate.

'we're terribly sorry, your highness,' Samantha and the twins bowed and took off their helmets.

'Dispense with the niceties,' Hekate said. 'I see you've not gotten the full update on the latest events yet, so let's get you up to speed. Fact is, I'm no

longer in charge.'

Samantha felt her mouth drop open, Hekate no longer in charge? That was like saying the sun wouldn't come up in the morning, it was a sheer impossibility. Yet here Hekate was, telling them in person. Samantha was so knocked off her wits she forgot who she was speaking to.

'What happened?' she said, in a tone that would most certainly have gotten her some kind of punishment had she used it a couple days ago.

Luckily for her Hekate didn't care anymore.

'I got overthrown by a powerful sorcerer calling himself An'dur,' she said. 'The short of it is that I then got captured by this lot.'

Hekate indicated the wall she had been hiding behind. The rest of the small group now too stepped from the shadows.

'You?' Samahta said after she'd had enough time to process all the new information.

'Yes, us,' Ash said. 'We're not really happy about it either, but it turns out we need your money.'

'Wait, what?' Samantha was now really confused. 'Hekate is one of the richest persons on the planet, the public doesn't know that of course, but it's true. And now you need *our* money?'

'Yes,' Clarice said. 'When An'dur defeated Hekate he also took over all her assets. She can't even buy a

cup of coffee without him knowing. And we're going to need a lot more money than that.'

'What are you planning on buying then?' Samantha said.

'We don't really have to tell you, you know?' Clarice answered. 'We need a private jet and we know you have enough cash to pay for it.'

'That first withdrawall you made was a little too early,' Hekate told them. 'I hadn't cut the connections yet, if you had waited a few more hours I wouldn't have known a thing.'

'And why exactly are we going to give you what you want,' Samantha said. 'It's not as if we benefit from giving you our money.'

'Well, you actually do,' Ash said with a grin on her face. 'You see, if you don't give us the money, I think you'll be wanting to look for new motorbikes. They don't seem to take fireballs very well.'

Samantha looked at Ash and saw that this was no longer the girl she had punched at Svallbard, the Ash she had now in front of her would indeed blast them if they didn't do what she told them.

'Alright, we'll get you the money,' Samantha said. 'On the condition that, wherever you're planning on going with that jet, we can go with you. It's getting a little too hot for our taste here.'

Despite the situation she smiled.

‘And you’re going to need a pilot.’

12.

It had been two weeks since the incident and there hadn't been any other sightings of strange creatures around the fort. Na'dur and his men were slowly convincing themselves they had drunk too much that day and that the wolf man had just been a very sophisticated collective hallucination.

Then the reports came in.

First it had been a single incident, a sighting of a creature fitting the negotiators description in a town about a month riding from the fort. Then over the next few weeks the couriers had brought them reports of villages getting raded. Every account said the same. A negotiator came in the morning to ask the chief for their surrender. Of course all of them refused, some even laughed at the creature, a gesture that they would come to regret. That evening the town would be suddenly surrounded by an army. They came out of nowhere: one moment everything was quiet and the next the streets were filled with spears. The few surviving eyewitnesses there were said that the army consisted entirely out of half

human creatures like the wolf man. Among them were bears, bulls and rhinos. One report even mentioned flying creatures that resembled giant hawks that swept in and dropped torches in the thatch roof so that the vilage already burned before the ground attack had even begun.

Na'dur was reading another one of the reports which detailed the destruction of a larger town about three days riding from them. He had already called the surrounding fortresses for backup, because from the reports i looked like the beast army was heading straight for them. He looked up as a soldier in the uniform of corrier stood in door opening and saluted. He nodded to indicate to the soldier that he could speak.

'Sir,' the corrier began. 'I carry a report from fort Stiway. It is bad news sir.'

Fort Stiway was the closest fort and the first to receive their call for reinforcements.

'Is it worse than these?' Na'dur said as he held up the papers he had been reading.

The courier glanced at the papers and concluded they came from the ruined villages, as one of them had a slightly singed corner.

'I'm afraid so sir,' the soldier said, and had the decency to look embarassed. Corriers were officially not suposed to read the letters they carried, but

Na'dur had been a corrier himself and he knew that was not always respected. He didn't reprimand the soldier for this lack of discipline because he also knew that this same courier would spread the news around the fortress faster than a direct order from him would.

'Let me have a look then,' Na'dur held out his hand and took the sealed scroll.

As he read it his shoulders slowly went down: the report was of a soldier who had barely escaped the fort just before the beast army had run it over. Stiway, and everyone in it, was gone.

He put the scroll down and stared at it for a while until a polite kouch reminded him of the fact that the courier was still standing in front of him.

'If I were you,' Na'dur said to him. 'I would gather some messages for the capital and go back to Ankh as soon as possible, It's going to be real bad out here soon.'

The courier looked at him with a puzzled expression.

'Sir, wouldn't that be considered cowardice?'

Na'dur looked back at the reports.

'No, personally I would consider that smart,' he said. 'Off you go.'

As the courier saluted and went back to his duties, Na'dur leaved through the reports of destruction and thought long and deep.

* * *

‘Guys,’ Samantha yelled from the cockpit. ‘We have bogeys on the radar.’

The cash from Anubis’ bank account had been more than enough to buy a private jet liner. They had been offered a pilot, but apparently Samantha had flown one of these jets before and was quite skilled at it. If she was any more trustworthy as a payed pilot was still to be seen, but at least with her they knew who they were dealing with.

‘It looks like we have three fighter jets on our tail,’ Petra said.

She had also had some flying experience and had offered to be co-pilot. The rest of the loose alliance sat in the luxurious passenger compartement. There had been quite a lot of awkward silences and once or twice lighting bolts and fireballs had popped up in the conversation. Ash and Philip were sitting next to the cockpit door and went to take a look. When the call had been made Ingird and Steven had jumped to the windows to see if they could spot them anywhere. Hekate looked at them and despite herself found it quite amusing. Clarice leaned back in her seat.

‘You won’t see them,’ she told the twins. ‘They’re still twenty kilometers out.’

‘How would you know,’ Ingrid said.

‘It says so on the radar display,’ Clarice replied.

Steven looked at Clarice and then at the cockpit door.

‘You can’t see the radar from here, You’re just making that up.’

From the front came the voice of Philip: ‘We better get ready. At the moment they’re still twenty kilometers out, but that’s already nearly in range of the long distance missiles.’

‘Told ya,’ Clarice said as Ingrid and Steven looked at each other with a puzzled expression.

‘Whoops, these must have new weapon systems,’ Petra said. ‘Missile inbound!’

Ash went back to the passenger area.

‘We’ll take it,’ she said.

‘Who is “we”?’ Steven wanted to know.

‘Ash and I,’ said Clarice as she stood up.

They stood face to face in the aisle as Petra called again through the door.

‘It’s closing in,’ she said in an urgent voice. ‘fifteen seconds till impact. You two better get a shield up.’

Ash and Clarice put their hands out and made their auras flare. In between them a translucent sphere appeared, it looked like it was made out of

solid light. The sphere lighted up and suddenly engulfed the whole airplane.

‘What the...’ Steven said as he saw the two girls auras blending in the space between them.

‘You better get used to those two doing strange things,’ Hekate said. ‘I don’t understand it either.’

From the cockpit they heard Samantha counting down.

‘Impact in three... two... one...’

There was a bright flash and a lot of flames outside. The missile had hit the shield and the resulting fireball had flown around the bubble. Kzao had been meditating in the back as he hadn’t fully recovered yet and he shot upright.

‘What’s happening,’ he said. Then he saw the excitement around him, said ‘oh sorry, I’ll only be interfering,’ and went back to his meditations.

‘Keep the shield up,’ Philip said as he came back into the passenger compartement. ‘They’ve seen we’re still here and have launched three more missiles.’

‘Weren’t planning on dropping it really,’ Ash said. ‘I think we can take at least ten more of those.’

‘But someone else will have to deal with the jets,’ Clarice continued. ‘We need all our concentration here.’

‘Right, when they get close enough I’ll blast them out of the air,’ Steven said.

‘They won’t get close enough,’ Hekate said. ‘My jets also carried those long range missiles, when you have them you won’t need to get within ten kilometers of your target.’

‘How many missiles does each have,’ Philip asked her.

‘Impact,’ Samantha said in a now scarily calm voice.

There were two more flashes and for a moment they flew through a world of fire and smoke.

‘About five each,’ Hekate answered. ‘And that’s when they also have other weaponry on board. If they take exclusively those missiles they can carry up to ten per jet.’

‘We can’t hold thirty,’ Clarice said. ‘We’ll need another plan.’

In the cockpit Petra got a call on the radio.

‘This is Foxtrot Bravo two calling private jetliner Alfa Sierra seven. Surrender and we will escort you back to Durnham airbase.’

Petra opened the channel and responded.

‘Alfa Sierra seven to Foxtrot Bravo two. Yeah sure, after you’ve shot three missiles at us you want us to surrender? Think again.’

After a while the radar beeped and showed a new craft coming in behind the three fighter jets which were now flying at fifteen kilometer distance. Al-

though they were flying only just subsonic the new airplane caught up with them in no time at all. The radar had originally measured the speed of the new craft at twice the speed of sound, but it was now rapidly slowing down to keep station with the jets.

‘Alpha Sierra here,’ Petra called the jets again. ‘Looks like you guys have company, is that why you were in such a hurry to get us to surrender?’

Then the three craft disappeared from the radar and were quickly afterwards replaced with the signatures of three ejection seats.

‘Hello guys,’ The voice of Skylar came over the radio. ‘I was just testing my new hypersonic craft when I picked you up on the aural scanner and decided to help out.’

‘Thank you so much Skylar,’ Petra responded. ‘We had no idea how we were going to deal with those fighter jets.’

She called the others through the door.

‘You can drop the shield now. Skylar has shown up in some kind of new fangled aircraft and has dealt with the fighters.’

The shimmering barrier around the craft disappeared and Clarice came into the cabin. Skylar came in over the radio again.

‘No problem,’ Skylar said. ‘I had fitted a disruptor cannon just in case, and this was a nice op-

portunity to try it out. By the way, I'm detecting more energy signatures than expected. I can pick out Kzao, but who are the other four?'

'You're not going to believe this,' Clarice responded. 'But we have Hekate and three of her furies on board. One of them is even piloting the plane as we speak.'

'You're right,' Skylar replied. 'I don't believe it, but I think I'll have to if I want to get a grip on what's going on. Where are you going?'

'Washington,' Petra said. 'Hekate has been usurped by a sorcerer called An'dur and he is threatening to kill Ash and Clara. We're now going to the last place she saw him to see if we can find any trails.'

'Sounds exiting,' Skylar said. 'I think I'll be coming with you. I need to test the range on this thing anyway. I'm coming up next to you now.'

Skylar's craft caught up with the jetliner and held station with it on its right. Looking out of the window they could see a long sleek craft flying next to them. The cockpit was flush with the body and they could see Skylar waving at them. For propulsion the plane had two smooth cylinders where normally the tailfins would be. Instead of traditional jet engines these contained two large energy crystals. They shot out a trail of green fire behind them and were currently running at a low burn.

The further flight to Washington was uneventful

now that they had Skylars protection and together
the crafts entered the airspace above Washington.

13.

It had taken them a while to come up with a plan that had even a remote chance of succeeding, but Na'dur thought that if there was a way to defeat the beast army, this scheme had a good shot at doing the job. When he and his officers had looked over the reports they had noticed a weakness in An'durs strategy. He was very predictable. Everytime a village got raided, a negotiator would come at dawn and when he got sent away the attack force would arrive exactly at nightfall. This regularity in An'durs movements could be exploited and they had set up a plan to do exactly that.

The day that the negotiator showed himself again the fortress had been readied for the execution. Every man had been notified that they could be required to march at any moment in time and they were all ready. The tsa'nigs had already been moved from the fortress to a forest in the southwest, as An'dur was most likely to come from the northeast. The moment the half wolf had left the southern gates were opened and the army quickly left the fortress.

On the walls they had mounted straw men to fool the enemy into thinking they were still there. They had tested it earlier that week and Na'dur thought the sillouettes looked really convincing in the evening light. He and his officers closed the ranks and behind him the doors were pulled shut again.

The plan was to let the enemy execute it's attack and take the fortress. Then when the beast army realized that there was no-one there, Na'dur and his men would burst from the secret tunnel that led to the forest where the tsa'nigs were stationed and would catch the beasts by surprise. Now it was only a matter of waiting until nightfall and hoping that An'dur wouldn't deviate from his routine.

'That's the building,' Hekate said as they were driving through an old industrial area. They had hired a small van because they wouldn't fit into a taxi together. The dealer had thought their ragtag band to be a little strange, even more so because they were paying in cash, but had sold them the car anyway. During the ride everyone had been updated on the latest events and some convusion had been cleared up. Skylar had made his co-pilot golem guard the two aircraft and had declared that he was going with them on the seach. When asked for a reason he de-

clared that his whole base was a mess and that he was just walking in the golems way as they went about the repairing. Now that he had joined them they were with ten in total. Half of which didn't really trust the other half and were only there on the basis of not having a better option.

'Park the van somewhere we won't be seen,' Petra said, who was riding shotgun.

Philip was behind the wheel and was now driving the van into a small alleyway between two warehouses.

'Alright everyone,' he said. 'end of the line.'

They left the van where it was parked and walked towards the old factory Hekate had indicated. As they got closer Hekate pointed at the building across the road.

'That's where most of my guards were waiting for my signal,' she said. 'Turns out An'dur had expected me to bring backup and had already taken them out before we even met. Afterward I found them on a heap behind that chimney. They weren't exactly dead, but they will take at least a week to recover their aural energy.'

As they came to the back of the building Hekate indicated to a row of windows looking out over a lower roof.

‘I went in over there, but I think we can now take the main entrance.’

They went to the side of the factory where there was a big metal door set in the wall. Together they slid it open and they entered the dusty hall beyond. Hekate’s footprints were still visible in the dust, leading from the iron ladder going up to the windows to the still open iron door and back again.

‘This place gives me the creeps,’ Steven said.

‘For once,’ Ingrid said. ‘I agree with you on that. It is quite scary.’

‘He attacked me in there,’ Hekate said. ‘you might be able to pick up residual energy from the fight.’

Ash and Clarice went into the room first, followed by Skylar and Kzao who indicated that the rest of them should wait in the hall.

‘You would only disturb the readings,’ Kzao said.

Skylar pulled an energy crystal out of his pocket.

‘I found that if you use one of these, you can pick up even more that with the traditional methods.’

His chest crystal lighted up and he made the crystal in his hand float in front of him.

‘Stand on either side of the crystal and focus your energy at it,’ Kzao said to Ash and Clarice as he stood across from Skylar.

All four of them had now activated their auras and were steering small steams of energy into the crystal floating between them. It started to glow white and after a few more moments shimmering images appeared around it.

‘That’s it,’ Kzao said. ‘Just a little more.’

Then the whole room turned grey and everyone except the four of them disappeared. They saw Hekate walking into the room and talking with the strange figure which would be An’dur. Then they witnessed the fight and saw both of them leave the room again.

‘Alright,’ Skylar picked the crystal from the air and the room returned to normal. ‘Now we can follow the energy signature of anyone present at the encounter, which would be Hekate and An’dur. The signal will be weak at first, but when we get closer to his present location it will get stronger.’

They went out of the room again and Skylar showed the others the crystal.

‘We got a trace on him,’ he said. ‘Now it’s just a matter of following it to his location.’

‘Which way?’ Samantha asked.

‘Since when are you eager to help us?’ Ash asked her.

‘Eh,’ Samantha actually didn’t know what to say, she had been swept along in the excitement and

hadn't really thought about her motives. 'To be honest, I have no idea.'

'He's to the west from here,' Skylar said as he pointed the crystal around. 'But he's quite far, I'm guessing San Francisco from the strength of the signal I'm getting.'

'San Francisco?' Philip said. 'That's all the way on the other end of the continent.'

'That's going to be a long flight with the jets,' Petra said. 'I guess we'll be stuck with each other for quite a while.'

14.

When the evening came a group of his scouts rode into the makeshift camp around the tunnel entrance and went straight to where Na'dur and his officers were sitting.

'Sir,' the leader of the group saluted. 'We have seen the army. It's coming from the northeast, as expected.'

'Good,' Na'dur said. 'Are the reports true? Is it indeed an army of beasts?'

'Yes sir,' the scout said. 'We couldn't get very close without getting seen ourselves, but from our vantage point we could see many horns and fangs.'

'Then I might need to go and talk to the men,' Na'dur stood up. 'They need to be prepared for what they're going to face tonight.'

He called his men together and looked at the three hundred soldiers that were his responsibility, a lot of them might die today even if everything went as planned, he just hoped their sacrifices wouldn't be in vain. He spoke to them about the monsters they were going to face tonight and that if anyone de-

served tonight he would understand it and wouldn't have them pursued. This seemed to have the desired effect on the men, he could see the thoughts on their faces as they looked at their comrades: they weren't the ones he was talking about, they were fearless warriors who would emerge from this battle victorious. He concluded his speech by saying that even though no one had won from this beast army yet, it always had had the element of surprise on its side. This time however, they were the ones that would strike unexpected, and would therefore be the first to achieve victory against An'dur.

The men shouted his name in their enthusiasm when he was finished. Then everyone went back to their camps and waited for the enemy army to overrun the fort.

The flight to San Francisco was a really long one and they had to make a stopover in Kansas city because the plane couldn't make it on a single tank of fuel. Skylars jet had to be refueled there too, but of course the fuel needed for his exotic creation wasn't available at a standard airport. So he showed off one of the more spectacular features he had built in. Due to some process he wouldn't give the details about the plane was able to decompose itself into small

particles and turn into a cube about half a meter across, which could be put in the back of the private liner. So the second half of the journey the jet had been carrying two extra passengers: the golem and Skylar, who had taken over from Samantha when she got tired. They had all slept for a while during the flight. Ash and Clarice had taken turns. When Ash sat in the cockpit with Skylar and Petra, Skylar wanted to know why she had woken up when Clarice had gone to sleep.

‘We have decided to always have one of our bodies awake,’ Ash explained. ‘Just in case something happens and we have to react.’

‘Wait,’ Skylar said. ‘The way you said “one of our bodies” just there didn’t make any sense to me.’

‘It wouldn’t really,’ Ash said. ‘We are still figuring it out ourselves too. But I’ll try to explain, remember those hangers you gave us so we could always find each other?’

‘Yes,’ Skylar said a little unsure of where this was going. ‘Is something wrong with them?’

‘No, they still work perfect,’ Ash assured him. ‘It’s only that we’re probably not going to need them anymore.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because this,’ Ash said. ‘Is actually Clarice talking.’

‘Wait, what?’

Skylar looked through the door to where Clarice was snoring on one of the chairs. She had actually rested her head on the shoulder of the golem, who had also gone into energy conserving mode.

‘She’s asleep in the back,’ Skylar said, ‘how can she be talking.’

He looked at Petra for an explanation, but she had dozed off in the communications chair.

‘It’s actually quite complicated,’ Ash said. ‘But the gist is that what is asleep over there is Clarice’s body. Clarice herself however is quite awake,’ she pointed at her head, ‘in here.’

Skylar took a moment to think this over.

‘So what you’re saying is that you and Clarice are both using your brain right now?’

‘We don’t know the details,’ Ash said. ‘But that’s a way to think about it yes.’

‘Amazing,’ Skylar said. ‘Just to make sure I’m getting this correctly: when you’re asleep you are actually both awake in Clarice?’

‘Correct,’ Ash confirmed. ‘We’re not sure though how long we can keep that up until we have to sleep both, as apparently this hasn’t happened before. And that means we have to figure everything out ourselves.’

‘After this is over,’ Skylar said carefully. ‘Would you mind if I followed you around for a while to study this phenomenon?’

‘Actually, we would really like that yes.’

Skylar looked up surprised as if he hadn’t expected them to agree.

‘At the moment we are just groping in the dark really. Heck, we even don’t know if there is a maximum range at which it will work,’ Ash added a little softer: ‘Or what will happen if one of us dies.’

‘Those are questions for later,’ Skylar said. ‘Right now we have to focus on taking down An’dur before he takes down us and with it the whole world as we know it.’

Skylar was silent for a moment and then let out a single laugh.

‘What is it?’ Ash asked.

‘Oh,’ Skylar said. ‘I was just about to propose that you should take some rest. Then I realized that, after what you told me, that wouldn’t really be necessary.’

15.

Na'dur and the other survivors were pushing their tsa'nigs to the limit in their hurry to get as far away as possible. The scheme had worked, except for one major detail: there had been way more enemies than expected. The army of An'dur had surrounded the fortress in silence as according to the reports. Then, on an unheard signal they had all charged the walls and killed the defending men. It took a while for the slow minds of the beasts to realize that the army they were fighting against consisted entirely of straw men. Then it was already too late. Na'dur's men had opened the wall that hid the secret tunnel and from there had swarmed out through the fortress, killing every non human that they encountered. Up until that point everything had gone according to plan. Then a horn sounded and things got grim really fast. On the hills around the fortress a second force of beasts appeared, much larger than the first one. Once the reinforcements had entered the fort the men got outnumbered five to one. Na'dur saw that they had lost and called the retreat, but then a

lot of his men had already been isolated in the different parts of the fort. He had only barely made it to the tunnel with a small band of soldiers he had picked up on the way. In the confusion they could escape through the tunnel and get to the tsa'nigs before the beasts started the pursuit. Luckily for them An'dur's army didn't have any mounts, but it still took them a substantial amount of time to shake off the pursuers. As it turns out, half-wolfs have a surprising turn of speed. Now they were hurrying across the planes and forests to Ankh to bring the news of the invasion to the generals. Na'dur didn't want to think about all the men he had lost that night and focused all his attention on the task at hand.

At the end of the day they didn't land in San Francisco, but in Los Angeles instead. This was because, as they came closer to their target, Skylar was able to get a better estimate on where An'dur really was. During the flight the crystal had started pointing a little to the south until they were nearing Los Angeles and Skylar had pointed out that this was about as close as they would get in a plane.

When they had got the clear from the tower and had touched down on Los Angeles airport, Skylar had instructed the golem to guard the aircraft and

warn him if anyone attacked.

Skylar pulled out the crystal again and moved it around.

‘He’s about three kilometers to the north of here,’ he said. ‘And I’m also feeling a slight downward pull, so he might be underground.’

‘Let’s get transport,’ Philip said. ‘And see where we end up.’

It turned out they ended up in a small industry area not far away from the airport. Petra was driving this time and Skylar was giving directions from the passenger seat.

‘He’s really close now,’ he said. ‘I can feel it.’

‘Let’s go through the plan one more time,’ Philip said. ‘Ingrid will scout out the building with her birds. Then, when we know whatever it is An’dur uses to travel through time, Steven will generate a cloaking field with aural energy supplied by Ash and Clarice. We’ll move in stealthily and try to get to the time machine without getting seen. Then we’ll travel back to where An’dur is nearing his victory and defeat him. If it turns out there is no way we can get back in time the way he came, we’ll search for An’dur here and defeat him in the present. Does everyone agree with that?’

There was a general nodding of heads.

‘That’s the building!’ Skylar said. ‘The crystal is basically pulling me towards it. An’dur has indeed holed up underground.’

They looked at the warehouse he had indicated. It was one of the many generic and totally inconspicuous warehouses in the vicinity and thus the perfect spot to build a hideout underneath. Philip parked the van on a parking lot of a nearby store.

‘You’re up Inrid,’ he said.

Ingrid had already made contact with the birds in the area and there were now an unusual amount of ravens and crows around. She closed her eyes and concentrated.

After a while she frowned.

‘I do indeed have something,’ she said. ‘There is a shaft behind a secret door in one of the offices. It looks a bit like it is from an old mine.’

‘Good job,’ Ash said. ‘See if you can get a bird down there.’

After some more silence Ingrid gasped and suddenly opened her eyes.

‘What happened?’ Kzao asked.

‘I got a raven into the mine,’ Ingrid said. ‘The lights are on and everything looks well maintained. Then I ran into a couple of creatures that looked like they were half wolf, half man. They killed the bird.’

A shiver ran down the back of her spine and Steven put an arm around her.

‘Those creatures are from his legion,’ Petra said. ‘An’dur really is down there.’

Skylar looked a little offended.

‘Of course he is,’ he said. ‘My devices always work.’

Kzao gave him a look.

‘Okay,’ Skylar gave in. ‘Almost always work.’

Ash and Clarice looked at Steven.

‘You ready?’ they said in unison.

Steven looked up from Ingrid.

‘I am, let’s get out and get invisible.’

They all got out of the van and clustered around Steven. Ash and Clarice went to stand on either side of him and put their hands on his shoulders.

‘Operation wolf has begun,’ Steven said in a dramatic voice as he made his aura flare up.

Ash and Clarice also lighted up their auras and started the energy transfer. Steven’s aura brightened to a blinding orange.

‘Wauw,’ he said as he started to move his arms in a spiral motion. ‘You really have a lot of power there.’

The world slowly went a little gray as the invisibility spell surrounded them. The only things that had not been washed of color was their small group.

‘We’re invisible now,’ Steven said, he looked at Ash and Clarice in turn. ‘How long can you keep giving me this amount of energy?’

‘About twenty minutes,’ Ash answered. ‘Then we’ll be dry.’

Steven’s eyes went big.

‘Twenty minutes?’ he said in disbelief. ‘If I had that amount of power constantly flowing inside me, I would have exploded long ago.’

‘Twenty minutes may sound long,’ Philip said. ‘But we’ll need all the time we can get to find the time machine. Let’s get moving.’

‘And from now on we shouldn’t talk,’ Samantha supplied. ‘We’re invisible, but not inaudible.’

‘Yes we are,’ Steven said and although his expression was difficult to read through the glare of the aura, it was clearly audible that he was enjoying this.

‘Hey,’ Samantha sounded a little annoyed. ‘When you made *me* invisible I was not to make any sound.’

‘That time I didn’t have this amount of energy at my disposal. I thought I might as well go the extra mile and make sure we can talk freely.’

‘You might want to ask us first before doing stuff we didn’t agree on,’ Clarice said. ‘That is our power you are using and seeing that we don’t fully thrust

you, we could put something nasty in it if we think that you are using it for your own benefit.'

'You can do that?' Steven suddenly didn't sound that happy anymore.

'Can you stop bickering for a moment and focus?' Philip interrupted. 'Skylar, could you disable that alarm?'

They were now standing at the back of the warehouse in front of a fire exit. A small light had been blinking next to the doorhandle until Skylar had waved it's hand in front of it. There was a click and the light was now a steady green. Skylar opened the door and indicated to the other to enter.

'After you,' he said in a mocking polite voice when Hekate walked past. She looked at him in a way that said: 'I could do some things to you right now that would make you wish you were never born, but I decide not to. You might not be this lucky next time.' and went inside.

Test