

The Twenty-Fifth Hour

by S. Y. Affolee

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"The twenty fifth is called Sadalabra or Sadalachia, that is a Butterfly or a spreading forth; it helps to besiege and revenge, it destroys enemies, makes divorce, confirms prisons and buildings, hastens messengers, it is conducive to spells against copulation, and so binds every member of man who cannot perform his duty."

– Agrippa, *Of Occult Philosophy*

Dramatis Personae

for the confused, in alphabetical order

Amanda - a male English bulldog who likes expensive shoes
Bartholemew Larrington - Ira's financially obsessed nephew
Diana Goldstein - middle-aged housewife, Xanthia's cousin
Donald Reece - Ira's deceased husband
Esther Friesner - Vicker's very young wife
Gregory Palwick - Ira's transplanted British butler
Hadrian Block - mystery editor at Ravenstone Publishing
Ira Reece - hostess and famous mystery author
Marcus Drenth - literary editor at Ravenstone Publishing
Mary Wolfe - the housekeeper
Phineas Cronan - late 19th century tycoon
Reine Lee - science non-fiction editor at Ravenstone Publishing
Stephen Kluger - a German Baron
Tabora Kluger - also the Baroness, Ira's childhood friend
Tuesday - an Abyssinian cat found in a fisherman's net
Vicker Friesner - businessman, Ira's longtime friend
Xanthia Greenberg - Ira's personal astrologer

I. Thaine

8:00 AM

"Pure crap. You've got to rewrite that."

Reine glanced at the rear view mirror and saw that the passenger sprawled out on the back seat, a tall lanky man with choppy cut muddy hair, had his fingers to his lips as if he were sucking on a cigarette. His mouth pursed to blow imaginary smoke into the car. His eyes were closed.

"Your characters are hackneyed. Your plot recycled from your last book. Where's your spark?"

"Is he always like this?" Reine asked Marcus who was sitting slouched in shotgun, furiously

crossing out lines in a manuscript with red ink.

"Like what?"

"Talking in his sleep."

He shrugged. "How should I know? Ask his girlfriend."

"He has a new girlfriend every week."

The gray truck in front of them turned right on an intersection. She floored the accelerator and the changing leaves lazily passing by became a blur of gold. Two hours before, Reine had met up with Marcus and Hadrian at the lobby of their place of employment, Ravenstone Publishing, to carpool. The three of them had been invited to Monadnock by Ira for a little house party.

The invitation had come three weeks earlier during a small birthday celebration for Reine. They were having lunch at the tiny bistro across the street from Ravenstone Publishing and Hadrian had unceremoniously whipped out a dainty pink envelope from the inner pocket of his crinkled leather jacket. It was a birthday card with flowers and animals and a hastily scrawled message in Hadrian's unintelligible hand. After seeing the card, Marcus had scowled and shoved a small misshapen object wrapped in twine and brown paper. That had been a ghoulish gargoyle who wobbled his head whenever he moved. It was a dashboard ornament to add to Reine's beloved collection. And Ira, the tiny snow-haired woman who first met them at a posh New York party back when they were young, naïve upstarts in the publishing industry, handed her a black velvet pouch with drawstrings that contained twenty-four tumbled quartz stones in all the colors of the rainbow.

"But I'm not twenty-four," Reine had protested.

"It doesn't matter," Ira had replied. "They've been in my family for generations, but I'm giving it to you because you'll probably find them more interesting. My family called them seeing stones. What you're supposed to see, I have no idea. There were supposed to be twenty-five, but I think I lost one."

"Why are they called seeing stones?" Hadrian had opened the bag and picked out a red stone to examine. "Are they like runes?"

"Runes are actual letters," Marcus had explained. "Maybe these act as a scrying focus. Sort of like a crystal ball."

Ira had waved a hand and said, "Well whatever it is, I'm just reminded that I wanted to invite the three of you to my house over for a week or two. An old-fashioned house party. It's large and so there's plenty of room. I'm also planning to have a few of my other friends there and I'm sure you'll like all of them."

Marcus yawned and stretched his long limbs. He was similar in build to Hadrian but was a little narrower in the shoulders and dark-haired. And where Hadrian was as pretty and as flighty as a movie star, Marcus was austere. His left cheek was marred by a scar that slashed downward. Fencing accident, he had once explained tersely.

"Why on earth didn't Ira just get a penthouse in Manhattan?" He stuffed the rest of the manuscript in a manila folder and looked at the driver, a slight woman who had stuffed her

long black hair underneath a baseball cap in a miserable attempt to look like one of the boys.

"I think she likes living the high life of a mystery author," she replied. "That is, being mysterious. But I've got to admit that Monadnock is a bit extreme."

"Out in the middle of nowhere," Hadrian agreed in his sleep. "Your plot has to go somewhere you know."

"Do you have a sock?" said Reine.

Marcus blinked. "Whatever for?"

"To stuff his mouth. This is a vacation, for Christ's sake. I don't want to hear about work even if he is only talking in his sleep."

Marcus's gift, the gargoyle, bobbed his head on Reine's dashboard as if in agreement.

"I don't want any of my socks dripping with his saliva," Marcus said.

"Maybe we can stuff him into the trunk the next time we make a pit stop," said Reine, hopefully.

The road ahead stretched and twisted into the reddened foliage. There was no sign of civilization except for the small green mile markers that steadily increased. In the back, Hadrian let out a few grunts before settling down into a low snoring.

At first, Reine hadn't wanted to go to Ira's house party. She figured she would be surrounded by egocentric writerly types. But as the weeks wore on and the pile of manuscripts awaiting her editorial expertise increased instead of decreased (or even staying the same), Ira's invitation began to look more and more appealing.

Ira Reece was the established mystery writer for the best-selling series *Through the Acorn Glass*, an amalgam of sex, violence, and mystery that the public gobbled up like candy and the critics hated with a passion. One would have never guessed Ira, a short elderly lady of in her late seventies, to write such controversial books. A few years before, Ravenstone Publishing had acquired the rights to put out the rest of the series after a huge bidding war with two other publishing houses. At the same time, Ravenstone had hired three new editors to take over the ailing divisions of science non-fiction, literary fiction, and mystery fiction.

Reine, Marcus, and Hadrian had naturally gravitated to each other—not only because they were a generation apart from the good old boys in charge of the other divisions, but that the chairman and chief financial backer of Ravenstone Bartholemew Larrington was against their appointments in the first place. So at one of the parties, the three were skulking and lamenting about their "required" attendance when Ira burst into the scene. She had taken an immediate liking for the young editors and in casual daring, whisked them away from the stuffy party to join her for dinner at a downscale Italian restaurant three blocks away.

And now, they were roaring down a small back road, part of the half day journey from New York to Monadnock in Reine's gas guzzling green Ford Explorer.

The early morning was misting, painting the sky a bluish-gray. They had left the last exit

fifteen miles behind.

Suddenly a brown blur careened ahead. Reine slammed on the breaks. Marcus uttered a sharp expletive. A crash was heard from the back seat as Hadrian was chucked from his previous comfortable position to the tiny space occupied by the cup holders.

The stag was a foot away from the bumper. He turned his head to stare at the humans through the windshield. Clear dark eyes peered from a sleek triangular head graced with an interwoven nest of antlers.

"You hit me!" Hadrian exclaimed. He had managed to crawl back onto the back seat without waking up.

The stag abruptly sprinted away, disappearing into the shimmering trees like a frightened sprite.

"Why did I have to draw the short straw?" Reine muttered as she pressed her foot on the accelerator again.

"Because you were gullible," replied Marcus, "And I didn't trust Hadrian's meager driving skills."

II. Natalon

12:00 PM

Monadnock wasn't a town really. Main Street consisted of a few clapboard buildings with faded signs that proclaimed "Post Office" or "McNally's Groceries" or even "Bubba's Hardware". For a few minutes, Reine impatiently plodded behind a teenager in a battered pick-up truck who was learning to drive until the kid turned down the driveway that led to the local high school. Immediately, she zoomed ahead only to turn down another road, one hidden behind a cairn topped with a wooden post.

Hadrian finally awoke from his morning nap and fumbled instinctively in his coat pocket for a pack of cigarettes.

"Don't you dare," said Reine, not even glancing at the rear view mirror.

"I'll open the window."

"No."

He sighed, crossing his arms for a lack of anything to occupy his hands. "There are too many trees."

"What do you expect in the middle of a forest?" said Marcus. "An industrial plant?"

"Of course not. But I thought Ira said there were mountains or something. You know, I'm not sure if this is such a hot idea. Ira's great and all, but she's what, seventy already?"

"Sixty-eight."

"Yeah, whatever, but haven't you noticed that most of her friends are about her age? We're

going to be sitting around in some rustic cabin in the middle of nowhere listening to the good old days when flappers were scandalous in Charleston or something. She might have said that we'll find interesting people there, but I don't think she meant people our age, you know? Her other guests are probably some old men who collect rifles to shoot moose with or little old ladies who crochet and speed."

A stick of spearmint chewing gum landed on his lap.

"What's this?"

"To shut you up," replied Marcus.

Reine chuckled. "I'm beginning to think I liked you better unconscious."

Hadrian sniffed at the gum suspiciously before he tore open the wrapper and popped it into his mouth. "Oh yeah? What did I say when I was asleep?"

"Unfortunately nothing that was blackmail material," said Reine.

He grunted approvingly.

For about five more miles, the forest continued like an unending ocean. Reine tapped a finger impatiently at the edge of the steering wheel. The gargoyle on the dashboard nodded its head, keeping time with the tapping. Hadrian snapped his gum loudly and deliberately. An empty coffee cup flew from the front seat only to land on his forehead. He grinned.

The forest then abruptly stopped, giving way to a plateaued clearing that overlooked a lake. An enormous shed that doubled as a carport hugged the base of the plateau, but none of the four cars already parked were underneath it for shelter. Instead, they were scattered willy-nilly across the driveway that had terminated into a semi-circle. A small footpath led up the plateau, and at this flattened hill's crown was topped a large house, a fortress actually that looked like it had been shipped across the Atlantic. It was carved out of dark stone and decorated with towers, each with slits for windows.

Reine ground her car to a halt beside a blue Pontiac that looked like it had seen better days thirty years ago.

"Finally!" Hadrian exclaimed. He burst out the door with a deceptively lazy movement and stood, only to spit out the gum onto the wrapping he saved before and to take out the pack of cigarettes he located on his breast pocket. After lighting up a cigarette and taking a drag, he said, "Isn't the air wonderful?"

"Speak for yourself," said Reine, unlocking the trunk and pulling out a suitcase. "We've got to lug all this stuff up that damned hill."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." He left the cigarette on his lip and sauntered to the back to pull out his own luggage. "Ira wasn't kidding when she said the house had plenty of room."

The three of them finished unloading the trunk, strapping tote bags and carryons with their shoulders and wheeling the rest of the suitcases behind them. The small footpath wound up the hill at a steep gradient. At the top, they had a panoramic view of the area, downtown Monadnock appeared as a few rooftops, the forest spread out like a gold carpet, and the lake was a dark looking glass, mirroring the sky through a tinted film.

Hadrian wheezed. "I've got to get more exercise."

"Then give up the cigarettes," said Marcus.

"Never!" He puffed defiantly on the rest of the joint before stubbing it out with the heel of his shoe. "I've got to keep up appearances."

A brief grin flitted across Marcus's mouth.

The entrance was framed by a series of three stone steps, each cut a different height, and two stone guardians, a sphinx-like lion sprawled atop a pedestal that doubled as a mailbox and a dragon that twined himself up a lamppost. The front door was a thin slip of dense wood complete with an iron ring doorknocker and a sliding panel on top which the occupant would open in order to inspect strangers.

But the panel never opened when Hadrian punched the discrete button for the electric doorbell at the side of the door. Instead, the front door itself opened revealing a woman in her late twenties with long blonde hair the shade of melted butter. Her salmon sweater and jeans did nothing to hide her buxom, yet trim figure. Hadrian and Marcus immediately smiled at her appearance. The woman smiled back. Reine let out a long suffering sigh.

Barking was heard from the interior. Suddenly a pudgy English bulldog, white liberally speckled with brown, with a red collar appeared, drool dripping from his lolling tongue. The ugly beast immediately latched himself onto Hadrian's pant leg. With a yelp, he attempted to shake the animal off, but was unsuccessful.

"You must be Amanda," Hadrian said, thinking back to his last conversation with Ira a week before. The mystery author seemed quite excited that he meet her beloved Amanda. The dog growled.

The woman smiled wider. "I'm sorry. I'm Mary Wolfe, Ira's housekeeper. He's Amanda. He looks delighted to meet you."

"That's Amanda?"

Reine covered her mouth, squeaking with suppressed laughter.

"Ira first thought she had gotten a female, but when we found out Amanda was really a he, it was too late to change the name," explained Mary. "Well, Ira told me that several of her guests would be arriving later today and she had everything planned out as to where everyone was to stay. Please come in. Would you like to take your bags to your rooms first?"

"Yes, if you don't mind," Reine said, stepping into the threshold. Amanda finally let go of Hadrian's leg and waddled back into the house. With a sigh, he followed the others into the interior. "I'm Reine."

"Ah, I heard so much about you," babbled Mary as she led the three through a foyer covered in traditional Chinese paintings of monkeys, horses, and dragons. "You edit science books, right? Like that book on fossils and geology?"

"You mean Drumfield's book *Dinosaurs and Bedrock*?"

"Yes, that's it."

Reine peered at the housekeeper speculatively. "I never would have figured you for a fan of science books."

"I am. I guess I live vicariously through them because I know I'll never be a scientist."

"Is it too much to hope that you also read fiction?" said Marcus.

"Literary fiction?"

He nodded.

Mary made a disgusted face. "You must be the literary fiction editor. No offense, but I think literary fiction is a bit too pretentious. I like mysteries. Especially Ira's mysteries."

"That's right up my ally," exclaimed Hadrian.

"Yes it is." The housekeeper directed them up a flight of stairs that began at the end of the foyer and ended halfway at the first landing on the second floor. A darkened hallway extended in both directions. She motioned towards the left. "So which one of you is Hadrian Block? Ira wants you to stay at the next to the last room on the left. She said to feel free to smoke cigarettes or cigars or joints or whatever as long as you leave the window open. I think it was originally supposed to be a smoking saloon."

"Ira thought of everything!" Hadrian lifted his belongings onto the hallway. "Maybe I'll give the room a test run."

"Perhaps you should wait until after lunch," Mary suggested, "because it is being served right now in the dining room downstairs. It's buffet style so you don't have to worry appearing too late."

"Hm. I guess you're right, food it is."

The stairs continued upward with another flight to terminate at the third floor. Another identical hallway streamed in both directions.

Mary nodded toward the same direction where Hadrian had gone a floor below. "Ira wanted you two to have the two rooms at the very end. It doesn't matter which one you pick since they're both virtually identical. They both share a balcony with a great view of Lake Shayadoh."

"Is that what the lake is called?" mused Reine. "American Indian, isn't it? What tribe is it from and what does it mean?"

Mary shrugged. "I have no idea."

As the housekeeper trudged back down the stairs, Reine dragged her bags down the hall and pushed open the last door on the left. She shoved everything inside.

"I'm famished. I'm getting lunch before exploring the place."

Marcus did the same. "Ira must be downstairs. We'll have to make an appearance to assure her we didn't get lost on our way here."

"Assuming Hadrian hasn't beaten us to it."

Downstairs, the foyer led to a main living room the size of a small cavern. The ceiling stretched upwards for another story, the empty wall above decorated with assorted stuffed heads of moose and deer. The head over the fireplace which faced the foyer suspiciously resembled the stag they had nearly run over on their way to Monadnock.

"Maybe you should have run that stag over," Marcus said. "We could have brought the head back to add to Ira's collection."

"And what, dirty my car with blood? No thanks."

French doors on the right of the living room led directly to the dining room where some guests were already seated, eating and chatting. At the other end of the room was a wet bar set with a dazzling array of food from salads to sandwiches and to soups. Hadrian was already halfway through the line, his plate already piled precariously with sandwiches.

"Well good thing we got here when we did," said Marcus. "If we got here any later all the food would be gone."

"Not really gone," replied Hadrian, "Just relocated. To my stomach."

The dining table, which looked like it was meant for about ten people, was a long rectangle covered with a forest green tablecloth. Instead of the expected overhead lighting provided by a chandelier, there was a large ceiling fresco of naked nymphs cavorting with lusty fauns. Instead, the actual lighting was provided by a variety of floor lamps in different heights but the same style along the walls.

Four guests already occupied the table. An older couple around Ira's age sat across from two women, probably in their late thirties or forties, who looked too similar to be unrelated. The wife of the couple was a sleek elegant lady with fine silver hair curled up into a chignon at the back of her neck. She wore a simple dark blue long-sleeved dress that was cinched at the waist with a gray belt. Her hands glittered with rings. Her husband appeared to be her perfect match with the same sleek build and same simple fashion sense with a casual gray suit. The man was bald, but had a thick gray mustache that drooped slightly at the ends.

The woman sitting across from the wife was plump with crinkle lines at the edge of her eyes and mouth. Her bobbed short hair was graying and she wore a white sweatshirt decorated with pink and blue morning glories. She exuded charm like a tired suburban housewife and picked at the food on her plate, making it obvious that she was on a diet. The woman across from the husband was the most striking of the tetrad in that she was wearing a turban the color of a drag queen's pink boa (and the feathers sticking up on top of the turban probably came from that same boa) along with a black robe that shimmered whenever she shifted. Only her lined hands revealed her age. Her face was smooth and clear, completely bland except for her eyes which glimmered gold in the light.

"Hello," greeted the older woman, the wife. Her accent held a subtle British lilt. "I'm glad you could make it. Ira promised us a large party. I'm Tabora."

Hadrian, Marcus, and Reine sat down and made hasty introductions.

"Is Ira coming for lunch?" inquired Reine.

"Unfortunately, no," Tabora replied. "The butler, what's-his-name told us that she'll be busy most of today working on her latest story."

"You've got to give an artist some latitude," her husband said philosophically. "By the way, I'm Stephan." His accent was much harsher than his wife's although he was quite soft-spoken.

"They're Baron and Baroness," said the woman across from Tabora, slightly awed. "They just finished telling us they're from Germany. Or at least Stephan is. Tabora's from some titled family in England."

Tabora laughed. "My pedigree isn't that interesting, Diana."

"Diana is a bit naïve even for her age," said the turbaned woman. "I'm Xanthia. Xanthia Greenberg."

She held out her hand to Reine who was sitting next to her. Hastily, Reine finished off her latest forkful of salad to shake hands but Xanthia surprised her by jerking it toward her and pulling it palm up.

"Birthday?"

"Er. Three weeks ago. I just turned twenty-nine. What are you trying to do?"

"Xanthia is Ira's personal astrologer," Tabora supplied.

"Astrologer?" Reine yelped attempting to pull her hand away.

Marcus, who sat across from her, coughed to stifle a chuckle.

"Ah, very interesting." Xanthia abruptly let go of her hand sending her careening backwards into Hadrian. "You're going to have a grand adventure of self-discovery. I can tell you more in private if you drop by my room later."

"Don't listen to her," said Diana. "She's trying to con you."

Instead of spluttering in outrage, Xanthia calmly turned to Diana and said, "You're not the one with the gift."

"What gift? You're just not willing to take up a real job."

"And you should have listened to me when I told you not to marry Stan."

"Hey, don't you dare attack Stan. He's a nice guy even though he may be a little clueless."

"Clueless, my ass. He's completely oblivious. That's why you try to escape real life by reading Ira's books."

Diana's face flamed and she ground her teeth. "This discussion is pointless."

"The point is, you never listen to me." Xanthia serenely took a sip of her tea as if she had already won the argument.

Tabora discretely cleared her throat. "Did you hear the news this morning on television?"

III. Mathon

5:00 PM

After lunch, Reine had taken a walk next to the shoreline of the lake, picking up smooth pebbles in an attempt to skip them on the water. She had failed to master that particular trick. Later, she decided to go back to her room to unpack for the week and found that Ira had an eclectic taste for interior decorating. The room was large, probably as big as the entire first floor of her apartment back in New York. A king sized four poster bed occupied the center of the room. The frame was oak painted with a dark varnish. The bed curtains were filmy lace drifting down like cobwebs. A large wardrobe stood facing the bed and to the corner was a tiny door leading to an adequately sized bathroom with a shower. The floor and walls of the bathroom were lined with Mexican tiles in turquoise and canary yellow.

The tall thin windows in the room also served as the doors to the balcony. She opened them, letting the cool late autumn air rush into the room. The balcony was a coarse stone walkway with a curling wrought iron railing. Another set of windowed doors at other end of the balcony remained closed. Reine stood at the railing and took off her cap and undid her ponytail. Eagerly, the wind mused her hairs, causing a chaotic black cloud to swirl behind her.

She took the pouch of seeing stones that Ira had given her out of her pocket and randomly took a stone out. It was a dark blue one, one that made her think of cold lake water and lonely boat rides to the small forested island at the center of the lake. Rubbing the stone against her palm, it grew warmer. Was the stone changing color? After another minute of examining the stone, perhaps seeing if it really was scrying material, she dropped the stone back into the pouch and went back inside.

Running her hand through her hair to untangle the wind's endeavors, she went back downstairs only to hear a few new voices in the foyer. She peeked in and saw that Mary the housekeeper and a taller older man with bushy eyebrows (the transplanted British butler Palwick as Tabora had pointed out) were attempting to fend off the blustery insistence of a red-faced man in his fifties to see Ira. There was also an older man, probably about Ira's age, and a beautiful young woman with curling auburn hair looking on in amusement. But it was the loud red-faced man who held Reine's attention. He was someone she recognized.

Quickly, she scurried into the living room where the rest of the guests were lounging, oblivious to the front door conversations. Xanthia was attempting to out-stare the flames in the fireplace. Xanthia's cousin, Diana was curled up in an armchair with Ira's latest mystery. The Baron and Baroness were talking in quiet tones, commenting on the chess game in progress which was between Hadrian and Marcus.

"Marcus is winning," Hadrian said sullenly.

"I've been playing chess longer than you have," his opponent said absently as he checkmated another of Hadrian's white pieces.

"Don't try to be modest. You enjoy clearing me out every chance you get."

Reine shook her head. "You can argue all you like later. Guess who has just arrived."

"More guests?" said Tabora.

"Yes." Reine crossed her arms and flopped onto the couch beside the Baronness. "But guess which ones."

"I hate guessing," said Marcus.

Hadrian looked thoughtful. "Must be someone bad judging from her expression. An ex-boyfriend?"

"Worse. It's Larrington."

"The bastard," fumed Hadrian.

"You don't suppose Ira would mind if we drown him in the lake?" said Marcus hopefully.

"That won't work. He's the only one who stands between having her published or not. Besides, Larrington has our salaries in his hands."

Confused, Stephan asked, "Who's this Larrington?"

"Ira's nephew. He hates Ira's work but allows her stuff to be published because it makes money," explained Marcus. "He also holds the purse strings to our publishing company. He isn't someone to cross."

From the foyer, they could hear Larrington finally bellowing, "I'm going to see her no matter what the hell she or anyone says, even if I have to break down the damn door!" The sound of glass shattering followed. Amanda who had been napping at Hadrian's feet woke up and started barking.

"The glass covering one of the paintings in the hallway needs to be replaced," said Xanthia, who was the only one not looking up from the commotion. "He's bringing much anger into the house."

"Understatement of the year," replied Diana.

The butler, Palwick, appeared at the entrance of the living room with the two other guests in tow. "Mr. And Mrs. Friesner," he announced.

"They're married?" whispered Tabora to her husband, aghast. "She's young enough to be his granddaughter, I bet."

"Some men feel insecure unless they have a trophy wife," Stephan replied. "Or I could just be saying that because I'm jealous."

"Stephan!"

The auburn-haired beauty who was introduced as Mrs. Friesner shrugged out of her mink coat with a toss of her head to reveal a dangerously low-necked black wool dress. Hadrian mouthed something to Marcus. Marcus only shook his head.

"Mr. Friesner is too formal. Everyone can call me Vicker. Right dear?"

His young wife draped her coat across her arm as her gaze landed on the two men who were even remotely her age. Her dark eyes turned thoughtful. "Of course, Vicker. Ira did say that this was an informal party."

Vicker placed a hand on his wife's shoulder. "This is Esther. We just got married two months ago, but I'd like to think we're still in the middle of our honeymoon."

Reine looked like she was about to be sick on Ira's living room carpet. Amanda wandered over to the newly arrived guests. The bulldog briefly sniffed at Vicker, but showed more interest in Esther's designer leather boots. Amanda began drooling over them in earnest.

"Disgusting little beast," Esther remarked.

"Let me get him for you." Vicker picked up Amanda and lugged the bulldog back into the foyer to put him outside.

"You don't look so well," Tabora told Reine, concerned.

She waved a hand. "I'm okay."

"Are you sure? You could be coming down with the flu. I have just the thing for it, an old German remedy I learned a while back. It's fairly foul-tasting, but it works."

Esther sashayed over to the collection of couches and chairs in the living room and chose a covered footstool near the chessboard forcing Hadrian and Marcus to look down at her in order to acknowledge her. Marcus paled. Hadrian gulped.

"So who's winning?" Esther asked.

"Um."

"Er."

"Darling," boomed Vicker as he arrived back into the living room. "I didn't know you played chess."

"I don't."

"Palwick," Mary called out from the foyer, "I'm done sweeping up the glass." She entered the living room and announced in general, "Dinner will be ready in a while. So meanwhile, make yourselves at home."

"Ira's got a nice place," Vicker said cheerfully, oblivious to his wife's attempted machinations. "She mentioned that she had inherited an old junker, but she was being too modest."

"I'm surprised you haven't come out here sooner," said Tabora. "So when did you find the time to get married again? Last I heard, you were down in South Africa supervising another

of your ventures. I wouldn't have thought you would have had the time. New ventures tend to fill up your schedule pretty quickly."

"I should know," the Baron added. "After a while, it just gets tedious, you know? So a couple years back I decided to go into retirement and hand over the business to the son."

Vicker chuckled. "Unluckily, I don't have any children to hand the business over. Lately, I've been delegating responsibility to the vice president who's much more younger and energetic. I figure he'll buy me out sooner or later anyway. I met Esther during one of my vacations to Rio. She was doing a photo shoot for a magazine in between some acting gigs. You could say it was love at first sight."

"Hm," said Tabora. "Well, it's too bad you didn't have the chance to get down here before. Ira told me that the house was originally built in the late 1800s by an eccentric tycoon. Ever heard of Phineas Cronan?"

"No, who's Phineas Cronan?" said Marcus. He and Hadrian had hastily reset the chessboard despite their unfinished game.

"I beginning to miss Amanda," declared Hadrian. "The pug has his high points." He fled through the living room to the foyer.

Without an excuse, Marcus took a place behind the sofa where Reine was sitting, shielding himself from Esther who pouted. She would let her quarry off the hook. For now.

"Phineas Cronan," Reine mused. "He's like Rockefeller and Vanderbilt, right? Was he one of those railroad barons? He must have owned a steel mill somewhere up here."

"Actually, he got rich importing furniture as well as some more questionable material," said Tabora. "Particularly alcohol, snuff, and poor peasants from eastern Europe who were basically sold into indentured servitude. He was also rumored to be into questionable religious activities. This house is supposedly modeled after or was a reconstruction of a fortress in south France where the Knights Templar were headquartered."

"He was into the black arts, then?" asked Vicker.

"Oh, yes he was," said Xanthia who had finally walked over to the larger gathering. The feathers on her turban waved as she nodded in a faint trance-like rhythm. "I can feel his spirit sometimes wandering about the house, looking for something. A malevolent spirit."

"I thought you were an astrologer," said Reine, "not a psychic."

"I'm very versatile."

"So you mean there are ghosts here?" said Vicker intrigued.

"There are no such things as ghosts," said Tabora loudly.

Hadrian sauntered back in holding Amanda tucked under his arm. "What is this about ghosts?"

Something crashed loudly behind Hadrian in the foyer which made everyone jump. Esther shrieked. Amanda took the opportunity from the commotion to tumble from Hadrian's arms

and to wander over to an empty armchair to go to sleep underneath.

"Damn stairs!" It was Larrington. The guests turned back to Tabora, finally ignoring Ira's irate nephew.

"There are no such things as ghosts," Tabora repeated. "Anyways, Phineas Cronan's secular life was as wild as his religious life. At one time, he supposedly had ten different mistresses. He didn't even bother sneaking around for his affairs either. He had them all under one roof, here in fact. People in town called the women his personal harem. He died naked in bed with a wineglass in his right hand and a mistress on each arm."

"How embarrassing," remarked Reine.

"He must have died happy," countered Marcus.

Reine tilted her head back to look at him. "Don't tell me you're actually jealous of some dead guy." He only grinned back, the scar on his face making him look slightly demonic.

"Phineas Cronan died around 1915," said Stephan. He waved a hand vaguely over in the direction of the dining room. "He was buried over there, in a cemetery beside the church that is approximately a mile over in that direction. The church was here even before Monadnock was settled. It was supposedly the center for religious activities to convert the non-believers during the day and to perform the dark arts during the night. Members of some Masonic club gathered there."

"The Freemasons," Tabora supplied.

"Yes, that's it. The church is abandoned now, but the ruins are still quite spectacular. It was built entirely of stone with one tall steeple at the front. It was also for Christians who were of the Methodist Episcopal persuasion, although back in the day, the inhabitants of Monadnock would tell you that no real Christians ever went there. The church wasn't there during colonial times, though. It was only just built around 1850. Before, there was only a hut that served as a Masonic lodge. And even before then, they were supposed to be some sacred place for Native Americans. The foundations were poured to cover a small system of caverns that the local Indians used to bury their dead before the Europeans came."

"Did archaeologists come to excavate?" asked Reine.

"Two or three came around the 1960s, but they only found a couple of femur bones or something like that. They concluded that it wasn't a major burial ground. None have come since," confirmed the Baron. "It doesn't look that interesting. You could probably hike out to see it. There's a trail leading from the back of the house into the woods in that direction. There's nothing there except the abandoned church and its overgrown cemetery."

"Well, it sounds interesting to me," said Reine. "Maybe I'll go out to see it tomorrow."

"I'll go with you," said Marcus.

"Me too," said Hadrian hastily, not liking the determined glint in Esther's eye.

"Too bad," Esther drawled. "I was hoping one of you would teach me chess. I've never played it before."

"I'll teach you!" said Vicker.

"Great." But his young wife didn't sound too pleased.

"Yes, too bad," said Larrington who had sneaked into the gathering while the Baron and Baronness were explaining about Ira's house. He was standing next to the fire, his large puffy form thrown in highlight looked like an orange snowman. "I thought it was a lucky break Aunt Ira invited you all here. I was hoping to talk to you three about next year's schedule."

Three pairs of eyes sent scathing looks toward his direction. "We already sent you our proposal before we left," said Marcus.

"I never got it in the mail."

"Of course you didn't," admonished Tabora, "because you never check you're mail. Ira tells me that you spend all your time driving up here to bother her about money."

"She tells you?" his voice rose. "How can she tell you when she never speaks to me, her own nephew?"

The ringing of a bell broke him off from his ranting. The guests turned toward the sound to find a short elderly woman with curly white hair standing on the threshold of the dining room. She wore a simple voluminous black dress. One hand gripped the head of a cane. The other hand held a small golden bell.

"Dinner is ready," the woman announced.

IV. Netos

7:00 PM

Amanda started barking and waddled to the woman with his tongue happily hanging out of his mouth.

"Aunt Ira, I've been trying to find you ever since I got here!"

She ignored her nephew. "All right everyone, get off your butts and come and eat before the food gets cold."

The guests slowly moved toward the dining room. The dark green tablecloth was replaced with one that was bright red with pink hearts. White candles were placed at intervals to coincide with the seating. There were tiny manila placards next to the wine glasses indicating where everyone was to be seated. Ira took the seat at the head of the table.

"I'll trade you," Larrington said to Vicker who had been assigned to sit on Ira's left. "I need to talk to my aunt about some very important things."

"No," Ira said, her blue eyes sharpening on her nephew like daggers. "Go back to your seat. Vicker stays here. I haven't seen him in some years. You come by practically every day."

Larrington sulked and wandered off to the other end of the table where he sat with the astrologer and her cousin.

"You must excuse Larrington," said Ira to Vicker. "His brain is the size of a pea. It's only big enough to hold one thought."

"Sort of like a tenacious dog, eh?"

Amanda woofed, insulted by Vicker's comment. He made himself comfortable underneath Ira's chair.

"Hadrian, darling, you have met Amanda?"

"Yes, Ira. Quite an ugly pug, I'd have to say. But he sort of grows on you, doesn't he?"

"I loved him the first time I laid my eyes on him," Ira declared.

Reine's seat was to Ira's right. "The Baroness, Tabora, said that you were busy writing today."

"Something like that. I was deep in research for my next novel. You know how it is. Ah, well, Marcus, I see you and the others have gotten here safe and sound."

Marcus had found himself wedged between Reine and Esther and was sitting across from Tabora who was occupying Vicker's attention with some of her childhood adventures. "Actually, Reine was driving. She got the short straw." He discretely scooted his chair an inch away from Vicker's wife.

The rest of the dinner went rather smoothly despite the grumbling of Larrington at the end of the table and the occasional bickering between Xanthia and Diana that always wound down to angry stares across the table. Hadrian was sitting next to Tabora and Xanthia, but also across from Esther. He was making strange faces all throughout dinner.

"Is something wrong with the dessert?" Ira inquired as Hadrian made a surprised face as he tasted a spoonful of the chocolate mousse that Palwick and Mary had served out a few minutes before.

"No, nothing is wrong," Hadrian hastily said. But it was clear that he meant something else entirely and it wasn't about the mousse.

"I think he's just suffering from nicotine withdrawal," Marcus said, sending him a sympathetic glance.

At the end of dinner, Ira tapped a spoon to a wineglass to inform everyone that she was regretfully leaving everyone for the night. The research on her newest novel beckoned. Most of the guests moved back to the living room for some more conversation, but the three editors fled upstairs.

"I hope we don't have assigned seats tomorrow," said Hadrian.

"Was there something wrong with the chair you were sitting in?" Reine asked.

"No. Something was playing with me feet, and I don't think it was Amanda."

She frowned. "What was playing with your feet? Amanda remained underneath Ira's chair

the entire time, sleeping.”

“That woman.” Hadrian shuddered. “For some reason, she gives me the creeps despite her pretty face. I think she was attempting to play footsie with me during dinner.”

“Consider yourself lucky,” said Marcus. “I was sitting next to her the whole time and it was sort of difficult trying to keep her hand from wandering to places where it shouldn’t be.”

“What do you mean? I thought you two would be all over the opportunity for an affair with a beautiful woman.”

“Have you ever seen me with a married woman?” Hadrian countered.

Marcus emphatically agreed. “She’s not my type.”

V. Jayon

10:00 AM

Hadrian had been the first of the guests to wake up. Reine and Marcus arrived downstairs half an hour later, finding him in the kitchen, helping Mary make breakfast. He looked out of place yet enthusiastic. The apron that Mary had lent him was a bit too small since it only covered his chest to his hips. He was eagerly helping the young housekeeper with the French toast.

“Isn’t it a miracle?” remarked Mary. “He’s domesticated.”

“Must have been all those years forced to cook on my own,” Hadrian agreed. “So go away. The master is at work.”

“Which means,” Mary translated, “that he isn’t done. Come back in about an hour.”

Ira’s house was oddly oriented in that the rooms on the first floor were connected to each other like a maze since there was no hallway to divide the living room from the kitchen. Instead, the kitchen which was located at the front of the house, melded into the dining room. French doors from the dining room led to the living room which had various doors leading off to various areas. One of these doors led to the foyer. Another led to the back where there was a den paneled with wide windows that opened into a stone porch that overlooked the lake.

Reine turned on the television. “It isn’t like Ira to ignore all her guests, especially if she’s the one throwing the party.”

“Yes. Maybe she isn’t feeling too well. The weather is getting cooler. Maybe she’s coming down with a cold,” Marcus suggested.

“Or the flu. Ira’s getting on in her years. When she gets up, we’ll see how she is. Doctors are few and far between around here aren’t they?”

“Out in the boondocks? Yeah.” Marcus settled himself beside Reine on the couch. He was casually clad in a pair of jeans and a dark blue sweater. Reine was clad similarly, except her sweater was a pale cream. He tugged playfully at her hair. “Ponytail again?”

"Sure why not," she said easily. "I'm not going out of my way to dye it green."

The movement on the television screen caught their eyes. A sober anchorman in a starch-pressed teal suit gripped a few papers in his hand. His eyes, glazed, were directed to the camera as he spoke.

"The creature currently on the loose in downtown New York is confirmed to be an experiment from NYGL, the New York Gene Labs. Our sources tell us that the creature was created using DNA extracted from dinosaur fossils, iguanas, and dogs in an effort to create a biological weapon for the government's defense division. We turn to Lenora Weatherspoon who's on the scene at West End."

The screen switched to a perky brunette with a wide mouth. Lenora Weatherspoon was a well known journalist who had her own news magazine show "America Tonight." She had the persona of a persistent woodpecker, cheerily chipping away at anything and everything. She was the reporter that everyone loved to hate. Her life was completely clean as if she had been living in a completely different universe. The tabloids always failed when they tried to dig up any dirty little secrets. Because there were no dirty little secrets.

"Good evening everyone," she said in her eternal perky little girl voice. "As you can see, I'm here on the scene at West End."

There were people behind her, streaming out of the theaters in a panicked run. Many were screaming. "Run for your lives!" a young man yelled as he passed by the camera. Police sirens could be heard in the distance.

"The creature is apparently inside one of the buildings behind me being detained by some trained military personnel."

As the reporter droned on, Reine and Marcus noticed that in the background, a creature in the shape of a komodo dragon with gleaming scales emerged from one of the buildings by ripping off the doors. People scattered. Some of the slower ones made for the nearest exit to the subway. The creature roared and charged toward the reporter. The camera man kept filming, but the audience could tell he was running as the picture of the reporter got smaller.

"Hey, where do you think you're going?" Lenora Weatherspoon yelled. "I was..."

In a swift movement, the genetically engineered creature from the New York Gene Labs swooped down and swallowed her whole.

"Oh my God," said Reine.

"That's one less reporter in the world," remarked Marcus.

"She probably didn't feel a thing." She shook her head. "It was like watching a movie."

"I agree. I hope they catch the beast soon."

Reine finally turned off the television when the screen switched to a placard that said "Please Stand By. We Are Experiencing Technical Difficulties."

"Hey, Ira has another chess set in here." Marcus ambled to a corner that held a lamp, a thin bookshelf filled with a set of encyclopedias and a table. On top of the table was a wooden

chessboard with lighter and darker squares. The pieces were also carved out of wood of the same shade.

She walked over. "It looks like someone is in the middle of a game."

"At the beginning of the game," he corrected. "Only the white pawn is out of place."

"Middle, beginning, it's all the same. Both sides are already probably thinking ten moves ahead anyway."

They moved back to the dining room to see that Diana and Xanthia had also gotten up. They were each holding a mug of steaming liquid and arguing.

"Ira has no time for your inane predictions," said Diana.

"She has time when she's not writing. We have an agreement. I draw up the horoscope. She reads it. How much more simple can you get?"

"By not drawing a horoscope in the first place."

"She's paying me to draw horoscopes so what do you expect me to do?"

"To find a respectable job." Diana sighed. "I'm so tempted to throw a mug of coffee in your face in hopes of dragging some sense into you."

"Breakfast is served!" announced Hadrian as he lugged out a platter of waffles and eggs. "Well, actually brunch, but who's counting, eh?"

VI. Abai

11:00 AM

The library, the housekeeper mentioned, was at the opposite part of the house, located in one of the towers. It was only connected to the rest of the house via the foyer and a small alcove. The housekeeper herself never went in the library.

"It just makes me feel odd," she explained tersely, refusing to elaborate. Only Palwick entered to occasionally keep the dust off the books that Ira's deceased husband, Donald, had collected.

After breakfast, Reine had made it a point to explore Ira's mansion even if Ira herself wasn't present to be the tour guide. She started at the library. Its sole entrance was a plain tiny door in the alcove in the foyer. The door to the cloakroom was larger. Was the library simply an afterthought in the building's planning?

The doorknob turned easily under her hand and a gray room, dimly lit by the partially drawn drapes in the front of the room, greeted her. There was a fireplace at the opposite end and shelves of books on either side. Three armchairs faced the fireplace. One of the armchairs, particularly the one facing away from her, seemed to be occupied.

"Is anyone here?"

Silence greeted her. Unnerved, she flipped the switch beside the doorway. A series of lamps

from the ceiling flooded the room with light. She could see now that the drapes weren't really partially drawn. They were actually gauzy material similar to the cloth used as drapes on her bed. A broken grandfather clock stood next to the window. The floor was actually a mosaic of a compass pointing north, south, east, west, as well as northeast, northwest, southeast, southwest. With the light on, the tiles gleamed a dull gold as if they had just been unearthed from a grave.

Reine stepped forward, toward the armchairs. In the light, it looked like someone with white hair was sitting on the chair. "Ira? Is that you?" She was finally within arm's reach. She touched the hair, intending to gently wake the sleeping hostess. The hair slipped and fell to the floor.

"Ira?" She stepped over to face the armchair, only to find that the thing occupying the chair was not a person, but a mannequin. The faceless doll, once crowned with a white wig, was now bald. It wore a gown of the late Victorian period with stays on a corset and dark purple lace and ribbons. But the gown itself was torn at the bodice, straight down the middle revealing the doll's breasts and crotch, which were covered with a liquid, glistening substance.

She backed away. "I am not hyperventilating. I am not hyperventilating. I am not hyperventilating..." Her right hand instinctively found their way into her pocket where she kept the pouch of seeing stones. She clutched them like a talisman.

"Reine?"

She screamed.

"Reine, it's only me." Marcus steadied her by her waist as she flailed backwards. The pouch flew out of her hands, landing on the east marker of the floor compass. One stone rolled out of the pouch.

"Marcus." She let out a breath and stooped to pick up the pouch and the stone. She tucked the pouch back into her pocket, but held the stone in her hand for reassurance. She examined the color. It was dark purple. She shoved the stone into her pocket, rattled.

"Is anything wrong?"

"I'm just a little rattled, that's all."

"What's that?"

"No! Don't go over there..."

But he strolled over to the armchairs despite her protests. He blanched when he saw the desecrated mannequin. "And I thought blow-up dolls were bad." He stepped backwards and pulled Reine out of the library. She didn't resist.

"Maybe we should tell someone."

"Telling someone is the last thing to do. Considering Mary said that Palwick was the only one who ever goes in there."

"The butler?" Reine shuddered. "You would think that a butler would be more discrete."

"It might not be the butler. Think of all the people who are under the roof right now."

"Well, it's not you, right?"

"I would think that you thought more highly of me."

Reine later pleaded a case of nerves and retreated back to her room. She flopped back on her unmade bed thinking that sleeping might be a good cure for the scare she had in the library. But as she thought about it, the fear turned to distaste. She took out the pouch of seeing stones again.

There were twenty-four stones currently in her possession. Lying on her side, she opened the bag and spilled the stones onto the mattress. They glittered eerily. Were they trying to tell her something? From her previous conversations with Ira, there were supposedly twenty-five stones. The twenty-fifth stone was lost, somewhere in the house or the property. But finding it would be like finding a needle in a haystack.

Reine did not believe in fortune telling or seeing the future. Her life path had always been drawn to truth and fact, not wishy-washy interpretation. That was one of the reasons she never pursued the same goals as her musician parents. Whimsically, she gathered the stones again, mixing them randomly in the pouch. Many traditional fortune telling devices were bowdlerized to more sanitized versions for young girls to see who they married.

Who loves me?

She reached into the pouch and pulled out three stones. One was black. Another blue. The final one was red. Glancing at them, a brief image of a face flashed in her mind. She gasped. The face was a familiar one.

"No. It's just my hormones talking. Let's try this again." Dropping the stones back into the pouch, she slowly framed her next question.

Who was with the doll before I arrived?

She drew out three stones again. The first one was a blue stone of a lighter shade. The second was white. The third was the same dark purple stone that had rolled out of the bag earlier.

"Damn. That's too much of a coincidence." She stared at the stones a moment longer, but unlike the first drawing, she saw no face to go with her question. The stones only felt cold and heavy on her hand.

A rapping at the door broke through her thoughts. Leaving the stones on the bed, she opened the door.

"Marcus. Er, isn't your room across the hall?"

"I wanted to make sure that you were all right."

"Well, I'm better now, I suppose. I wanted to take a nap, but was sidetracked."

"Sidetracked?"

She beckoned him inside. "You know the stones that Ira gave me on my birthday?"

"Yeah. They were a hell of a better present than mine."

"Your gargoyle is cute," she said earnestly. "He looks right at home on the dashboard. Anyways, I was fiddling with the stones. I hadn't had a chance before to really look at them before. You were right. They're sort of like scrying stones. Instead I get feelings for what they're trying to tell me."

"Reine, the sober minded, now believes in hocus-pocus?"

"Let's say they enhance my intuition." She pointed to the bed. "I'm testing them. You get to ask the next question."

"You know, a different man would have completely different ideas when confronted with a woman trying to lure him to bed."

"Marcus!"

"All right, all right. I get the idea." He took off his shoes and climbed on the bed to sit cross-legged on the other side of the spread of stones. "So what do you want me to do, meditate?"

"Ask a question."

"What did you ask the stones first?"

She scowled. "Make up your own question. Mine's too embarrassing."

"All right. This sort of reminds me of something I read a while back where in the old days, young girls would cook a meal and set it out on a table at midnight and wait. Supposedly the spirit of their true love would come visit them then."

"Yeah? And your point is?"

"Well, I'll ask a sappy question. Who loves me?"

Reine sighed and held out the pouch. "I guess I wasn't so original after all. Take three."

Marcus reached in to pluck three stones and to place them on the bedspread. Surprise briefly flickered over his scarred features. "Well, that was unexpected."

"You saw her, didn't you?" Reine glanced at the stones he had picked. One was black, another red, and yet another cream, the color of her sweater.

"I saw..."

"I asked the same question earlier."

"As I gathered, considering the color of your face." He dropped the stones into the pouch. "I'm fine with it. But what will Hadrian say?"

"Hadrian? You saw Hadrian?"

"I didn't see Hadrian. Did you?"

"No! Of course not."

Marcus had leaned over, his face close to hers. His dark eyes were searching. "Reine, I didn't think..."

"Maybe you shouldn't think." She could feel his breath against her mouth. Her eyes drifted closed.

The door slammed, causing the two of them to jerk apart. Hadrian was plastered against the door with Amanda tucked under his right arm. The bulldog's tongue lolled out. Apparently, the canine was enjoying the ruckus.

"She's after me!" He fumbled into his pocket, taking out a pack of cigarettes.

"No you don't. Not in here," said Reine. "Ira reserved your room specifically for your habit."

"Damn." Hadrian shoved the cigarettes back. "How's a guy going to get a smoke around here? Do you have a closet?"

"There's the bathroom," said Marcus.

"Great. Come on Amanda. We're going to hide out on the throne while that harpy wears herself out searching through this monstrosity." Hadrian trotted into the bathroom and locked the door with a click.

Reine's bedroom door opened again.

"We need a sign around here," he joked. "High traffic area."

"Oh, give me a break."

Mrs. Esther Friesner stood in the doorway. "I thought I saw someone come in here." She blinked, seeing Reine and Marcus in bed. "Oh, sorry. I thought this was a closet."

VII. Barol

2:00 PM

Lake Shayadoh rippled in the wind, disrupting its black-mirrored surface. Reine stood at the shore, pulling her gray jacket closer to her and trying not to think. The thought of a certain literary editor made her stomach clench uncomfortably. The smooth stones beneath her feet gleamed enticingly, wanting her to pick them up, to skip them on the rough lake surface, but she ignored them. Instead, she opted to walk along the shore, her back to the plateau with the house.

Reine had taken her hair down from the ponytail she had earlier. The wind was whipping the strands crazily, but she didn't care if they got tangled. The shore was slightly rocky but edged towards sand as land became water. The forest stayed a respectable distance away. There was a trail that forked off from the shore to join with the forest, but she ignored that.

At its widest, the lake was about three miles in diameter. In the center of Lake Shayadoh was an island that appeared forested. The Baron, who had tagged along with this wife to visit Ira before, had mentioned that the apparent forest was only a line of trees rimming the perimeter of the island. The interior was actually quite bare and rocky and ideal for camping. The Baron was already busy planning another camping expedition and had roped Hadrian and Marcus into his grand plans. While they were in deep conversation, Reine had made a hasty exit through the back doors in the den.

As the shoreline sharply turned, she saw the boathouse, a hastily erected shack of shingles painted a deep green. A door leading to the shore was open and she peeked inside, finding two motorboats and a rowboat docked inside. On the walls hung various equipment and life preservers. Outside on the pier were three red kayaks. A small pleasure yacht was anchored a few yards away. She walked out to the pier. Two lonely chairs sat at the edge with a flower box between them. A few dried up marigolds stuck out of the soil in the flower box. The water churned underneath the pier, creating a periodic creaking whenever the waves lapped upon the supports. She looked down into the water and she saw nothing, not even her reflection. She sat back on a chair and closed her eyes.

"Fine day, isn't it?"

She cracked her eyes open and saw that Larrington had taken the opposite seat. Her first impulse was to tell him to go away rudely, but she kept her mouth shut. He was wearing a thin navy jacket that barely covered his growing stomach. The wind blew apart his graying hair, revealing a bald spot. His face wasn't ruddy this time with anger, but with the cold brisk air.

"My aunt lived on this property ever since she was born. My grandfather bought the property off Phineas Cronan's family."

"She did a pretty nice job doing the upkeep of the house."

"I'm surprised she didn't turn it into a bed and breakfast. It's more profitable," said Larrington. "About the schedule."

"We mailed it to you, Larrington. If you check your mail more often, you'd find that you also receive progress reports from all the department heads. They're also in your e-mail if you bother to check your computer. All the secretaries in the world can't help you if you don't even look at the stuff people send you."

"I have no time to do that," he said dismissively. "Besides, I have to take care of my aunt. She's getting on in years."

"Ira looks like she could take care of herself."

"Ah, that's the thing though. She's very good at fooling people. Lately though, she's been completely ignoring me, you know? I wonder if her mind is going."

"She seems perfectly lucid to me."

"Every time I ask to talk with her, she's always working on her damned manuscript. It's not like she's scribbling away on some profound masterwork. She writes trashy mysteries and she makes enough money selling those. You'd think she'll have a few minutes in her day to

talk to me, her nephew.”

Reine refrained from saying that Ira was perfectly justified in ignoring an annoying relative who constantly pounded down her door. “Ira’s novels sell well. They’re not just trashy if so many people in the public like reading them.”

“Bah.” His eyes gleamed. “Say, Ira likes you. She’s always talking to you. Do a favor for me, go talk to her and mention me. I really need to talk with her about some important things.”

She looked away and stared at the lake. “I have no influence on her. I’m just an editor. A science editor at that.”

“But you’re her friend.”

“Hm.”

Larrington grinned, as if triumphant. Reine did not like his smile as he stood up. It looked too conspiratorial. “Thanks. I owe you one.”

Even if he did owe her one, she doubted that he would pay up.

“I’m going for a hike up into the woods. Care to join me?”

“No thanks. I like it here just fine.”

Larrington whistled and strolled down the pier, his heavy steps making the wood creak and the stones on the shore crackle.

With his departure, the wind died down and the waves lessened. Restless, Reine finally stood up. She wanted the wind to blow through her hair and to sting her cheeks. She liked the implied danger even if she didn’t like Larrington. Ira’s nephew had taken the path that deviated from the path along the shore. She seemed to recall that one of the guests had said that the path to the woods led to the old ruined church. She had a hankering to see it, but not at the moment, and especially not when Larrington was on the same path.

The ground crunched at her feet as she stepped from the pier back to the path.

“Ah, Reine, going out for a stroll too?”

From the direction of the house the Baroness, Tabora, strolled toward her. She was wearing a long black woolen coat with a matching black beret. A colorful scarf wound around her neck.

“It’s a wonderful day for a walk. Not too cloudy. And it’s not too sunny either.”

“Yes,” Reine agreed. She waited for Tabora to catch up with her and then fell into step, walking along the shore. “I escaped when your husband and my friends began talking about camping equipment.”

“Men.” Tabora smiled. “They’re obsessed with their little toys. But camping isn’t too bad, especially since they’re talking about the island. There are campgrounds at the center. That is, there are facilities there for bathing and going to the bathroom so it’s not completely caveman territory.”

"I take it that your husband has dragged you out there once before?"

"He loves doing those kind of things. It's kind of a puzzle to me since we can just as easily stay at home or go to a hotel where there are so many creature comforts."

Reine stared outward at the lake. "Tell me about the island. Does it have a name?"

She shook her head. "If it does, I haven't heard of it. No one bothered naming it, I suppose, since it's all the way out here and hardly anyone goes out there anyway."

They walked further, companionably. Tabora told her of her relationship with Ira. They had been childhood friends ever since her father had moved to America for two years. Afterwards, they had corresponded often by letters and by phone. When they were young women, they had taken a tour of Europe together doing many wild things.

"What we did together, it shows in her books," said Tabora. "We were wild, undisciplined. If we didn't have to go back to our families within the year, it would be safe to say that we would still be roaming Europe as spinster bohemians looking for a good time. It was during our time in Europe that we met Vicker."

"He is then also an old friend along in your youthful escapades?"

"That's putting it lightly. We three had interesting times, until Vicker was called away to manage his family business because his uncle had just died and his uncle had no children to pass it on. In some ways, it's not a surprise that he has a young wife. His third, I believe. I don't blame him for attempting to recapture youth."

"She looks like she's only after his money."

"Seems that way, doesn't it?" Tabora sighed. "What is surprising is that your friends won't take her hints."

"My friends told me they don't go for married women."

"Ah, yes. Good for them. Vicker is the type of man who would go after his wife's lover with a loaded pistol."

"Aren't most..." Reine stopped. "Did you hear something?"

"What dear?"

The wind was howling in her ears, but she had heard something else—a cross between mewling and squeaking. "Wait here a moment."

Reine traipsed to the edge of the forest and pushed some bushes aside. Gold eyes peered at her through a fishing net.

"A cat," she said, surprised. "You are a cat, aren't you? Not a cougar? No, those live in the mountains." She held out a hand. The cat craned his neck and sniffed. He mewed. "Sorry buddy. I don't have a pocket knife with me. I guess I'll have to take you and the net back with me."

"Did you find something?" called out Tabora.

"Hold on for a moment." She tugged at the fishing lines until it came free from the branches. Carefully, she picked up the cat and wrapped up the trailing net so that it wouldn't trip her. The cat purred. "Geez, don't count your chickens before they hatch. I haven't gotten you out of the net yet!"

Out in the light, she saw that the cat was small and skinny. His ribs faintly showed through his amber colored coat. His face was a delicate wedge resembling an elf's face. His large pointed ears pricked up as Tabora approached, exclaiming excitedly.

"How wonderful. He looks like a stray. There's no collar."

"Maybe we should go into town and ask around first. He looks like a show cat, actually."

The cat yawned and settled himself against Reine. His long tail curled around her arm.

"That's right. He looks a lot like an Abyssinian. I have a cousin who owns a breeding pair, but they certainly don't have his color. They were much darker."

"I wonder how he got trapped in the fishing net in the first place."

"He probably smelled fish. There is a place a little further up the coast where fishermen like to visit often. Someone careless must have thrown it into the woods."

They trekked back to the car shed at the bottom of the plateau and found a pair of shears to cut away at the net. Once the cat was freed, he trotted beside Reine as the two women walked back to the house.

"So what are you going to name him?"

"Name him?" said Reine, bewildered.

"Yes. You found him. You get the rights to name him."

"I don't know. An Abyssinian is an Egyptian cat right?"

"People used to think they were Egyptian cats," corrected Tabora, "but they really aren't. They were actually imported from Ethiopia."

"Well, I don't know any Ethiopian names. And I don't want to name him something common. He doesn't look common. But I'm not very creative. What's today?"

"I think it's Tuesday."

"Then I'll call him Tuesday. How about that?"

The cat flicked his tail in agreement.

They walked to the back of the house and opened the back door to the den. Esther sat on a couch sipping tea. The Baron, Hadrian, and Marcus were standing around looking at the chessboard. Black had apparently moved in response to white.

"Somebody, or rather two people here are playing a game. It looks like the beginning. I wonder they each know they're playing against each other?" said the Baron.

"Hey, don't look at me," said Hadrian, "If Marcus beats me every time I play, I'm not attempting to touch chess pieces especially if my opponent is faceless."

Marcus looked up at the sound of the opening door. His gaze automatically fixed upon Reine. "You're back."

"Of course I'm back."

Amanda, who had been napping underneath the coffee table woke up and yipped as he spotted the strange cat at Reine's feet. Tuesday took off, climbing up the first person he bumped into.

"Hey!" exclaimed Marcus.

"What a marvelous looking cat," said Esther. She moved purposefully toward Marcus.

Amanda careened in a chunky trot toward Marcus, intent on investigating the new feline intruder. From Marcus's shoulder, Tuesday meowed indignantly.

"What's going on here?" Larrington had apparently also gotten back from his walk. He shouldered past Reine and Tabora to see what was happening.

"Amanda!" Hadrian commanded.

The English bulldog stopped suddenly, looking confused in Hadrian's direction. Esther did not see the bulldog at her feet. She shrieked as she tripped over the prone dog. Automatically, Marcus stepped backward to avoid the falling woman. Larrington stepped forward and grabbed Esther by her waist.

"These are marvelous scones, Mary," said Vicker as he entered the den with the housekeeper with a pastry in hand.

"Give your thanks to Hadrian. He made them this morning."

"Hadrian? One of the young men who's an editor you mean? Well, I'll..." He nearly choked. "Get your hands off my wife!"

Larrington abruptly let go of Esther as if she was radioactive waste. "I was just trying to prevent her from falling. She tripped over the dog."

Amanda barked and drooled over Esther's boots.

"Blaming the dog is a poor excuse," said Vicker. His face was getting red.

"Calm down, darling," said Esther. "It was all an accident." She shoved at Amanda with the toe of her boot, but the bulldog refused to budge.

Reine walked over to Marcus to pluck an annoyed Tuesday off his shoulder. "Hey, it looks like white moved from a minute ago."

The white bishop on the board was definitely out of place. Someone had moved it while everyone was occupied with the commotion in the den. It was on a totally different square.

"I didn't do it," Hadrian protested as eyes landed on him. "Come on Amanda. It's time to bale out."

The bulldog finally moved at Hadrian's voice. Esther breathed a sigh of relief.

VIII. Janor

2:00 AM

She found herself floating near the ceiling. An out of body experience or a dream? She decided on the latter and examined her surroundings in earnest. She was in the library again, yet it was dark. There was a fire in the fireplace though and the flames cast strange shadows along the chairs nearby. Not with a little trepidation, she made herself drift over to the chairs. They were empty. But next to one of the chairs was the white wig.

She made herself float down from the ceiling and reaching out, she tried to touch the wig. Her hand passed through it and sank through the floor. Jerking her hand upward, she glanced around her. Did she just hear something? In the dancing shadows, the wig began to look a more than a little gray. It was darkening before her eyes to black. Backing up, she looked at the window. The drapes were drawn and the sky was dark. It was raining hard. That must have been the sound that she heard, the rain pounding upon the panes.

The room grew colder as the flames died down to embers and she shivered. Even the dream library was a bit unnerving. She turned toward the door and opened it. On the other side, a tall black figure confronted her. Sharp silver eyes pierced through her. The shadow lurched forward.

* * *

Reine sat up in bed, breathing hard. Tuesday remained asleep at the foot of the bed, unaware that his mistress had a nightmare. Disturbed, she rose from bed and pulled on her robe. The drapes to the windows in her room were drawn aside to let in the meager moonlight. She had no inclination for going outside though. Her pouch of seeing stones laid on the bed stand. She put them in her pocket and padded toward the door. Something touched her ankle.

"Tuesday," she whispered. "What are you doing up?"

He placed his forepaws on her leg.

"All right, just this once." She lifted the cat up and placed him on her right shoulder. Tuesday yawned and she could smell the leftover Parmesan chicken that she had given him for dinner. "Let's go raid the kitchen."

She stepped out into the darkened hallway. Her slippers made little sound on the carpet.

Tuesday meowed.

"Calm down. I have good night vision. I'm not going to trip on the stairs...ow!" Ruefully, Reine wiggled her toes. "On the other hand, maybe you were right." She had mashed her

toes on the banister while trying to turn the corner into the living room.

The fireplace in the living room was dead. This brought little relief though; the moonlight filtering through the windows gave the room an eerie silver look. The moose and deer heads on the wall gazed downward in a strange otherworldly fashion causing a frisson of heightened awareness to trickle down her spine. In the dining room, there was a little light coming from the kitchen from underneath the door. Did the household servants forget to turn off the light?

Reine pushed the door open and found a solitary figure with a dark robe and mussed hair sprawled on a stool at the counter munching on a leftover vegetable tray. Marcus looked up and paused with a cherry tomato halfway to his mouth. For a brief moment, she debated on whether to run back upstairs to the safety of her room or to stay. She decided she didn't want to go back to sleep.

"Are you planning to finish the whole thing off?" she asked.

"No more than you are. Help yourself."

She took the seat next to his and reached over to take a baby carrot. "Couldn't sleep either, huh?"

"Oh, I'll probably get to sleep eventually, but not now."

Tuesday leaped off her shoulder and attacked a sprig of broccoli with gusto. Reine laughed. "Looks like Tuesday is turning vegetarian. No I couldn't get to sleep either. There's something about this house." She was silent for a moment as Marcus reached out to stroke Tuesday's head. "Am I paranoid or what?"

"I heard somewhere that it may be difficult for some people to adjust to different places. Maybe that's why we can't sleep just yet."

"I got to sleep just fine. But the dreams were strange."

"Care to tell me about them?"

"They were just about the library. Assimilating information you collected during the day and all that." She sighed. "It wouldn't feel so strange if Ira was around more. You'd think that she would at least spend some time with her guests instead of holing up in her room working. Ira's social for an author. This isn't like her. Maybe Larrington is right—that there's something wrong."

"Larrington? Is he actually showing some caring for his aunt?"

"I didn't get the impression. He just wants to talk to her about something. Money, as Ira would say."

"Larrington has enough money to sink a ship. Why would he want more?"

"Well, you know that Ira doesn't have any children. And she owns this house, this mansion as well as the surrounding area and that island out on the lake."

"The island?"

"Yes, Tabora told me about it. Are you going camping with her husband and Hadrian?"

"I was planning on it." He crunched on a carrot, looking thoughtful. "You could come with us."

"Me? Camping? Do I look like the type?"

He grinned. "Try out a new experience, Reine. You might like it."

"I don't know. Isn't it freezing cold out there?"

"Not if you bring the right clothing."

"Sure," she replied skeptically.

"Reine?"

"Hm?"

"About the seeing stones." He hesitated for a moment, forcing her to turn her head to look at him. "When we were about to, I don't know, were we just using our own skewed interpretations as an excuse to act on impulse?"

"It was impulsive?"

"I'm sorry. Impulse was the wrong word. I knew exactly what I was doing. I just wasn't sure how you'd react. I don't look like Hadrian."

The edge of her lips quirked upward in a smile. "I'm surprised you would be insecure about your appearance. It's just a scar. Besides, the rest of you doesn't seem damaged. Not that I can see anyway."

"I'm not sure if I should be insulted or not with that last remark."

"Maybe all the depressing fiction you've been editing lately has been rubbing off on you."

The sound of the kitchen door opening caused the two of them to look up. Tuesday continued gnawing on his beloved piece of broccoli. Hadrian sauntered in, clad only in pajama bottoms. Spotting Marcus and Reine, a ruddy blush appeared on his cheeks.

"Um, hi. What are you two doing up?"

"Eating," said Reine. "Care to join us for a late night snack?"

"Uh, no thanks. I just wanted to look for something." He wandered over to the fridge and rummaged inside. "Damn. Where is it?"

"What are you looking for?" she asked.

"Whip cream."

There was a moment of silence.

"Isn't two in the morning a little late for that kind of thing?" Marcus finally asked.

"It's never too late for food. Ah hah! Here it is." Hadrian emerged from the fridge triumphantly with an unopened can.

When he left, they simultaneously got off their stools. "I should put this back," Marcus said, taking the unfinished vegetable tray.

"It really is getting too late." She scooped up Tuesday who scrambled back on her shoulder. "Even if we have the luxury of sleeping in."

He flipped the switch off. "You must have pretty good night vision if you got here in one piece."

"Not quite. I stubbed my toe on the stairs."

"I can act as a guide dog then." His hand found hers. His fingers were warm and a little rough.

They made their way through the dining room and the living room until Marcus saw a thin beam of light flickering along the foyer. Instinctively, he pushed Reine back to the wall.

"Oof. What do you think you're doing?"

"Shh." He peeked past the doorway and could make out two figures, one with a flashlight, making their way to the library.

She tried to look past his shoulder. "What is it? What did you see?"

His hand tightened over hers. "Apparently, everyone is awake in the middle of the night. I just saw two people go into the library."

"The library? Could you tell who they were?"

"No. And it probably doesn't matter."

"We could peek in."

"That would seriously get us in trouble."

"Not if we're discrete about it." Reine edged past Marcus and dragged him down the foyer. Marcus tried to pull back, but she was adamant. "Come on. A quick peek won't kill us."

"Reine." He sighed and reluctantly followed. "This is a bad idea."

She placed an ear to the library door. "I can hear them talking."

"It's in here somewhere. I knew she mentioned it."

"Look, it's way too late to be tearing the library apart. I want to go to sleep."

"Quit whining, you old bag. If we find it, we'll be rich."

"A fine thing that is. If we find the damned thing."

"Either you help me or not. If you don't and I find it myself, the deal's off."

"I'm just trying to be reasonable here. It's late. And we've been up the entire day playing congenial guests. I'd say the hell with it and just sleep during the day and prowl during the night when no one's looking."

"We'll also have plenty of time when some of the others go on that fool of a camping trip."

"That would grant us few hours at best. And that wouldn't eliminate everyone, especially the women. And the servants."

"Well, we've got to think about it more, don't we?"

Reine shook her head and pointed to the stairs. "I wonder what made Larrington and Diana think that there is a treasure hidden in the house."

"Who knows?"

"Ira probably."

"I hope that little bit of reckless eavesdropping sated your curiosity."

"I just had to know."

"You still have some time to make it big as a reporter with that killer instinct of yours."

"Not funny. I'm not going to end up like another Lenora Weatherspoon."

"I didn't say you would end up like another Lenora Weatherspoon." They soon reached the third floor. He reluctantly let go of her hand and stuffed his own into the pockets of his robe. "I was thinking of hiking up to the old church the baroness was talking about. Want to come with me?"

"I had planned on going there had Larrington not taken that path."

"I take that as a yes?"

"Of course." She yawned. "Well, I think I had enough excitement for the day. See you in the morning. I hope you have better dreams than me."

IX. Ourer

7:00 AM

"Coffee," Reine muttered to herself as she stumbled out of the shower. "Why is it that I always wake up at the same exact time every day no matter the amount of time I spend asleep?" Wrapping a towel around herself, she turned on the sink faucet and squirted toothpaste onto her toothbrush and looked up.

An old man's face with lecherous blue eyes stared back at her from the mirror.

She screamed, jumping back against the wall and dropping her toothbrush into the sink. The face disappeared, but she thought she heard a chuckling in the back of her mind. Nervous, she hastily scrubbed her teeth and brushed her hair and tugged on some clothes. From her bed, Tuesday peeked at her before going back to sleep.

"My mind is playing tricks on me," she told the sleeping Tuesday. "Too little sleep will do that to you. It makes you see ghosts and hear weird things. You've got it good to be sleeping in."

She stepped out of her room and headed downstairs when she heard commotion coming from the hallway on the second floor. Curious, she sidetracked, and headed to the end of the hall where she found Palwick and Mary knocking on a pair of wooden double doors.

"Ira, are you awake?" Mary called out.

"Go away. I'm working," came the muffled voice from the other side of the door.

"What's the matter?" Reine asked.

The housekeeper shook her head as Palwick took his turn pounding on the door. "Ira hasn't been about all day yesterday and she refuses to come out today. What if she's not working? What if she really needs help?"

Something Larrington had said while she had been sitting outside the previous day trickled back into her consciousness. "Maybe she does need help, but she won't admit it to just anyone." Reine knocked. "Ira? It's me, Reine. Is everything all right? Can we help?"

"Go away. I'm working."

Reine frowned. "This isn't like her at all. We should have checked up on her earlier."

"We could try opening the door now," suggested Mary. "Don't you have the key, Palwick?"

"I do not have the key to her quarters," Palwick sniffed. "She has the only copy to her room. But I can try pushing the door open. Many of the locks around here are of the old style. If you apply enough force on them, they open automatically."

"Yes, that might work," agreed the housekeeper.

Palwick began hurtling himself into the door, putting force by his shoulder. Each time he crashed into the door, the wood shuddered in a long groan.

"Go away. I'm working."

"Ira, we know you need help. We're coming," Reine called through the door.

"What exactly are you doing? It's too early in the morning for this noise." Hadrian had wandered out, still only dressed in his pajamas. His hair was hopelessly tangled. Amanda waddled at his feet and began yapping when he saw Palwick shoving himself on the door.

"Ira won't respond to our queries. She's just repeating herself," explained Mary.

"Go away. I'm working."

"There's a much more elegant solution to opening the door than by brute force," Hadrian said.

Palwick stopped and raised a haughty eyebrow. "Oh? And I suppose you have a key?"

"No. But I know the next best thing." Hadrian suddenly shoved a hand into Mary's hair eliciting a surprised gasp from the housekeeper. He pulled out a bobby pin. Mary's hair tumbled down in golden disarray.

"How dare you..."

"I like your hair down better anyway," Hadrian interrupted. He shouldered his way past Palwick who was getting red in the face.

"I didn't know you could pick locks," said Reine.

"I don't," he replied as he stuffed the thin metal into the keyhole. "I'm just applying what I've read from mystery novels."

"Oh great. An amateur. I really need a cup of coffee after this. First I see a ghost this morning in my bathroom mirror and now this."

"You saw a ghost?" Mary said suddenly interested. "What did he look like?"

"Old. Male. Blue eyes. He looked like a damned peeping tom to me."

"That must be old Phineas Cronan. Ira's astrologer always says that his ghost is still lurking around. You must be the first person who've seen him because I still haven't."

"If I'm the first person who've seen him, I must have been hallucinating."

"Ah hah!" With a triumphant twist, the lock clicked and Hadrian pushed the door open.

"Ira?" Reine called out.

Amanda, who had been pawing at the door the entire time Hadrian had been working, burst into the room barking wildly.

"Go away. I'm working. Go away. I'm working. Go away. I'm working..."

Palwick strolled into the room, staring down at the bed stand that had been shoved next to the door. The answering machine was on top, rigged so that it played the same message over and over again.

"Go away. I'm working. Go away..."

The butler turned the machine off. "If this is an idea of a joke, I'm not amused."

Ira's room was a combination of bedroom and office. One side was dedicated to a bed, a no nonsense iron-framed cot the size of a king bed, and a whole slew of wardrobes and bureau drawers of dark mahogany. The walls were bare except for two paintings by Georgia O'Keefe. The other side was a large desk surrounded by three identical floor lamps in the

shape of giraffes. On the desk was a computer (turned off), a black and white picture of Ira and her deceased husband when they were in their thirties, and three pens—one black, one blue, one red. The bathroom connected to the room was also empty.

"She's gone," Hadrian said redundantly.

The windows in Ira's room were open though, letting in the cool fall air. Reine walked to the windows and noticed that the windows were also doors, leading out onto a thin balcony. A scrap of torn white cloth tied onto the railing fluttered in the breeze.

Reine turned back into the room, seeing everyone else standing around, still shocked. "The room looks undisturbed and that answering machine looks planned. I think Ira just left."

"But who saw her leave?" demanded Hadrian.

Mary put a hand to her mouth, eyes wide. "Do you suppose she was kidnapped?"

"Quite possible," Palwick agreed. "I'm going downstairs to call the police. We shouldn't touch anything in here in case they want to examine the room for evidence."

They filed out and the butler closed the door behind them.

"What are we going to tell the others?" Mary wanted to know.

"They'll find out soon enough when the police arrive," said Hadrian. He handed the bobby pin back to Mary.

"It's bent out of shape!"

"I'll get some to replace it then."

X. Athir

4:00 PM

By the time the sheriff, a tall dark-skinned man with a boxer build, and his assistant, a thin spidery woman who missed nothing, left, Reine as well as all the other guests were drained from all of the questioning. She pulled a chair to the window in the den and looked outward at the lake. The sky had been leached of all color and was rapidly becoming black. The wind was especially choppy. Spray erupted from the water along the shore. Golden leaves swirled along the ground occasionally slapping against the windowpane.

"I can't believe she left her dog," said Hadrian. He was lounging on one of the couches tapping a finger impatiently along a magazine that he had picked up from the coffee table. He had flipped through it twice already. "I thought she was fond of the pug."

"If she left of her own accord, it looks like she planned to leave the dog here. Besides, hasn't Amanda taken to sleeping in your room?" Marcus sat across from Hadrian, studying the chessboard set up in the den. The chess game was now in full progress, pawns and bishops and rooks littered in the strategic places on the board. The kings were still protected. Not one of the guests so far had admitted to touching any of the pieces. "That may be a reason why she didn't take the dog with her. She would have alerted you if she took Amanda."

"Not really," replied Hadrian sheepishly. "I haven't been sleeping in my own room lately."

"Oh really? You never told us who your latest paramour was last night."

"Well..."

"Don't encourage him," said Reine, looking back. "His room is right next to Ira's. If he had stayed in his room, he would have heard something."

"Well, I was on the third floor on the opposite side of the house. I couldn't have heard anything on the second floor last night. I didn't hear anything when I got up last night either. If anything happened, it must have been before or after my foray into the kitchen."

"Don't tell me you're with an older woman," said Marcus. The only other guests on the third floor were the astrologer, Xanthia Greenberg, and her cousin Diana.

"There's nothing wrong with older woman. Anyways, she is not older than me."

"If Hadrian didn't hear anything, then what about Larrington and Diana?" said Reine.

"What about them?" Hadrian asked curiously.

"They came down the stairs right after you went back up with your midnight snack. We noticed because we left the kitchen almost right after you did."

"That's right," said Marcus. "Those two were heading to the library looking for something. I think they were coming down the stairs to the library to look for something that Ira had hinted at. Some treasure or something valuable at least."

Reine tapped her finger against her lips, thinking. Marcus watched her mouth, his darkening eyes betraying his thoughts. She smiled, but said instead, "So you thought they were coming down from the stairs. Perhaps your night vision wasn't as good as you thought. Maybe the reason why Hadrian didn't meet them while he was going back up the stairs was that they weren't on the stairs in the first place. And think, why did they have flashlights with them?"

"Finding their way around in the dark?" Hadrian made a face. "I know, stupid answer. My mind isn't working."

"Neither of us used flashlights to find our way to the kitchen." Marcus nodded toward Hadrian. "And you didn't use a flashlight. I think there was enough light in the house at night—there are windows and there was moonlight. If I really needed to see my way, I would have turned on a switch. But they had flashlights which means..."

"That they were probably outside," Hadrian finished, looking pleased with himself. Reine glazed at the ceiling and let out a sigh. "You can't turn on a switch outside."

"I want to take a look outside to see if I can find anything," said Marcus.

She shook her head. "Remember what the sheriff said? Nobody's leaving the house until he and his assistant clears everything."

"But that doesn't mean that we can't just step outside to get a breath of fresh air." Hadrian pulled out his pack of cigarettes and wagged it like a lure. "I'm going outside too. I don't like feeling trapped in this house." He dropped the magazine back on the table and stood up when Marcus stood. "Want to come outside with us?"

"No thanks." Reine looked back out the window, feeling as dark as the sky. What had happened to Ira? Did she just leave or was it something more sinister? Was she kidnapped? It was impossible for this to be the work of anyone living in the house because they were still all present. It must have been someone outside she rationalized. But she shivered at this thought. She could be the next one stolen out of bed in the dead of night.

Marcus and Hadrian briefly greeted the incoming Baron and Baroness as they exited. The Baron stood over the chessboard examining the current moves.

"Your two friends have been playing again, haven't they?" said the Baron.

"No. They haven't touched the board. It's still the mystery players. No one seems to have admitted to playing yet. You don't suppose you're one of the players?"

"Good God, no," the Baron laughed briefly. "I like to see my opponent while I'm playing him."

"Any more clues about Ira?" said Tabora worriedly. "Did the sheriff or his assistant say anything to you?"

"They asked me a couple questions to determine my whereabouts and my relationship to Ira, but no. They haven't said anything or hinted at anything that may be developing."

"Monadnock is a small place. Rumor of this is going to spread if one of Ira's staff goes out to town and blabs. Or if the cops talk about it. Ira's pretty famous so sooner or later, her disappearance will probably make the news."

"Or it might not. Mary and Palwick don't seem the type to gossip with small town folk. And I'm sure even the cops in the boondocks like this town won't talk about a case they're currently working on. It would do nothing for the investigation if the media swoop down here and start snooping and messing around with anything that might possibly be a clue."

"Hm." Tabora finally sat down on the couch that Marcus had vacated. She was wearing a turquoise dress that swirled around her ankles whenever she moved. "I hope Ira's all right. This isn't something that she would do as a joke, even if she had been acting rather reclusive the last few days."

"If Ira's really kidnapped," said the Baron, "we'll hear from the kidnapper soon. He'll be demanding a ransom because Ira's so well known. And she's wealthy."

"Later today or tomorrow, then. But the wait is horrible." Reine crossed her arms and looked toward the door of the den. She could see out into the living room with the trophy heads. Xanthia the astrologer was sitting on a straight-backed chair giving her cousin a stony look as Diana said something back that caused her face to redden in irritation. "Marcus told me that I should join you guys to the camping trip."

"Excellent," said the Baron. "We were planning to go tomorrow evening. I'm sure it'll be a good diversion from everything that's happening."

"I'm not sure. Common sense tells me that I should head on back to New York and leave this behind. But I'll stay here until the worse blows over. It's for Ira's sake, at least. I've never been camping before."

"Piece of cake. It's just sleeping outdoors."

She stretched her legs. The wind outside had gotten fiercer and she could hear it howling, even inside. Leaves were now plastered against the bottom of the pane. The lake looked like it was boiling. The trees were bowing down before the wind's force. "Did either of you hear anything last night?"

"That's what the sheriff asked us," said Tabora. "No. We're both sound sleepers. Nothing much wakes us except perhaps someone yelling 'fire'. We're right across from Ira's nephew and beside the Friesners and Palwick. Should we have heard anything?"

She shrugged. "I don't think anyone would have been up at an incriminating time even though it really doesn't matter because everyone else is still here. Do you think the sheriff suspects any of the guests?"

"Maybe not. He's probably back at his office talking with his assistant about how unobservant we are. But then again, how can we observe anything if we don't suspect anything in the first place."

"A good point."

Finished analyzing the chessboard, Stephen, the Baron, sat beside his wife and asked, "So did you hear anything last night?"

"I got up around two to get a snack," she admitted, "but no, I didn't hear anything that sounded like someone getting kidnapped." She decided not to mention anything about Larrington or Diana. Even though the Baroness was a close friend of Ira's, that was not sufficient for her to trust her with the information. The Baroness might jump to the wrong conclusion and start accusing someone who might be innocent, no matter how odious his personality was.

"That's too bad," the Baron replied. "You don't suppose if we put all our heads together, we might come up with something? Ira's disappearance is far too mysterious so far. I know there's the money angle, but as far as I know, Ira hasn't written anything on kidnapping."

"She doesn't have to have written about kidnapping to be kidnapped herself," his wife pointed out.

"Yes, you're right, but there's just something really strange about all of this. I mean, her room is completely untouched except for that answering machine. You would think that Ira would have put up some sort of struggle. Something should be out of place."

"But something is out of place. My hair pins for instance," said Tabora.

"You just misplaced them, dear."

"No, Stephen. I distinctly remember putting them on the table next to the door. In the morning, they were gone."

"Maybe your husband is right," said Reine. "Maybe you misplaced them somewhere else. It might help if you described it. If anyone finds it, they could immediately give them back."

"There are two of them, each about this long," Tabora said, holding her fingers two inches apart. "They're made of ebony and have turquoise stones set into them. Three stones each. Stephen got them for me while we were vacationing in Mexico five years ago. They were lovely. And had sentimental value."

Reine soon excused herself from the den and wandered back out to the living room. Diana and Xanthia had stopped arguing but they were still staring daggers at each other. She decided to edge out of the room before witnessing another explosion. She grabbed her coat from the cloakroom and headed out.

Outside, she found Marcus standing at the edge of the plateau looking into the woods. The wind tugged at his hair and the collar of his coat. His hands were at his pockets and he did not appear to hear her as she approached.

"Downtown Monadnock is over there," she said.

"I'm not looking at Monadnock," he replied. "The old church is supposedly over in that direction. Too bad we can't go hiking over there today."

"The weather today is a bit rough too." The wind stung her nose and she rubbed it with the back of her hand to get the circulation back into her face. "Where's Hadrian?"

"He's around." He glanced at her. "You decided to come out here?"

"Hadrian was right. The house is a bit stuffy, even if it fits a hundred people. Did you find anything interesting while you were out here?"

"No. No obvious footprints, snatches of clothing, or otherwise suspicious clues lying around."

"I feel terrible. I should have heard something while I was sneaking around last night."

"It's not your fault, Reine." He did not protest when she placed her head on his shoulder. "Maybe she didn't leave last night."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, what if she left or was kidnapped earlier? There was the answering machine. Ira's staff may not have realized that she was gone yesterday because of the message. Remember, no one saw her about all of yesterday. The last anyone saw her was the very first night that everyone arrived. And then, it was only for about an hour for dinner."

"Yes. But I feel bad anyway."

His arm snaked around her waist. He turned his head so he could feel her hair against his scarred cheek. "You're not alone. Ira is a wonderful old lady. She's tough, but I hope she's still all right."

"Damn!" They could hear Hadrian trooping back toward them. Reine moved out of his embrace and watched amused as Hadrian shook his arms and legs as if he were standing on

hot coals.

"What's the matter, someone put itching powder in your pants?" said Marcus.

"This. Is. Not. Funny." Hadrian gave another vigorous shake of his arms and three sharp burrs came tumbling off his coat cuff.

"Where were you? What did you do?" she asked.

"I was at the boat house. Looking out at the lake, you know? And then the wind suddenly came out and I had to jump back to prevent myself from getting splashed. But I jumped back too far and I landed on one of those damned bushes with burrs!" He looked up, his eyes narrowing on Marcus. "I didn't imagine that did I?"

"Imagine what?" Marcus asked in faux innocence.

"Your arm. Well, I guess I lost, huh? I'm a bad chess player and..."

"Don't say it," Marcus warned.

"What are you two talking about?" asked Reine.

"I guess I don't have a chance to ask you to go out with me."

"Hadrian!" She picked up one of the burrs and launched it toward him, hitting him on the forehead.

"Ow!"

"Wrong thing to say, buddy," said Marcus, laughing. " Judging from last night, you already had a hot date."

Reine grinned. "Cheer up Hadrian. You know I don't share."

"Ha! Look who's laughing now," Hadrian said smugly as he brushed the remaining burrs from his trousers and rubbed his forehead. "She doesn't share. You're doomed Marcus."

XI. Tafrac

8:00 PM

The after dinner mints that Mary had placed out on a table in the living room were rapidly disappearing. No one noticed until Larrington put his hand into the bowl and found nothing. He grumbled, cursing under his breath.

"Who took all the mints?"

Most of the guests stared at him blankly. Amanda remained under the table chewing.

Diana fidgeted and ran a hand over her graying hair. "I want to get out of here now."

"You know the police don't want us leaving this town," said Xanthia. The astrologer paced in front of the fireplace like an agitated lion. "I knew that this was going to happen. Ira just

didn't want to listen to my advice." She suddenly stopped to glare at her cousin. "Just like you, you know."

"I knew she was going to say that," declared Larrington.

"I'd say that Ira finally came to her senses," retorted Diana.

Vicker stopped discretely fondling his young wife (although it wasn't so discrete since everyone noticed where his hands were the entire time). "Why don't we play a rousing game of chess?"

"You play chess?" said the Baron. "Don't suppose you're one of the mysterious players of the set in the den?"

"Certainly not. It's ungentlemanly to play in the dark that way."

"Give it up, dear," said Tabora. "No one's going to admit to playing the game."

Mary arrived in the living room just as Tabora commented, wiping her hands on her apron. "Speaking of games, there's a Chinese checkers set stored in one of the cabinets. We could play that. There's twelve of us and there's room for six players. We could divide up into teams of two."

"That sounds fun," said Hadrian.

Esther yawned and leaned over. She was wearing another of her neck-plunging outfits. "Chinese checkers is so passé. Since Ira employed an astrologer, I'm sure she has a ouija board. Maybe we can commune with the illustrious Phineas Cronan."

"What a ridiculous idea," snapped Xanthia. "And don't trivialize my profession. I actually had to go to school to learn about astrology. Ouija boards are for amateurs."

Diana gave a small smile. "She didn't mention that all her knowledge about astrology stemmed from taking online courses at the Psychic University."

"Diana!"

"You know," said Reine, "if we really did contact Phineas Cronan, I have a feeling that the old ghost would only be asking what the women were wearing underneath their clothes."

"Dirty ghost," sniffed Diana.

"That sounds endearing," countered Esther.

Reine looked up at the ceiling silently asking for patience. "Actually, I'd find that annoying. Who wants some dirty old man looking up their skirt?"

"Ira doesn't have a ouija board," said Mary. "But besides Chinese checkers, she has checkers, dominoes, and cards."

"We could play a card game," suggested Vicker. "Esther and I will be a team."

Everyone seconded his suggestion except Palwick who sat at the end, frowning. "We should

be worrying about Ira. Not playing card games.”

“Worrying is unproductive,” Tabora informed him. “The police are already working on the case. We can’t do anything about it, unless you happen to know where she went.”

Tuesday leaped from Reine’s lap to her shoulder to get a better vantage point to see what the humans were doing. Mary had gone over to one of the cabinets in the room to remove a pack of cards. She handed it to Hadrian who quickly opened the box and flipped through the cards.

“One of them is missing,” he said, slapping the deck back on the table.

Marcus grabbed the deck. “You must have miscounted.” But when he went through the deck, he shook his head. “Never mind. You’re right. There is one missing. There’s no two of spades.”

“Well, Ira has three more decks,” said Mary. “The card for that deck must be stuck between the cushions or something when it was last played.”

But when Marcus and Hadrian looked through the rest of the decks, they were also missing one card. Specifically the decks were missing the two of spades.

“That’s too much of a coincidence,” growled Larrington. “Who the hell would want to steal the two of spades? I would understand the ace of spades, but the two of spades? Someone here is off his rocker.”

“Who said it was anyone here?” said Vicker. “This could be the prank of one of Ira’s past house guests.”

“Well, how would you explain that chess set in the den?”

“Ghosts,” said Mary.

“I refuse to believe that ghosts are popping in and out of here to mess with our minds,” said Reine. “I think it’s just lack of sleep.”

“I’ve been getting plenty of sleep lately,” said Tabora.

“God, I need a mint.” Hadrian reached into the mint bowl. “Damn. Where are they?” He looked underneath the table and found Amanda munching on the last crumbs. “Bad dog!”

Amanda barked.

“There are more in the kitchen,” said Mary. “I’ll go get some.”

“You usually need a smoke,” remarked Reine.

“It’s too dark to go outside to smoke. So, since the ghosts are playing chess, Ira doesn’t have a Ouija board, and all the card decks seem to be missing cards, and no one’s keen on playing Chinese checkers for whatever reason, why don’t you demonstrate the use of your seeing stones?”

“No way, Hadrian. I hardly know how to use them. Besides, Ira said one was missing.”

"Figures," said Vicker. "Ira had a fondness of things with missing parts."

Xanthia's strange eyes glittered. "Did you say seeing stones? Can I have a look at them?"

"They're not very interesting," said Reine as Mary came back with a new bowl of mints. Hadrian grabbed two and popped them into his mouth. Amanda crawled out from underneath the table and tried to climb up the nearest chair so he could have access to more treats. "They don't have any mystical runes or anything carved into them." She took out the pouch from her pocket and took out two stones, one lavender and one milky white.

"Ira gave them to you?" said Larrington.

"For my birthday. They're just quartz stones. They're colored because of impurities when the quartz was formed."

"Very pretty nonetheless," said Tabora. "I'd like to use the opportunity to ask everyone if you see some hair pins with turquoise stones that you return them to me. I seem to have misplaced them. They have sentimental value."

"I'd also like to say I lost something too," piped up Esther. "I have a little golden pin in the shape of a rose that Vicker gave me as an engagement present. So this has sentimental value too."

"Is it one of those small pins that you put on a jacket?" asked the Baron.

"No. It goes in my cleavage."

Larrington's face grew red and he began coughing. Palwick pounded him on his back.

The astrologer frowned. "I thought Ira gave you those. What makes them seeing stones?"

"Marcus has this theory that they act as a scrying focus."

"Does it work?"

Reine shifted uneasily in her seat. "I don't know," she finally lied. "I usually don't believe in all this stuff."

"Science editors are always skeptics," said Hadrian. He reached back into the mint bowl and encountered a wet tongue. "Amanda, didn't I tell you not to eat everything?"

The bulldog ignored his command and continued eating.

"But you do know how to work the seeing stones, don't you?" persisted Xanthia.

"Well, sort of."

"I want a demonstration."

"Give it up, Xanthia," said Diana tiredly. "Unlike you, Reine knows what's real and what's a hack."

"Don't be such a spoilsport," said Tabora. "Even if no one believes in it, it might be fun to watch anyway. It's sort of like Tarot cards. They're like parlor tricks that people do to amuse themselves. No one is serious about it. So why not do it, Reine? I offer myself up as a test subject."

She shook her head reluctantly and dropped the two stones back into the pouch. "All right. You should ask a question first. And then you draw out three stones."

"I'll ask a silly question, then," said the Baroness. "Are ghosts playing chess or someone among us who has a warped sense of humor?" She reached into the pouch and dropped three stones into Reine's hand.

The stones felt heavy and very cold. She looked down and saw black, white, dark purple. "Well, it's noth..."

Suddenly, the living room scene around her disappeared and she was in the library. The drapes were drawn so that it was dark. The fireplace only glowed dimly with withering embers, casting the strange shadowy shapes on the shelves. She saw the mannequin in the armchair. The wig was on its head. The dress was untouched. But over the mannequin stood a dark, tall figure. A menacing figure who looked up at her with glittering eyes. She cried out.

"Reine!"

She blinked, mouth open, breathing hard. Marcus had taken a hold of her arms and was staring down at her with his worried, dark eyes. Tuesday made a small sound in his throat and rubbed himself against her cheek.

"Are you okay?" asked Tabora, frowning.

"I, I just remembered a dream." She brushed Marcus's hands away and pulled Tuesday back into her lap. Still concerned, the cat stared up at her with gold eyes and gave a plaintive meow. She placed a hand over his head. "I'm okay. It was nothing."

"Oh, no, it wasn't nothing," said Xanthia, pouncing. "You saw something right? You had a vision. You have the gift."

Reine instinctively recoiled from the astrologer's aggressive manner. "I don't have a gift. I was just thinking about something else, that's all. I didn't see anything with these stones." She dropped the stones that Tabora had picked out back into the pouch and shoved it into her pocket. "You're placing emphasis on things that don't exist."

"Why don't we just play some Chinese checkers anyway?" said Mary. "As I recall, only Esther objected."

"Chinese checkers is for old people," the red-headed beauty sniffed snobbishly.

"And exactly how old are you?" asked Tabora.

"Twenty-six."

"So is anyone here the same age or younger?"

No one raised his or her hand.

The housekeeper grinned. "Well, you're outnumbered by us old fogies. We're going to play Chinese checkers."

Despite Larrington's grumblings that half the marbles in the Chinese checkers set might be missing, all of them were accounted for. Xanthia and Diana decided to be a team even though they each had mutual disagreements on strategy. They sat nearer to the fireplace because Xanthia claimed that that particular spot gave her insight into all the other players. To their left was Palwick and Larrington who were stuck together because everyone else were already paired up.

"I still say there's more serious things to think about," said Palwick.

"Just be quiet," replied Larrington. "I'll play for the both of us."

"You're a terrible nephew." The butler crossed his arms and sat back sulking.

Vicker and Esther were next, with Vicker still debating where to move even though it was still Xanthia and Diana's turn. Esther continued to lean forward in a blatant attempt to distract the opponents with her cleavage.

"She should be careful or those things might pop out," muttered Mary who was partnered with Hadrian. She had once again refilled the mint bowl. This time, Amanda remained underneath the table, sleeping.

"What?" Esther said.

"Nothing," the housekeeper immediately replied.

"I think it's raining," said Hadrian looking out the door to the den. The drapes in the den were pulled open so that one could see the wet panes.

Mary tapped his arm. "Pay attention. Xanthia and Diana just moved."

"You're really into Chinese checkers aren't you?"

Reine studied the board as Larrington triumphantly jumped a few pieces, getting closer to his destination. "Do you think we could do that?"

Marcus shook his head. "We'll be blocked by our next turn if we do that."

The Baron and Baroness were between Xanthia and Diana and Marcus and Reine. Both of them seemed to be the only players who were completely lackadaisical about whether or not they should win. Seeing Hadrian glancing outside, Tabora turned her head to peer into the den.

"It's raining quite hard. Did anyone catch the weather forecast on television today?"

"You don't need a weather forecast since you have me," said Xanthia. "It's going to be a fierce storm tonight."

"What makes you think you'll have a better probability at predicting the weather than the

weatherman?" said Diana. "Anyone with an ounce of common sense would know that there will be a storm. The weather today was rather rough to begin with."

"Ah, but it's not just a fierce storm," Xanthia glared at her cousin. "This will be a fierce electrical storm!"

A clap of thunder erupted, making the window panes vibrate. Amanda gave a yelp and ran underneath the couch. Tuesday didn't say anything, but his claws dug into Reine's shoulder. The lights flickered as Hadrian finished his move on the board. Then the lights went out.

Palwick cursed.

"Don't you dare say anything, Xanthia," said Diana in the dark.

"But..."

"No. Don't try to tell us now that you have magical powers."

"Hadrian, don't you have a cigarette lighter with you?"

"Yeah, and a pack of cigarettes, but I don't think you want me to light up now, do you?"

"I know my way around, even in the dark," spoke up Palwick. "I'm going to the kitchen to get a flashlight and look at the emergency generator. I don't want to waste it's power though, so when I come back, I'll round up some more flashlights and candles."

"I could try the fireplace," suggested Hadrian. "All right wait a sec and let me find my way without doing permanent damage to myself."

Lightning flashed briefly, casting the entire living room in silvery and shadowed relief. Thunder erupted again from the sky outside.

"All right, I think I got it."

The previous small flickering flame grew as Hadrian threw in more logs. Soon the room was bathed in an orange and red light and there was enough light to see everyone (minus Palwick who went off to find the emergency generator) and the Chinese checkers board.

"That was not how we left it," said Mary. "All of the marbles are in the wrong place."

"I did not bump the table while I was walking over here," said Hadrian, straightening out near the fireplace.

"Mary's right," said Tabora. "From what I remember, Xanthia and Diana's pieces were on this side of the board. Now they're scattered everywhere. So are Larrington's pieces. The Friesners' pieces seemed to have swapped places with ours and everything else is stuffed at the very center spaces."

"Coincidence," said Larrington. "Palwick must have hit the table while he was trying to get to the kitchen."

"Maybe, but the kitchen's over there and the quickest way to the door is not through the area with the table," said Vicker. "Someone must have deliberately switched the pieces."

The Baron shook his head. "Impossible. There was very little time between the blackout and the building of the fire. If one of us moved, someone might have noticed. Especially with the intermittent lightning flashes."

"Maybe it was the ghost," said Mary.

Reine sat back with a huff. "Not again."

"Maybe we should reset the board and start over again," suggested Diana.

"It's too dark," the astrologer argued. "And it'll take too long."

"No it won't," said Larrington.

"That's because you were winning!"

"Why is everyone so obsessed with winning?" said Tabora. "We could play something else. Or tell scary ghost stories."

Reine was in no mood to listen to ghost stories but said instead, "I don't know any ghost stories."

"If only we had a ouiji board," complained Esther. "This is the right atmosphere to contact a ghost for messages from beyond."

"Or looking at seeing stones," said Xanthia craftily.

"No," Reine replied. Her hand sneaked to her pocket and clutched the pouch of stones protectively.

"Damn." Palwick trooped back into the room with an even larger frown. "I couldn't get the emergency generator to work. We'll just have to wait it out. The utilities services down in Monadnock are usually pretty good about fixing power outages even if it's all the way out in the middle of nowhere. Electricity will be back tomorrow."

"And meanwhile, we can pretend we're camping," said Hadrian.

"That's right," said the Baron. "Tomorrow we're going camping. We can consider this practice."

"Let's just hope that the weather is better tomorrow," said Tabora dryly.

"Of course, dear. The weather is always better after a storm."

"Did you say camping?" said Xanthia. "Is it just out in the surrounding woods?"

"No. We're going out to the island," the Baron explained. "People have camped out there before. There's some good places for campgrounds at the center of the place."

"I want to go camping," said the astrologer.

"Be serious, Xanthia," said Diana. "You've never been camping in your whole life."

"And you have?"

"Of course! Stan took me off into the wilds a couple times before. I could give you pointers, if you ever bother listening to me rather than telling me that I should be listening to you."

"I'm taking you up on that," said Xanthia. "So," she said, turning to the Baron, "What do I need to bring?"

"I could give you a list tomorrow morning."

"I'm not going camping when there are perfectly good luxuries here," said Diana.

"Fine then. I'm going to come back a successful camper."

"Good luck," her cousin said wryly. "Because your astrology training won't be able to help you tell direction with the real stars."

XII. Beron

1:00 PM

The sun was out in full force, bathing the entire lake shore with its warmth. But the ground remained soggy from the previous night's storm. Reine frowned as she stepped out onto the trail. The ground made a greedy sucking sound as if it was valiantly attempting to transform itself into quicksand. Most of the trees in the surrounding area were striped. Gold and red leaves littered the ground in a show of dying dramatics. Pine cones occasionally littered the trail, crunching beneath their boots.

"The Baron was right," remarked Marcus as the two of them tramped down the trail and turned at the fork into the forest. "The day is better after the storm."

Sunlight filtered in from the bare branched canopy to light up the interior with specks of light. Tuesday would have found it fascinating. But the small cat had decided to sleep in yet again. Not that Reine blamed him. After her disturbing visions the night before, she had also wanted to cower back underneath her covers and shut out the world. But, yes, it was a nice day. Perhaps their little jaunt to the church ruins would provide a bit of relief from the strange things up at the mansion and the pang she felt whenever she remembered again that Ira was missing.

They had brought two flashlights with them at the suggestion of Palwick, the butler. "They're interesting for tourists if you know the right place to look," he had sniffed airily. "And it's quite dark in there despite the sun and despite it's supposed to be a ruin. The windows are all boarded up so hardly any light goes in. And definitely go in with a partner. I'd say the old church is liable to fall down any moment."

"You don't suppose we might find some relics in there, would we?" said Reine.

"Nah. Didn't the Baron and the Baroness say that archaeologists already went through the place and saw nothing of interest? I think the only thing interesting would be seeing Phineas Cronan's grave."

"I find it morbid."

"What's morbid?"

"Using a grave as a tourist attraction."

"Well, the Taj Mahal is a mausoleum and everyone visits that."

"I'm not quite sure that would apply as something mainstream."

"How about the pyramids?"

"Now you're just being silly," smiled Reine.

"Well, I am being serious. Too many people have flicked off graves as being uninteresting. It's the remains of someone who used to be alive, just like you and me. And they talked and laughed and cried and had thoughts like us."

"Great philosophy, but poor in practice, Marcus. How many times a day do you think of dead people?"

"Well. I guess you have a point. Less than once average. But I do think about dead related things sometimes. Like graveyards and pyramids and hearses."

"Is that all you think about?"

"Now that you mention it, no. I think about other stuff."

"Like what?"

"Hm," he said, avoiding the chance to answer. He stopped and looked briefly behind them. "Ah. We're finally out of sight of the house."

She stood beside him, looking in the direction of his gaze, seeing nothing but bare trees and the trail. "And what does that supposed to mean? Did we forget something like leaving a trail of crumbs like Hansel and Gretel to help us get back home?"

"You've been reading too many fairy tales."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah." Marcus took a hold of Reine's wrist and pulled her toward him so they were only a few inches apart.

Reine felt her face warm and it had nothing to do with the afternoon sun. "Am I going to be eaten by the big bad wolf?"

He grinned. "I'm not a wolf. But I can be big and bad if you want." He leaned down so she could feel his breath caressing her nose.

She tilted her head up and watched the pupils of his eyes grow larger. "Hm. I've..."

"Hey, wait up!"

Simultaneously, they stepped back from each other. Reine crossed her arms. Marcus stuffed his hands into his jacket pockets and narrowed his eyes at the figure jogging along the trail to catch up. It was Hadrian.

"So, where's your dog shadow?" said Reine.

"For once, I'm glad to have left him back at the house. He probably ate too many mints yesterday. All of that mint extract probably went to his head."

"Humph," Marcus grunted.

Hadrian smiled, knowingly. "The Baron said that you two were going up to see the old ruined church this afternoon," he said instead. "I just thought I'd tag along. I don't want to miss an opportunity."

"To visit a pile of rubble?" Reine turned to continue hiking up the trail, not waiting for the men to follow her because she knew they would do it automatically. "I think you just want to visit the grave site of this Phineas Cronan. From what we've heard of him already, he could be your hero."

"Actually, I think he's crazy," said Hadrian. "I mean, ten mistresses at one time? What man in his right mind would want to have ten women at a time calling upon his attention? And think of all the money he must have spent on them all."

"But think," said Marcus, "he didn't have to spend the long winter nights up here alone."

"Yeah, there's that."

"Is that what you guys always think about? Getting laid?"

"We're not that complicated to understand," Hadrian told Reine.

"We're not," Marcus agreed, drawing an amused glance from Reine. "But I've met quite a few authors who think the contrary."

"Send those literary types my way then," said Hadrian. "I'd like to hear their side on what makes a man tick. Then I'll beat him to the ground to demonstrate who's right."

"How barbaric," she replied. She pushed away a swinging branch as she continued on the trail. Marcus ducked as the branch came swinging back. The branch smacked Hadrian on the forehead.

"Ow! How am I going to explain a mark on my head when we come back?"

"You stepped on some fairies. They wreaked retribution," said Reine.

"Huh?"

"Expert on fairy tales," Marcus explained.

"Oh really?" The mystery editor rubbed his head. "Well, tell those fairies to go to hell." With his free hand, he took out a cigarette from his pocket and stuffed the end in his mouth. He fumbled for the lighter. "Is it me or is this trail getting darker?"

"The branches are thicker overhead," Reine replied absently. "Look. I think I see it."

The trail turned revealing a clearing that was on the verge of not being a clearing as bushes had started encroaching onto the perimeter. One church steeple reached upward toward the sky in a plaintive last testament. The church was built entirely of dark quarry stone except for the rotting stairs and the wooden doors which were hung at an odd angle.

Hadrian was disappointed. "You know, I was sort of expecting a spooky, haunted house sort of thing." He breathed out a cloud of smoke which dissipated almost immediately once it hit the air.

"You've been watching too many movies," said Reine. "Or were you really secretly expecting to meet up with Phineas Cronan's ghost?"

"Must have." Hadrian dropped his cigarette and snubbed it out with the heel of his shoe. "But we can look on the bright side. There's probably not much to see anyway. We can get back in time for dinner. Or if we're lucky we'll get some pie. Mary was baking some when I left."

The steps of the church groaned when they walked to the door. Marcus pulled the door open and remarkably, it gave way easily. Reine peered inside. It was dark. She switched on her flashlight and swung the light beam around, catching glimpses of misshapen objects and boarded up walls where the windows were supposed to be.

She stepped inside, and the air swirled, musty, around her, a striking contrast from the fresh, slightly damp air of outside. It was air that no one had breathed in many years. She tucked her free hand into her pocket, her fingertips touching the pouch with seeing stones and walked forward, her footsteps making dull thumping sounds instead of echoes from resonating and hollow boards. The beam of her flashlight finally focused onto one of the misshapen lumps and she discovered that it was a broken pew. It was wood and plain, the clunky and practical legs scratched and torn.

"So far, it's comparable to an unrepairable farm," said Marcus. He stayed near the door and pointed his own flashlight to the farthest corners of the ruined church. The beam was not strong enough to penetrate the dark.

"A mess," Hadrian agreed. He took one step inside and felt his boots sinking into something soft. He looked down, seeing something white and possibly moldy. "Oh great. What did I step in this time?"

Marcus chuckled. "I think you're cursed."

"That is not funny."

She ignored the exchange near the door and ambled down an aisle and eventually made out the altar at the front of the church. The podium where the minister was supposed to stand was turned over on its side, rotting. The altar itself remained intact except for the lack of a crucifix. "Well, the Baron and Baroness did say that some cult or something or other used this as a base of operations once upon a time," she murmured to herself. Reine swung her flashlight up towards the ceiling, hoping to either see a crucifix there or just ceiling boards. Instead she saw red eyes.

"Cover your heads and run!" she screamed as shrieks and rustlings roared overhead. She covered her own head with her arms and ran down the aisle, feeling things brushing past her and hearing flaps of wings. Someone tugged her the rest of the way outside.

Finally, she looked up and saw a black cloud streaming out the door.

Hadrian gaped at the scene. "Bats. How the hell did they end up in a church?"

"Look." They followed Marcus's hand and saw that a larger black cloud, bats, were streaming out the back of the church. "There must be a hole back there somewhere. And didn't the Baron or Baroness say that the church was supposed to have been built on top of a cave? Perhaps the local bat population was forced to move when that happened. And when they did move, perhaps that dried up the church's business."

"But how could have people not noticed that there were bats around when they were building the church?" Reine asked. "You would think that the noise of construction would have woken a few of them up."

Marcus shrugged. "How am I supposed to know? I'm not a biologist. You're the one with the scientific background."

"I may know a lot about science, but I do not know about bat behavior. I'm no biologist. I'm just a lowly science editor."

"Right," said Hadrian unconvinced. "I keep telling you that you have it easy. I have to put up with more crap than both of you combined. See?" He lifted up his boots, which were covered in the white stuff that he had stepped in earlier.

She shrugged. "Well, the bats are out of there. For now, anyway. They'll come back soon though since it's still day. From what little I do know, bats are nocturnal creatures."

"Bats or no bats, I'm not sticking around," said Hadrian. "I'm going back to clean my boots and maybe get a slice of Mary's pie. Or maybe if she's not done, she'll let me help. She loves it when I take over." He waggled his eyebrows.

Reine rolled her eyes. "Geez. We're stuck with a cooking Don Juan who's afraid of bats."

As Hadrian walked back down the trail, whistling, Reine and Marcus made their way to a more overgrown section of the clearing next to the church where weathered headstones peeked out from the cover of bushes and weeds.

The ground in the cemetery was remarkably dry. Perhaps the water from the storm the night before simply soaked right through and was collected by the small holes and containers underground. Reine frowned at the thought of waterlogged caskets.

"Should I know what you're thinking about?" asked Marcus, noticing her frown.

"How would you like to be underwater when you thought you would be six feet under?"

"Maybe not."

She brushed some weeds away and looked at the letters that were still visible on the headstone. "Smith, died 1857." She looked at the stone next to it. "Haggerty, 1862. Trevor

Finley, 1876.”

“It’s a completely different era. Look, here’s one from all the way back in 1795.”

“Hm.” Reine stepped over another stone to a much larger one, mostly obscured by the grasses at the edge of the clearing. “Hey. Look what I found.”

Marcus trooped over to where Reine crouched, wiping away the dirt on the plaque on the ground. “It looks as old as the others although the design looks a little more recent.”

“Phineas Cronan, died 1915. So his bones are here. You would think that a ghost would have the sense to stay a little more closer to his body, especially one that was so materialistic when he was alive.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in ghosts.”

“I don’t. I’m just saying, if there was a ghost this is where he belongs.”

“Well, maybe it gets a bit boring out here in the cemetery with only bats for company. I know that if I were a ghost, I’d definitely check out the house for some real people.”

“Ha. Wouldn’t you be more concerned about getting into the next life then getting stuck here where a ghost can’t really interact with anyone?”

“Well, it might be fun to spook some people out. Like Larrington for instance.”

“I don’t know. He’ll probably think it was indigestion.”

Marcus closer and crouched down next to Reine. “I think there’s some more writing on this. You don’t suppose it’s an epitaph?”

She leaned forward to get a better view, but the soft ground underneath their feet suddenly sunk and crumbled into a large gaping hole that appeared out of nowhere. Reine was too surprised to scream as she tumbled over into the dark abyss. Marcus tried to catch her arm but ended up losing his balance and fell in, too, head first.

The first coherent word that came to her mind was “pain”. The back of her head hurt. Her shoulders hurt. Her back hurt. Her hands hurt. Her legs hurt. She heard a groan next to her. She couldn’t make a sound. She hurt too much to do that. Instead she attempted to see if she could move the rest of her body. Reluctantly, she sat up, wincing.

“Where the hell are we?”

She looked beside her but only saw a shadowed face as Marcus struggled to sit up also. She glanced above and saw a thin hole, the dust and dirt still drifting down onto them, the grass trailing at the edge of the hole, the sunlight simply failing to penetrate the darkness. The flashlight, she thought. Soon, a beam of light attempted to pierce the darkness. The hole was perhaps, fifteen feet above.

“Do you suppose one of us could reach the edge if we stood on each other’s shoulders?” said Reine.

“Correction, if you stood on my shoulders,” he replied. “I don’t think you could lift me if you

tried."

She shrugged. "Well, do you think it could be done?"

He looked up and judged the distance. "Probably not unless we had some other help. What is this place anyway?"

The flashlight's beam swung around, sweeping the small cavern. It was mostly dirty and musty, but the walls gleamed slightly in the light. Reine reached out and felt stone.

"It's a cave. Perhaps it's the same one that the church was supposedly built on top of."

"It doesn't look that large," Marcus said. "We'll probably have to wait until someone notices we're missing and they launch a search."

"You've got to be kidding. Hadrian is the only one who knows we're still out here. He'll remember that he left us here two days from now." She had drawn a stone from within the pouch in her pocket. It was cool to the touch but reassuring. Briefly, she wondered if she was becoming superstitious, but banished the thought when her flashlight encountered a wall built with cubbyholes filled with bones. She swallowed, trying to still her racing heart. "I think we got our answer to what this place is."

"A grave under a grave. These look more like catacombs than anything. I wonder if these were the bones of Christians or of Native Americans."

"Probably Christians. Native Americans don't build catacombs."

She took a deep breath, reminding herself that these people were dead long before she was born. The cubbyholes had a rough hewn look to them as if the builder of the catacombs were going more for quantity than quality. Each hole contained a skull and some other bones. And there were many holes. As she swept her flashlight over the wall, she counted at least fifty. Upon closer inspection, some of the cubbyholes had inscriptions, all of them in Latin.

The entire cavern was about the size of a bedroom in Ira's mansion. There did not appear to be any exit except the hole that they fell through. Crossing her arms in resignation, the beam swung around the cavern once again, but when it finally landed, there was only a spot of darkness. What was this? She walked forward the stone remained cool. Bolder, Reine reached out to touch the corner where the crevasse met the edge of the wall. She steeled herself and stepped through.

"Reine!" A hand took hold of hers, attempting to pull her back to the other side.

"I think it's a passageway." Instead of passively letting him pull her back, she tugged on his hand, guiding him through.

The crevasse widened in a few steps and she found herself in another room, also filled with cubbyholes. Along the floor were shallow stone coffins, all of them covered with carvings of crucifixes.

"Why doesn't anyone know about this?" she said, half to herself. "You would have thought that the archaeologists would have discovered this at least. People just don't build underground graveyards in the Americas."

"You're right. Catacombs are mainly found in Europe. But what if all of these were people who recently came from Europe?"

"It still doesn't make very much sense."

This room was rather narrow and curved. A crude archway was the entrance to a third room with yet more corpses.

"We should have stayed where we were," said Marcus. "At least someone would have a chance of finding us due to that hole above."

"But we also have nothing to lose if we follow this," she said. "What if these passages lead back up to the church? Because think about it. You need a way to access the caves down here if you're going to inter somebody. It makes no sense if all the entrances to above ground are sealed."

"Well, what if they are, after all the bodies were interred?"

They finally found themselves in a room that appeared to be a central hub of a network of catacombs. Reine stepped toward the first doorway that she instinctively chose. The stone remained cool.

"We're going to get lost down here," he told her.

"You're sounding very negative. Just trust me."

"I do. But aren't we checking out the other paths?"

"Because I think this one is the right one."

Marcus shook his head, hoping that he remembered the layout of the catacombs so far. He didn't want to end up running around in circles. As he started walking again, following Reine, he stumbled over something on the ground. He looked down, pointing his own flashlight down at the offending object. It glittered. He picked it up and turned it over. The flat disk in his hand was quite dusty, but it was brass and had odd symbols nicked at the edges. A long slender dial was affixed at the center. As he turned the disk, the arrow moved, or rather the arrow stayed pointing at one direction. A compass. What a lucky find, he thought to himself. They wouldn't get too lost with a directional instrument of some sort.

He began to wonder who had left a compass down in the catacombs, but noticed that Reine had already stepped into the other room. He followed her.

The style of the carved cubbyholes were the same in all of the rooms. Some cubbyholes had inscriptions, and occasionally they would see shallow coffins. But all of those would be closed. They wandered down more rooms and passages, awed that there would be something so complex located in the middle of nowhere. On their last room, there were no other doorways leading elsewhere. It was a dead end.

"Let's go back," said Marcus.

"Hm."

The last room was like the first room. Only one wall was covered with the cubbyholes filled with skeletons. The other wall was a mixture of stone and dust. She pointed her light to the ceiling and saw that several tree roots had managed to finagle their way into the cavern. That side was a massive tangle of organic matter. Some moss grew in that area too and brackish water trickled from the corner down to a small hole in the floor that had obviously been worn by the dropping water. The sound of the water echoed deep in the bowels in the earth and she guessed that perhaps there was a level of caves or catacombs below the one they were on.

"We're very close to the surface," she said as she walked over to the tree roots.

"Yes, but there's only one exit. And that's back through the network of catacombs over there."

The stone in her hand remained cool though. She stood still, holding her breath for a moment, trying to hear anything over the trickling water. She thought she heard a distant roar, possibly from outside. She placed a hand on a root and pushed. Dirt came away along with a long curling vine. She looked incredulously at her hand.

"What is this?"

"What do you mean?" Marcus walked over to where she was to see what she was up to.

This time she pulled and a few more vines came loose. Did she smell fresh air? She began tugging vines and roots in earnest and soon, a spot of light opened up. With a whoop, she worked harder with Marcus who became as excited at the opportunity of escaping the cave. Soon they opened up a hole large enough for one person to crawl through.

Reine squeezed herself through first and found herself near the shore of the lake and underneath a large oak tree. She could see the plateau with Ira's mansion nearby. "Come on, Marcus, we actually managed to get to a place near the house."

"Really?" Marcus crawled through, only to wince as he tried to push himself out. "Reine. I think I'm stuck."

With both arms, she locked them underneath his own and pulled. He tried to gain traction on the ground with his hands and also tugged. Suddenly, he slid out and ended up pinning Reine to the ground. He stared down at her. "Thanks."

"No problem." She felt her face grow warm as a smile tugged at the edge of mouth.

"I should have trusted you, been more positive that you would find a way out."

"You did. You followed me through that maze." She pushed at his shoulder. "You're heavy."

He stood up and held out a hand to help her up. "Sorry about that." As she tilted her head up to look at him, he could not help but to reach up and brush a smudge of dirt from her cheek. "We're not particularly clean."

"No." She was about to dust off his shoulder when he leaned down and touched her lips with his.

* * *

When Reine opened the kitchen door, her nose was assaulted by the scent of fresh blueberry pie. Her arms were assaulted by an amber colored cat who vaulted onto her as soon as he sensed that she was home.

"Time you got back," Hadrian said between bites of pie. "The Baron is almost done loading everything on the boat. And that cat was busy scratching waiting by the door like a paranoid doorman."

"Perhaps Tuesday was worried," she said as the cat in question purred and rubbed his head against his favorite human. He then took a dainty sniff and suddenly jerked his head up in surprise, nearly hitting Reine's chin. "Hey. Maybe you are as paranoid as Hadrian says you are," she laughed.

Tuesday turned, wide-eyed to stare at Marcus. "Mreow!"

"What did I do?" Marcus demanded. He stroked the cat's head. Tuesday appeared to like the attention, but he yowled once more before wrinkling his nose prudishly. He knew what these two had been up to in the woods.

XIII. Thanu

3:00 PM

The roar of the motorboat frightened a flock of ducks bobbing along the surface of Lake Shayadoh like oddly shaped corks. They rose from the lake with a few flaps of their wings, squawking in annoyance. The dark cloud of fowl delighted Tuesday as he stood at the prow of the motorboat. He yowled and let the cool autumn air ruffle his fur. The boat skimmed the water effortlessly, rarely sending spray into the boat. But even if a little water splattered on him, Tuesday didn't care. They were nearing an island. He was eager to explore a little new territory without the annoying, wussy bulldog yapping at his heels.

"I swear, he looks just like a ship cat," said Reine. "Perhaps he was a sailor in his past life."

"Cats don't have past lives as sailors," sniffed Xanthia. "They're just familiars."

At Xanthia's voice, Tuesday's large expressive ears pricked up and he turned around to glare at the astrologer. She didn't appear to notice the cat's scrutiny. Tuesday softly hissed. The woman was an idiot.

"Humans on the other hand," Xanthia continued, "have past lives."

"Reincarnation?" said Hadrian, amused. He stuck a finger over the side of the boat to feel the cold water. "You believe that stuff?"

"I took a class on self-hypnosis. I discovered that I had three past lives before. All very interesting."

"My wife once dragged me to a seminar on hypnosis when she was in her new age phase," the Baron said as he navigated and adjusted the dials for the motor. He was using everyone's bags and supplies as a seat. "The guru hypnotized this one woman and to show that she had lost all inhibition, he made her squawk like a chicken."

"Isn't getting hypnotized supposed to be putting your mind into an alternate state?" said Marcus. "I heard that you could use it to cure phobias and add confidence."

"Sure. And you could make people do things that they wouldn't ordinarily do," Hadrian added. "Now that's sort of scary. You could hypnotize someone and tell him or her they're supposed to steal something or kill somebody when he or she sees or hears a signal. And when they're in their right mind, they have no idea that they were given such a directive."

Reine shook her head, smiling. "Hadrian, you've been reading too many mysteries with conspiracy plots."

"Hey, that's what I do for a living."

"I had three past lives," Xanthia continued as if no one had interrupted her. "My first past life was in ancient Mesopotamia. I was a priestess. My second, I was a witch doctor who traveled with some nomads in the Sahara desert. And in my third past life, I was a courtesan in the Sun King's court."

Reine raised an eyebrow.

"I thought witch doctors practiced voodoo in the Congo," said Hadrian.

"In South Africa," Marcus corrected.

"If you had so many past lives," said the Baron, "How can you keep them all straight in your head? I mean how wouldn't you get confused with all the different memories?"

"I don't."

"Hey, I think I see a pier over there," Reine interrupted.

The Baron nodded. "People come to the island fairly often for camping or making a base for fishing. So of course there's a pier. And it's a good thing too. I wouldn't like wading in the water to get the boat launched."

The Baron maneuvered the boat next to the dock and killed the engine. Tuesday made a graceful leap to the pier and watched for a moment as Hadrian tied the rope onto one of the pillars, tethering the boat to the pier. Then the cat trotted off, whiskers trembling in excitement, to discover a new land.

Awkwardly, Xanthia was the next one to stumble out, readjusting her turban and shiny robes which had little speckles on the hem from the spraying water. She peered curiously at the island now that she was close up. Pines and other evergreens lined the shore like sentinels, obscuring all view of the interior. Absently, she helped arrange the backpacks onto the pier as the others clambered out.

"It's a little hike into the interior," the Baron said as he adjusted the straps on his hiking pack and stamped his booted feet onto the pier, enjoying the hollow sound he made. "It's about a half an hour walk. There's a small trail from here to the main campsite. We'll probably have to set up camp when we get there. It gets pretty dark early. We wouldn't want anyone getting lost in the woods at night."

"If we get lost, Reine can find the way out again," said Marcus. "She has better sense of

direction than me.”

“Sure,” she replied. “I don’t know about my sense of direction, but we should keep in mind not to ask you for directions.”

As the humans tramped noisily down the path that began where the pier met the ground and wound a little along the shore before disappearing into the vegetation, Tuesday investigated a tree. He had thought he had seen a squirrel scamper up the trunk before disappearing into the leaves above. For a moment, he debated on whether or not to climb the tree, but ultimately decided that he was much too dignified to climb. Besides, it would have been awkward to be stuck up in the branches only to have someone rescue him. He scampered back to the others and trotted next to Reine’s feet.

“This is a bit more messier than I had imagined,” said the astrologer.

“What do you mean?” said the Baron as he walked confidently ahead a ways up the path.

“This hiking. I had not thought about the rather damp nature of the forest after yesterday’s storm. I had heard about wiccans going camping so that they could commune with nature. They often go skyclad in order to be closer to nature.”

“Well, you haven’t seen anything yet if this little jaunt is anything to judge by.”

“Maybe you should have borrowed some more practical clothes before coming with us,” said Hadrian as the astrologer narrowly had her turban snatched from her head from an overhanging branch.

“More practical clothing?” she said, giving him a disapproving look. “This is practical clothing. It’s made of a special fabric and designed to keep you warm in cold weather and cool during warm weather. It’s based on a design from some of the geniuses during the Renaissance.”

“I didn’t know there were geniuses in tailoring clothing,” said Hadrian blithely as the astrologer again sent him another annoyed look. “Maybe if you tell me the secret of your clothing I could set up a sweatshop and make millions at it.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Maybe she’s right,” said Reine. “You can’t make millions with clothing unless you’re one of those fashion designers in Paris or something. You could go into stock brokering though considering you live so close to Wall Street.”

“I don’t live that close to Wall Street,” said Hadrian. “Besides, I don’t have a business degree. I’m stuck in publishing and you know it.”

At the end of the trail, the trees abruptly ended and gave way to an empty clearing that was devoid of anything living. Instead, the terrain was a long stretch of rock that rose from sea level in an almost smooth fashion, occasionally punctuated by rivulets, which broke the rock into several sections. When they climbed this rock, they could see the surrounding area as well as a little past the treetops to see a little of the lake. But they were not high enough to also see the mainland and Ira’s mansion.

The Baron made his way up the rocky incline as the others stood nearer to the base looking

up at the rock, wondering how it got there in the first place. Perhaps the island used to be a center of volcanic activity and the odd organization of the rock was actually the result of ancient lava flow. Reine said as much to the others. Hadrian voiced concern that perhaps they were sleeping on top of a dormant volcano that would blow at any moment. Marcus contradicted him by saying that if it was an active volcano they would have known about it by now. Xanthia serenely looked on as if all of this was obvious and that it was pointless to even talk about it.

Besides the rivulets that cut the rock into sections, the rock was littered haphazardly with burnt out pockmarks where previous campers had chosen to build their campfires. The Baron chose the one nearest to the top of the rock shelf. From the top, one could also see the other side of the island, which was a continuation of the evergreen trees. A small shack was located at the bottom of the rock shelf in that direction, partially hidden by some trees. The Baron pointed out that it was a bathroom in the style of the old-fashioned outhouse.

"I thought you said that there would be amenities for camping," said Xanthia.

The Baron pretended to not understand her. "What do you mean? There's the outhouse."

"No. I mean a showering facility, picnic tables, actual places marked out for building fires."

He shook his head. "If you want to take a bath, go hike back down to the lake. And we're going to build a fire, right in this hollow as soon as we can gather enough firewood. So everyone should hurry up with that task. Keep in sight of this stone hill. We wouldn't want anyone to get lost in the woods at this time of day, would we?"

"But I thought this island was pretty small," said Hadrian. "You're bound to hit the shore sooner or later and from there, find the pier."

"The island is a lot bigger than you think," the Baron replied. "Especially since there are so many trees and after a while everything starts to look the same."

As Xanthia muttered under her breath, destroyed from her previous serene composure, and trampled toward the outhouse to get her turban fixed, the others headed off in different directions in an attempt to find the firewood that the Baron requested. Reine headed off a little ways, still in sight of the elevated stone campground and the lonely outhouse. As she gathered a few fallen branches, Tuesday tagged along to sniff at a few twigs before picking up a few in his mouth like a dog who wanted to play fetch.

Reine laughed. "I didn't expect you to be so helpful. I bet you're just doing it for the food. We're having hotdogs tonight."

After she filled her arms with as many branches and medium sized logs that she could carry, she and Tuesday hiked back to the campsite to drop off their load. As the Baron was about to start the fire, Xanthia came back from the outhouse smelling, literally, of roses.

"What did you do in there?" said Hadrian jokingly. "Start a perfumery?"

The astrologer glared at him as if he were an errant schoolboy. "What a woman does during her daily toilette is none of your business."

"Give her some slack, Hadrian," Reine said, momentarily sympathizing with the astrologer as she tried to wipe away the dirt on a rock she wanted to sit on. "Xanthia's never been

camping before.”

“You haven’t either,” said Marcus, “And you haven’t complained.”

“But I know something of what to expect. I went to summer camp once when I was a kid. Although it isn’t on par with this, I did know that there wouldn’t be any conveniences.”

The spark that the Baron started finally caught on to the various pile of twigs and branches that everyone had accumulated. Against the darkening navy sky and the shadowy woods, the fire leapt up, bright orange flame dancers that licked hungrily at its fuel. Tuesday trotted over to Hadrian who was taking out a package of hot dogs from his backpack. The cat stared hungrily as he stuck the hot dogs on skewers and handed them to everyone.

“You’ll get your chance,” said Hadrian to the cat, “once these are done. Raw hot dogs will probably give you a belly ache.” He aimed a grin towards Reine. “And I don’t want an angry owner at my back for her puking cat.”

“Then you shouldn’t have given me such a dangerous weapon,” said Reine, briefly waving her skewer.

Tuesday seemed to understand. The cat stopped staring at Hadrian and stared at the roasting hot dogs instead, his swishing tail the only indication that he was impatient for the food to be finished cooking.

XIV. Yayn

1:00 AM

After Xanthia finished complaining that the ground was too hard to sleep on and that Diana was right in that she wasn’t cut out for camping, Reine finally drifted off to sleep with Tuesday curled with her in her sleeping bag along her shoulder.

They had brought two tents with them, round waterproof cloth igloos that the Baron had found while scrounging around in the boathouse for supplies. The men had taken the larger tent, but even that was not big enough. While the Baron, Marcus, and Hadrian were trying to get into their sleeping bags, Reine had poked her head in to see if they were all right since she heard much cursing coming from their direction. They turned out to be packed like sardines.

She and Xanthia shared the other tent. The astrologer had decided to go back to the outhouse again to change into some silver pajamas. She kept her turban on her head, complaining that it was too cold to sleep without one. Normally, Reine would not have thought anything about it, but the astrologer had also insisted on piling the rest of her wardrobe on top of herself to keep herself from freezing.

A noise, something that sounded like a clap and the whistle of the wind woke Reine from her short rest. She had been dreaming of dark, dirty places filled with bones and skulls and coffins. She was relieved, as she stared up at the tent roof, that she was no longer stuck in those catacombs. I should tell Ira about them, she thought. They were on her property and would be a dangerous hazard for tourists and guests alike.

Tuesday was an inert lump of fur nestled along her shoulders. She could hear the astrologer mumbling and shifting in her sleep. The air inside the tent was cool but still bearable. She

raised her arm and pressed a light to illuminate her watch. It was one in the morning. Tuesday protested quietly as she got up to go to the outhouse.

The air outside was much cooler. Apparently the tents also provided some insulation. With her flashlight, Reine made her way without incident to the little shack at the edge of the woods.

But as she finished her business and went outside again, the wind started up, rustling the pines so that their branches clacked and creaked like wooden floorboards and old bones. The trees swayed as if dancing to a mysterious rhythm that only the wind knew. Reine looked up at the sky and the clouds were racing across the heavens, the stars winking in and out like tiny switches. The full moon cast an eerie silver light across the landscape. Even with the naked eye, she could make out blotches, which were moon craters. With a more creative bent of mind, she could easily envision it as a face. But it wouldn't be the smiling man in the moon as depicted in children's fairy tales and nursery rhymes. Oh no. This face had a more malicious cast to its features.

Reine climbed up the stony incline to the campsite. The fire that the Baron had built had completely burned out—not even a persistent ember remained to help light the path. The wind whistled again, but she wondered, was it really the wind or the howl of a wolf? But she almost immediately discounted that idea. There was no way a wolf could find its way to the island. The only way to the island was either by boat or by swimming. And even if a wolf had somehow found its way to the island, there would be nothing for it to eat. The island contained no large game, at least no large game that the Baron had mentioned or that she had seen.

At the two dark outcroppings that she had recognized as the two tents, a dark loping shadow loomed in front of her. Soon it stood upright as it sensed her presence. Suddenly nervous, she fumbled with her flashlight. The beam fell upon the figure and she saw, with relief, that it was the astrologer. In the light, her silvery pajamas were enough to give a reasonable person eyestrain. The astrologer herself put a hand up to her face to shield her eyes.

"What are you doing up?" said Reine.

"I should be asking the same question," Xanthia replied. "And quit shining that damned light into my eyes."

"Sorry." Reine turned the flashlight off. "I just came back from the outhouse. I see that you have discovered that it's not so cold out here."

"It's colder than inside the tent," the astrologer retorted. "Anyways, perhaps I was a little hasty in trying to keep myself warm. I was beginning to get stifled in there."

Reine refrained from saying an "I told you so" but said instead, "You can use my flashlight if you want."

"I'm fine," the astrologer sniffed, apparently uneasy that she had admitted another weakness. "The moon is giving out enough light for me to see. I have excellent night vision."

As she moved away, Reine cast a glance over to the larger tent and smiled. She could hear snores coming from that direction. It was most likely that the men had not heard their

exchange. She stepped into her own tent and found that Tuesday had taken up her sleeping bag by sprawling over her pillow. She sighed and pushed the sleeping cat over and slid into her sleeping bag.

Tuesday meowed in her ear.

"Sorry, I don't have any food with me." She yawned. "Wait until tomorrow morning, will you? I'm sure Hadrian packed some bacon with him."

The cat responded by readjusting to his former position along her shoulders.

The two of them fell back asleep, unaware that the astrologer came to the tent to take her sleeping bag out but never came back to the tent for the rest of the night.

XV. Sadedali

5:00 AM

Dawn light filtered through the translucent tent material to illuminate the interior. Reine groaned and rolled over, trying to block out the light. Tuesday squeaked in protest. She cracked an eye open and was about to tell Tuesday to be quiet when she noticed the empty space beside her. She gasped in surprise and sat up.

"Xanthia! Where is she?"

Tuesday gave a sleepy confused meow.

She scrambled out of her sleeping bag, nearly stumbling on her own feet as she unzipped the tent and lumbered outside. The sky was still quite dark although the gray of dawn was already permeating. The woods surrounding the rocky incline was also dark and unmoving. The air was cold. Reine stamped her feet in an attempt to get warm but realized instead of rock, her feet were kicking against a thin layer of powdered snow.

Reine exhaled loudly and saw her breath as a white vapor. Vexed at getting sidetracked, she finally tramped toward the larger tent. She unzipped the entrance and peered inside, slowly making out three large lumps. Finally awakened, Tuesday followed Reine to the other tent and curiously peered in too. Unerringly, he wandered toward Marcus, who sneezed in his sleep as the cat tickled his nose with his tail.

"Hello?" she called out softly.

Hadrian snorted in mid-snore and mumbled something like "Too early darling. Go back to sleep."

Tuesday twitched his tail again making Marcus sneeze one more. He finally sat up, awakened. He blinked his eyes and focused on the dark figure at the entrance of the tent.

"If you want to join me, you'll have to wait until next time when we get our own tent. Right now it's too crowded."

"I'm not here to join you," Reine replied smiling. "No matter how tempting it may be. Is Xanthia here?"

He scowled, setting Tuesday aside. Instead, the cat jumped onto Hadrian and proceeded to stare at the sleeping man until he awoke. "Why on earth would Xanthia be here? There's hardly enough room for three people as it is. Maybe she's in the outhouse."

"She can't be in the outhouse. Her sleeping bag is gone."

"What?"

"Huh?" Hadrian finally sat up, rubbing his eyes. Tuesday meowed. "Get your own breakfast, pipsqueak, I'm frying the bacon when I'm good and ready."

"What do you want me to do?" Marcus said after the initial shock wore off. He unzipped his sleeping bag and shrugged on his coat and boots as he joined her outside. "Have you already looked around the surrounding area?"

"No. I was hoping you guys would help. It would take less time to do it."

"We'll let the others sleep. It's still pretty early in the morning. I'm sure she hasn't gone far. You can take that end and I'll be over here. Check the outhouse just in case anyway."

Reine tramped over to the outhouse and banged on the door. "Xanthia! Are you in there?"

There was no answer.

The handle was unlocked so she pushed it open, peering in. No one. Shutting the door to the outhouse again, she headed off in the direction of the forest. Why on earth would Xanthia be wandering out here, in the cold and in her pajamas? Wasn't she afraid of the cold anyway? This was ridiculous. She was the calling for the astrologer as if she was a lost puppy.

"Xanthia!"

She could hear similar shouts from the opposite direction where Marcus was searching. Frowning, she kicked the snow, sending little sprays of white flying at her feet. Xanthia must have left much earlier. She could not see any footprints except for her own. She peered behind likely trees and hollows. The last she had remembered seeing Xanthia was in the middle of the night when she had come back from the outhouse. Then, the astrologer had still been snug in her sleeping bag in the tent when she had gone out. And then the astrologer had gone out to the outhouse herself.

"Xanthia!"

Still nothing. The snowed in forest was like a large insulated wall that made sound travel extremely poorly. Her voice sounded like she was shouting through a thick gag. The astrologer had left no trace of herself. And if she did, the snow had covered everything up.

"Damn snow."

What if aliens had come in the middle of the night and abducted her? Reine shook her head. She was getting fanciful now. But at the rate everything was happening, she would not have been surprised if Xanthia had fallen into a deep hole on her way back from the outhouse. The problem would be locating the hole. The snow covered everything and it was still a bit dark. Everything looked gray and the same.

"Xanthia! Where are you?"

The other problem was that Xanthia's sleeping bag was missing. Her backpack was still at the tent though so through reasoning, she could not have wandered far.

After scouring the edges of that part of the forest, Reine gave a frustrated sigh. If the astrologer ever showed up, she had a lot of explaining to do.

"Anything?" Marcus said, heading towards her.

She shook her head. "I didn't see anything. I think it's best to tell the others and get going. Doesn't the Baron have a radio or something with him? He could radio for help."

"Good idea."

The both of them tramped back up the rocky incline, waking Hadrian who was already half awake, attempting to shove the persistent and hungry Tuesday from off his face.

"Reine," he whined. "Get your cat off me."

"Tuesday, come here. You're never going to get your breakfast that way."

The cat pricked up his ears at Reine's voice and then sauntered off of Hadrian as if he had wanted to do that all along.

"All right, out with it. I heard snatches of something about Xanthia," said Hadrian as he reluctantly shoved the sleeping bag off. "I suppose she was the reason that both of you are up early?"

Marcus nodded. "She's missing. We looked everywhere and couldn't find a thing."

"She might be out taking a little nature walk."

"No. I don't think so."

Hadrian rolled his eyes. "Great. Baron? Baron? Are you awake?"

"I am now," came a voice from the depths of the other sleeping bag. "What is it? It's a rather ungodly hour in the morning."

"The astrologer is missing."

Reine coughed. "You don't suppose you have a radio or cellphone with you? We really should call for help."

"Good God!" The Baron finally sat up, blinking. "What do you need a cellphone for?"

"Xanthia's missing."

"Didn't you check the outhouse?"

"The last I saw her was last night, around one in the morning. She was going to the

outhouse. But when I checked just now, she's not there. She's not out taking a nature walk," at that she sent a glare in Hadrian's direction. "And her sleeping bag is gone. But her backpack is still here. It looks like she sort of left in a hurry."

The Baron brooded. "That is not like her. You don't suppose she decided to go out camping on her own, do you? She's always arguing with that cousin of hers. Maybe she wanted to prove that she could do the camping thing on her own."

"That's a completely ridiculous idea," said Hadrian, "but considering that the woman is an astrologer who wants to believe in magic tricks, it's probably not out of the realm of possibility that that's exactly what she did."

"I charged my cellphone right before we left on this little trip," said the Baron, "in case some emergency came about like someone accidentally tripping and spraining their ankle, but this, this takes the cake. I think I'll strangle the woman once she's found. We'll have to get back out to the edge of the island to get reception. We'll have to pack everything and head on out there. This trip has been a bust."

Tuesday meowed, disappointed that there would be no breakfast.

"Sorry Tuesday," said Reine as she picked up the cat after she put on her own backpack. "We'll get you a big brunch as soon as we return back to the house. If it's any consolation, that astrologer is making us miss our breakfasts too."

The four of them hiked back down the stony incline and through the small trail that was now much more difficult to follow because of the snow back to the lake shore. As they neared the pier, Marcus was the first to spot a dark lump on the pier next to the motorboat. The lump did not move. Instinctively knowing something was amiss, they hurried to the pier and found that the bundle was indeed the astrologer. She was scrunched up in a ball, her eyes closed, her skin very pale. Bits of snow clung to her hair. The astrologer's turban had disappeared.

Reine found a pulse, but it was weak, thready, and erratic. "Thank God she's still alive."

The Baron punched in numbers on his cellphone anyway to call his wife. "Good morning, darling. Yes, I know what time it is. But we've got an emergency. I need you to call a doctor."

Hadrian and Marcus moved the astrologer's body to the motorboat as the Baron finished his conversation with his wife and jumped into the boat to untie the rigging.

The lake itself was a calm pool, the waves so weak that they hardly lapped against the island shore. Because the air was so cold and the lake much warmer because it did not have as much time to cool, steam rose from the dark waters so that one could hardly make out the distant shore. The Baron seemed to know what he was doing though so the others sat back as he revved the motor and guided the boat from out of the pier. Reine took out her own sleeping bag, unzipping it to make it a blanket and covered it over the astrologer, hoping that it was keeping her warm.

As the boat sped towards the mainland shore, the sun decided to break through the tree tops. The light scattered through the fog and mist creating a yellow veil that continued to hide their destination, the mansion on the hill.

XVI. Thamur

6:00 AM

As the Baron killed the engine, the boat bumped against the pier at the base of the plateau that held Ira's house. The boat rocked and the water sloshed against the sides. Instinctively, Reine reached into her pocket to hold her pouch of stones, which felt oddly warm. The astrologer, wrapped in blankets moaned quietly. Hadrian and Marcus lifted the woman's prone body out of the boat and quickly carried her up the plateau. The Baron and Reine stayed behind to drag all the equipment back into the shelter of the boathouse before trailing the others. They caught up with Hadrian, Marcus, and Xanthia. At the house, the front door was already open, the housekeeper, Mary Wolfe, waving them inside as if she was afraid all the heat from inside would escape if she left the door open long enough.

The butler, Palwick, quietly instructed them to place the astrologer on the couch in front of the fireplace in the living room. The doctor, a tall distinguished looking gentleman with graying hair, stood by the couch, stethoscope already hanging onto his ears. He made a sound of disapproval in the back of his throat as he watched Hadrian and Marcus lay the astrologer onto the couch.

The doctor's gaze first fell on Hadrian. "What did you do to her, dump her in the lake?"

"No," said Hadrian, hurt. "Apparently she wandered out of the campground in the middle of the night and never came back. We were lucky we found her on the pier on the island."

"If she was so eager to not camp with us, she could have taken the boat," said Marcus.

"And left us stranded?" said the Baron, horrified. "I don't think Xanthia is that cruel-hearted. Besides, I seriously doubt that she knows how to pilot a motorboat without grounding herself into the next state."

"Whatever the case may be, please stand back so I can examine the patient," said the doctor."

"Sorry," came a chorus of male voices.

"I shouldn't have let her wander off to the outhouse by herself," said Reine, "Although taking the sleeping bag with her was rather odd. I remember offering her my flashlight to help her way, but she didn't take it. She said she had good night vision."

"She must have been right," mused Marcus. "Otherwise, how on earth would she have found her way back to the pier? The easiest way for her to have done that would be to follow the trail back there."

A shriek suddenly pierced the air. "Xanthia!"

Everyone looked toward the horrendous sound. The astrologer's cousin, Diana, stood at the entrance of the living room with a hand to her mouth as she stared at her unconscious cousin on the sofa.

"What happened to her?" Diana quickly rushed to her cousin's side. Xanthia moaned, unaware that everyone's attention was riveted to her. "What did you do to her?" She gave the campers, the Baron, Hadrian, Marcus, and Reine, an accusing stare.

"It was not their fault," said the Baroness who had drawn her husband down to sit with her on another couch. "Xanthia wandered out by herself to sleep outside."

"If that was true," said Diana slowly, "then my cousin is a fool to think she could do everything, including camping." She watched her cousin as the doctor took her pulse.

"Hypothermia," the doctor finally announced.

Reine rolled her eyes. "An idiot could have figured that out," she muttered under her breath.

Unaware of any skeptics of his ability, the doctor continued, "Just keep her warm and give her warm liquids when she wakes. There's just nothing to do but keep her in bed until she recovered. However, if things take a turn for the worse, don't hesitate to call me and bring her into the clinic in town."

Tuesday yowled loudly when the doctor left.

Diana sharply turned her head toward the cat that was sitting in Reine's lap. "Keep that animal quiet. Xanthia needs rest."

"Of course," Reine replied smoothly as she got up. "Tuesday is just making a ruckus because this morning's grave events caused him to miss breakfast."

"Which reminds me," Mary piped up. "I was just about to start breakfast for the early risers."

"Meanwhile, I'll stay here in case my help is needed," said Palwick gravely.

Mary shook her head. "You just want to avoid the kitchen."

"I'll help," volunteered Reine. "I think I'm too wired to go back to sleep."

"I'm never too wired to go back to sleep," announced Hadrian. With that he quickly exited the living room to go back to his bedroom upstairs.

At his rather hasty departure, the rest of the guests slowly agreed that the mystery editor had the right of it. Six o'clock in the morning was indeed too early for anyone in their right minds who were on vacation. But before Marcus left, he took Reine aside, pressing a piece of cloth into her hands. It was bright orange like the waterproof material on life jackets and traffic director vests.

"I found this," he murmured in her ear, pretending he was whispering an endearment instead.

"Where did you find it? What is it?" she asked. She looked down briefly at the scrap of cloth and closed her fingers around it to hide it from prying eyes although everyone else's eyes were mostly on Xanthia and Diana.

"I found it clutched in Xanthia's hand as Hadrian and I were lifting her into the boat to transport back here. It doesn't look like anything that she would wear."

"No. An astrologer would pick something darker and brooding. Where did she get it though?"

The life jackets on our boat, as I recall were yellow."

"I don't know either, but I have suspicions. I'm going to catch a few hours of sleep and check up on my hunch later." He gave her a half grin and followed the others back upstairs.

Reine and Tuesday instead followed Mary back into the kitchen as the housekeeper rattled off a list of things she would like prepared.

XVII. Neron

9:00 AM

"I like Hadrian."

"You do?" said Reine surprised. She briefly glanced at Mary who deftly maneuvered her beat-up but functional gray truck out of the driveway. Tuesday had wedged himself into the tiny third middle seat and proceeded to take a nap. He was drowsy from all of Mary's special fried ham he had gorged himself on earlier. "Oh, I mean you do. Well, everyone likes Hadrian."

"You mean he's a ladies' man."

Reine pretended to cough. "Uh..."

While they were cooking breakfast, Mary had realized that they were running low on food. Figuring that the local authorities wouldn't care if they went into town to go grocery shopping (since they technically wouldn't be leaving town, just Ira's property) Mary had coerced Reine into coming with her. She finally rationalized that maybe she would have to buy some cat food, especially to wean Tuesday off of human food, and to make discrete inquiries about anyone who had lost an Abyssinian cat as well as to the more delicate matter of Ira's disappearance since Ira's current unknown whereabouts were still a secret to the world at large.

"Granted, he's a bit rough around the edges," Mary continued as if she hadn't registered Reine's surprise. "And he needs to quit smoking, but I like him."

"And how did you come up with that conclusion?"

The young, buxom housekeeper smiled.

"Geez." Reine sighed and stared out the window at the passing trees. "I should have guessed earlier. I suppose Diana was out of the question?"

"Diana is a housewife. She's married to some guy named Stan."

"Oh, that's right. Xanthia, then."

"She's attractive for her age, but I don't think anyone would go for her extreme outlook on, ah, life."

"All right. Maybe I'm not as astute as I thought I was," Reine grinned wryly. "So why are you telling me that you like Hadrian?"

"You're one of his friends."

"And you want my approval?" She laughed. "Trust me, you don't need my approval. Hadrian associates with whomever he likes. He never asks me for approval."

"But one night," and she saw Mary slightly blush, "he told me that he would never stick with anyone that you or Marcus would have disapproved of. He thinks of you as family."

"Family?" Reine glanced back at Mary, then at the snoozing cat. "Yes, I guess that's true, in an odd sort of way. Sort of like the wonky brother-in-law. If I had a brother-in-law."

The small road, nearly inundated with the forest, eventually widened out onto the main street. For a small town, Monadnock was well kept. Even with the first snow, someone had gotten up early and had industriously plowed the main street so whatever traffic that got out that day (which admittedly wasn't much) wouldn't have to slog through melting brown slush by midday. Mary pulled into an oversized log cabin that had a sign in front on top of the door proclaiming, "McNally's Groceries." The sign was a little crooked.

There were three other vehicles on the non-existent parking lot, all of them like Mary's truck, battered and old. As Reine opened the door, she nearly rammed it into the truck in the next spot. She cringed at the grating metal sound.

"Don't worry about it," Mary called from the other side. "I've had this truck since I learned how to drive."

Tuesday uttered a meow and jumped out. Immediately disliking the cold ground, he climbed up Reine's leg.

"Tuesday! Get back in there. Grocery stores don't allow pets."

The housekeeper laughed at Reine's predicament. "Bring him along. I don't think McNally would care all that much. He has three cats himself. Besides, you can ask people if they've lost the cat and have an accurate depiction of him since he's right here."

Vindicated, Tuesday finally leaped to her shoulders. She gave a resigned sigh.

A cowbell clanged as Mary pushed open the door. The ceiling was low, but the floors were white and relatively smudge free. It looked like a regular grocery except much smaller. There were only four long aisles laden with an assortment of dry foods. Along the edge of the store were cold bins for meat and fresh vegetables. A small freezer at the back held milk and other dairy products. At the front of the store was one counter where a bored teenaged girl with short brown hair and freckles snapped her gum and flipped through the latest Seventeen magazine.

As Mary took one of the shopping carts and began loading it up with various supplies, Reine wandered along the aisles until she came upon a heap of bags of cat food.

"Here we are Tuesday, food."

The cat leaned over her shoulder and sniffed. Uninterested, he settled back on her shoulder.

"Not to your liking, eh? Well, unfortunately, you don't have a choice. You can't go eating human food all the time. I thought some of the stuff we eat was poisonous to cats. Like

potatoes and other tubers. And you can't very well eat tuna even if you do like it. I heard that the oil in tuna depletes the calcium in your bones. And we wouldn't want that would we? I think we need to wean you off of Mary's cooking and put you on a cat food diet indefinitely. I know you're a bit thin, but we shouldn't go to the other extreme."

Tuesday hissed.

"Look here, I'm not the one advocating you get fat. Just that you stop eating the food that's unhealthy for you."

His tail smacked her forehead.

"Now what is it?"

Reine turned and saw that Mary was a little ways over in the bread aisle with her hands on her hips. She was frowning ferociously at a giant hulking man with no neck who was looming over her and leering at her. He was wearing a ratty coat and red suspenders. He looked like one of those rowdy fans at monster truck rallies.

The cat meowed in her ear.

"You're right, Tuesday. I think we'll have to rescue Ira's housekeeper."

The teenager at the counter chose that moment to look up from her magazine. "Bubba," the girl said sternly as the gum snapped. "Stop harassing my customers."

"Shut yer trap, girl," he said rudely, not even turning around to address her. "Can't ya see I'm busy."

"Busy, my ass," Reine muttered as she turned the corner to the next aisle.

"I can see you're busy thinking about your lower half," the girl responded. "Don't you have your own business to look after?"

This time, the man ignored the girl. "Well," he grinned at Mary. "How about it? Tonight over at..."

"I'm not interested."

"Look, I'm just offering you a good time."

"I have work to do."

"Aw, come on." Bubba reached out and grabbed Mary at the waist. She struggled vainly in his grasp as he puckered his lips. But as he managed to pin Mary's arms to her sides, he finally spotted Reine storming down the aisle with a cat on her shoulder. "Now what's this? I didn't know you had a friend..."

Tuesday hissed as Reine swung her arm upwards and her fist connected with his face in a loud crack. Bubba suddenly let go of Mary who stumbled back, wide-eyed. The man fell backwards to the floor with a loud thump.

"Ow." Reine shook her hand out. "His face is like a rock."

"Is he dead?" Mary said worriedly.

"I don't think so, more's the pity," said Reine. "He'll probably be out for a while, but his head is probably so thick whatever that is his brain won't be damaged. He probably won't be able to remember a thing either."

"Wow," said the clerk as she jumped over the counter to get a good look at the unconscious man. "How did you do that?"

"A bit of self defense," said Reine. "Usually I would go below the belt, but Mary was unfortunately in the way. So I went to the other opening."

"So you think I could learn that if I went to a self defense class?"

Reine nodded.

"Cool."

"Cool indeed," said Mary as she brushed her clothes back in order. "I'll have to remind myself to sign up for one."

Reine frowned at the man on the floor, thinking of Ira's disappearance and the police. "I do hope he doesn't remember all of this. Who is he anyway?"

"Bubba?" said the clerk as she began to check out Mary and Reine's groceries. "He owns the hardware store across the street. He definitely gets more customers during the summer. During the winter, he's a nuisance. Not enough to do, I say. I think he needs a new hobby."

"Well, it definitely should not involve picking up women," said Reine. "Yeah," the clerk agreed. "McNally once told him to go fishing, but he wouldn't listen. He said it was for old men who didn't have anything better to do." The clerk laughed. "Like attempting to get a social life in a grocery store is much better."

When they arrived back from their grocery shopping expedition, someone was already waiting for them at the foot of the plateau. Hadrian exhaled a final cloud of smoke and stubbed out the cigarette with the heel of his boot. "I thought both of you were in the kitchen cooking breakfast."

"We ran out of food," Mary replied turning to the back of the truck to take out the numerous bags of groceries. She unceremoniously piled them into Hadrian's arms.

"Oof. Geez, what did you buy, a couple dozen rocks?"

"Nope. Just food. Enough to last a couple of weeks. I sure Ira wouldn't want any of her guests to starve."

Reine took the cat food and two other bags of groceries. "I think I'm dreading the hike up that hill. Why on earth didn't Ira just buy a penthouse back in New York? She was out there quite often anyway."

"Ira liked the serenity of the woods. No one would bother her writing marathons." Mary took the last of the groceries and motioned towards the hill with her head. "We better get going."

The hill is great exercise. Builds up appetite." She grinned.

"I think the only thing it'll build up is fatigue," replied Reine.

The three of them proceeded to trudge up the plateau with Tuesday tagging along their heels. The morning had brightened considerably, the sun a pale yellow disk in a clear sky. But the air was just as cold as it was earlier when they had discovered the astrologer huddled and hypothermic on the island dock. There was no wind to sway the trees but the air bit into the lungs as they climbed the plateau and inhaled and exhaled heavily.

Hadrian complained about not getting enough exercise. Reine tersely replied that he should have quit smoking. Mary jumped into the fray saying that he should listen to his friend. Hadrian frowned.

"I was under the impression that you liked it," he said.

"No I don't," said Mary, not looking at him. "What's that word I'm looking for? Perhaps you're in love with your own image too much to quit smoking."

"Narcissism?" Reine supplied.

"Yes, that's it," she said. "Don't you care about your own health?"

"Yes," wheezed Hadrian.

Mary sighed. "Don't I sound like a mother hen?"

Reine grinned.

"My mother smokes too," he said defensively.

"Parental conditioning," said Mary disapprovingly.

"It looks like she's out to reform you," Reine laughed. "Perhaps you should run while you still can."

"You think so?" said Hadrian seriously.

"Well, she is trying to help you."

"More like torture me," he replied dramatically. But he snuck Mary a look and the corner of his mouth twitched upward. "So Reine, what's up with you and Marcus?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know, those little looks you give me when you two aren't expecting me. Oh, and Marcus told me to tell you to meet him at the boathouse as soon as you got back. It isn't one of those nudge, nudge, wink, wink things is it? Because if it is, I don't like acting like the courier pigeon."

"You need the exercise," said Mary.

"Humph."

"Right, Hadrian," Reine rolled her eyes but did not seem unduly annoyed. "I'm not one of those gaudy nudge, nudge, wink, wink kind of girl. Do I look like one to you?"

"No. But you do look like you're capable of punching a guy's lights out if he said the wrong thing," said Hadrian.

Mary coughed, remembering the incident at the grocery store.

"Of course I am," Reine replied. "That's why you and Marcus keep me around. To protect you two from bad guys."

"I'd say," said Mary.

* * *

After Reine helped Mary and Hadrian put back the groceries in the kitchen, she strolled back outside and hiked down the path to the boathouse. Tuesday had decided finally not to follow. The cat had meandered to the den to sleep the day away in front of the sunny window. Reine had briefly peeked in to see if the cat was all right and had bemusedly thought to herself that she was beginning to act motherly to the cat when she noticed the chessboard. The game was well underway. A few pieces were set to the side since they had been checkmated. The more powerful pieces as well as a handful of pawns still littered the board. There was no sign of either player.

The wind started up again as she entered the boathouse. The motorboat and another boat were docked inside. The lake water sloshed against the pier making all the wood, and thus the entire boathouse creak with each incoming wave. Her footsteps sounded muffled against the floorboards. The water reflected some of the light so it threw the interior of the boathouse into a semblance of a disco dance hall—silvery blobs of light flickered across the walls decorated with fishnets and other boating paraphernalia. Aside from the pronged deck of the lower boathouse, there was a small door facing toward the lake that led out into a thinner, extended pier. A thin staircase at the back of the boathouse led upwards to the second floor of the boathouse where she assumed was more boating equipment.

A loud thump sounded overhead.

"Marcus?" she called out. "Did you find something up there?"

The thump sounded again.

"Are you all right?" She moved towards the stairs.

"Good morning, Reine. How was your trip to the grocery store? Did you get the cat food for Tuesday?"

She whirled around to find Marcus's familiar figure looming right outside the door to the boathouse. "Marcus! I thought you were up on the second floor."

He stepped inside. "Second floor?" he said puzzled.

"Of the boathouse," she clarified. "I thought you were already here waiting for me. Or at least that was the impression that Hadrian gave me."

"Yes, I was to meet you here, but I took a walk near the shore to think and clear my head first," he told her. "What made you think I was up on the second floor?"

"I thought I heard you walking up there."

"It must have been the building settling, especially since it's bordered by the lake on one side. Or maybe you're imagination."

"I refuse to think that I'm going crazy. But maybe you're right. Maybe I mistook it for the waves making the floorboards creak or something. Anyways, I did get Tuesday's cat food as well as helping Mary get the groceries," she said deciding not to say anything about the encounter with the hardware store owner Bubba. She had the feeling that Marcus would start acting too protective. "And I found out about this." She pulled out the bright orange fabric that he had given her earlier.

"So you found out who wears it?"

She shook her head. "It's not as easy as that. It's the same fabric on the life vests that they sell over at the fishing store. Perhaps Xanthia had briefly put on a life jacket and had accidentally torn it."

"No. That's impossible. All of the life jackets on that motor boat were yellow."

A thump was heard overhead, again.

Reine raised an eyebrow. "See? I wasn't imagining things."

Marcus narrowed his eyes. "I suppose you're right. That doesn't sound like the boathouse creaking to the lake tides."

Something crashed above their heads.

"You don't suppose that someone is attempting to eavesdrop on us?" said Reine, alarmed.

"Probably," said Marcus as he sprinted to the steps and took them two at a time.

Reine followed quickly. At the top of the narrow staircase was another door. Marcus rattled the knob but the door did not budge. He kicked at the door though and it flew open with a bang. He peered into the gloom. Reine tried to look over his shoulder.

"Anyone in here?" he called out.

No one answered.

"Whoever is eavesdropping is probably also hiding," concluded Reine.

"No kidding."

He strolled into the room. There was a little light as the opposite end of the room held a dusty window. There were a few trunks shoved up against the wall, fishing gear piled up in a corner, and more boating equipment strewn around. Marcus looked behind the equipment, finding nothing.

"Nothing here. Maybe the equipment was piled in a precarious position and just now decided to fall over."

"Maybe. But look, life vests." Reine had discovered a pile of waterproof garments underneath the pile of fishing gear. She took them out, shaking them. They were bright orange. She held one up and noticed a tear on the corner.

"You don't suppose," his voice trailed off as Reine held up the torn piece of fabric and compared it with the hole in the vest. It matched perfectly.

"What on earth does this mean?" Her voice wavered as she stared at the evidence.

"I think someone else was on that island with us last night," he replied grimly, "and Xanthia probably knows who."

"But why? There's nothing on the island."

He shrugged. "But whoever it was, he or she wasn't very nice. They left Xanthia out there to freeze."

XVIII. Nasnia

3:00 AM

Reine stared up at the dark canopy of her bed and worried.

The police had still not turned up any clues about Ira's whereabouts. She seemed to have vanished into thin air. All of the cars were still on the driveway at the base of the plateau. All the guests were still accounted for. And then there was the business of Xanthia wandering off. What if she didn't wander off on her own free will? What if someone else coerced her to go out? What if someone else was on the island at the same time that they were? And then what was the purpose of leaving Xanthia out in the cold weather without a way to get back to the camp? There may be no way of knowing until the astrologer came out of her fever induced stupor.

Restless, she finally got out of bed and donned a robe. She paced as she tied the belt at her waist. "Can you make any sense of this?"

Tuesday meowed sleepily from his nest of blankets, apparently unconcerned.

"There are too many strange things going on. The matter with Xanthia. The life vest. That damned chess game in the den where the pieces look like they are moving by themselves. And this afternoon, the Baroness said that she was missing something else. And Vicker's wife Esther was still harping about her missing jewelry. All of this can't be coincidences."

She shoved her hands into the pocket of the robe and her fingers came in contact with her pouch of stones. "And don't forget those strange things in the library. And on top of all of this, Ira is gone."

She opened the bag of stones and selected one out. Black. "It's always black. I don't understand what it's trying to tell me even if this is trying to tell me anything at all. You don't suppose I'm going out of my mind, do you? I'm usually so logical."

Reine stopped pacing for a moment to stare out the window. The sky was clear and the moon, a bloated crescent, was out. It was cold outside—there was still a bit of frost left from the ground, not completely melted during the day. She unlatched the window and pulled them open. Cold biting air assailed her senses.

Tuesday protested with a loud yowl.

“I need to clear my head, Tuesday. Besides, I can’t sleep.”

She stepped out onto the balcony, rubbing her arms. The lake was a calm black pool and the island beyond, something darker and more mysterious. As far as her eye could see, everything was dark and quiet and refusing to begrudge her answers. Giving a groan of frustration, she leaned against the balcony railing, wishing that the cool air would give her something of an answer.

The sound of metal squealed.

She had only a second to register that the railing was giving way, but the railing was already falling. For a moment, she saw that part of the balcony in midair as she herself was suspended. Time to freeze for that particular second until she realized that she too would tumble down three stories if she didn’t do anything.

And she was falling and for a second she thought it was a repeat of falling down the catacombs, that she was just dreaming and that in reality she was really in her bed, warm and safe while her adopted cat that no one had claimed back in downtown Monadnock was snoozing at her feet. But then her hands grasped onto cold metal and the muscles in her fingers, wrists, and shoulders strained as her body was flung over the balcony. She breathed sharply when she looked down. She hadn’t fallen yet. But she was close. She was dangling at the edge of the balcony only by her fingertips.

Above her, she heard Tuesday meowing from some distance away. Did the cat realize that she was in danger? She tried to shout, but her throat had closed up and she could only utter a squeak. Her fingers were freezing and getting tired.

Marcus, she thought. I have to call Marcus. His room also faced the balcony. If only she could call, then there would be a chance that he could hear her.

Tuesday’s meowing moved from her right to her left, but still, it sounded too far away. Was her hearing going? Was she going mad since she was on the brink of disaster? She heard a scratching sound and her already tense muscles quivered. Was the rest of the balcony going to fall too? Her fingers were slipping as they were.

Above her, she heard a click and then a masculine voice. Marcus. A tiny bit of relief flowed through her. Now if only her throat could work! “Tuesday, what are you doing out here? Reine didn’t leave her window open did she? She’s going to freeze if she lets all this cold air in. Now, what the hell?”

The cat meowed, determined.

“Oh my God. Reine?”

She managed to move her head and looked up. Marcus was looking over the balcony, the

moonlight shining over his face highlighting his scar, his eyes glittering with surprise and horror. She couldn't decide whether she should be relieved or embarrassed. Instead, she tried opening her mouth, but still nothing came out."

"Hold on Reine. I'll get you."

His face briefly disappeared, but she felt his hands grasping her forearms. Slowly, she felt herself being pulled upward. With every inch closer to safety, she found herself breathing more easily. Finally, she collapsed onto her savior and greedily took a breath. His arms came around her, gently pulling her up with him.

"Come on, let's get you to some place warmer."

She let him half walk and half carry her back to his room. Tuesday jumped inside just as Marcus closed the window. She buried her face into his shoulder and shuddered. "Thanks," she croaked, finally finding her voice. "I could have broken my legs from a fall like that."

"You could have died in a fall like that," he said angrily. "What the hell happened?"

"The railing gave way when I leaned on it."

His arms tightened around her. "Damn."

"It was probably old and I wasn't thinking."

"It was not your fault, Reine." He tried putting her onto the bed, but she refused to let go of his shoulder. He sighed.

"Delayed reaction," she explained as he obligingly settled with her in his arms. "I just need somebody to hold onto and to remind myself that I'm still alive."

"Just anybody?"

"You'll do just fine. By the by, why are you awake at this hour anyway?"

"I should be asking you that question. I was thinking. I was probably thinking too much because I couldn't get to sleep. There are too many coincidences happening lately. So many that I don't think that they are coincidences. And I'll have to add this balcony incident to the ever growing list."

"It was just an accident."

"No. All of these little incidents are all connected somehow. All of them culminating to Ira's disappearance. They must be all connected."

"But."

"Tomorrow morning, we're going to take a good look at that balcony. I wouldn't be surprised if it was somehow rigged to fall. Ira doesn't seem like the type to me to neglect repairs to a house."

"I suppose so." She raised her head so that her mouth touched his throat. "But she isn't here now to see if anything has fallen apart during her absence." Impulsively, she licked his

skin. Salty.

"Reine?" He edged a few inches away from her so that he could look down at her. She grinned back up at him mischievously. "You should go back to bed."

"I am in bed."

"No. I mean your bed."

"No."

"You want to switch rooms?"

She shook her head. "You're staying right here," she told him. She placed a hand on his chest as he started to get up. "You're not going anywhere." She took the belt out of the loops of her robe.

He eyed her wearily. "You know I'm glad that you want to stay with me, but what are you doing?"

"Oh, nothing," she replied innocently as she wound the cloth belt around his wrists and secured it to the headboard. "I finally decided I wasn't really satisfied with that kiss you gave me in the forest. But you can get away if you really wanted to."

"Uh, Reine. You know this isn't necessary. You know I'm not going anywhere."

"Well, it never hurts to be extra sure, you know."

He opened his mouth to retort but she held up a hand.

"You're being far too chatty tonight." She lowered her head and kissed him.

When she finally came up for air, he gasped. "Why did you stop?"

She grinned, a hand lingering at the opening of his robe when there was a rapid knock at the door.

He groaned when she looked up at the noise. "Hadrian has such horrible timing."

"Why on earth would Hadrian come by at this time of night? I thought he was preoccupied elsewhere."

"How would I know? Maybe he wants us to tell him where the whip cream is."

"Whip cream. Now that's an idea."

"No. Too messy."

She sighed. "Spoilsport. I guess I'll just have to tell him to go away."

She wrapped her robe tightly around her since her belt was now in use elsewhere and opened the door. She blinked at the redhead on the doorstep. "Er, good evening?"

Tuesday crawled out from his hiding place beneath a stool and trotted to Reine's feet. He took a passing sniff at the visiting woman and the hairs on his back stood on end.

"I'm sorry. I must have the wrong room."

"Well..."

"Damn right it is!" shouted a furious voice.

Reine blinked again and the barrel of a gun appeared in front of her face. She glanced up to see that Vicker was behind the trigger. His black robe was flapping dramatically around him and his face was a beat red. His young wife, Esther who had been wearing a revealing negligee was shoved aside, gaping.

"What are you doing here?" Esther said to her husband.

"I'm here to get rid of your lover," Vicker declared. "I admit I wasn't really expecting a woman but then again, that doesn't really matter."

"She isn't my lover," his wife said exasperated. "And why are you doing here?"

Vicker ignored his wife's question. "All right then, you got the bedrooms mixed up. Damned easy to do in the dark. His room must be across the hall right?" he said gesturing to the opposite room.

"Actually, that's my room," Reine said calmly, but still eyeing the revolver still pointed at her direction.

"What?" Esther was obviously not comprehending the implications of Reine's statement.

Vicker frowned. "So if that's your room, who's room are you in now?"

"Mine." Reine's belt dangled from Marcus's hand as he stepped to the door to see what was happening. "Put that gun away, Vicker. You could seriously hurt somebody with that."

"Oh, sorry." The older man tucked his weapon into the belt of his robe. "So this is your room, eh?"

"Yes."

"So what are you doing in his room?" Vicker said looking back at Reine.

"It's really none of your business," she replied.

"Ah." His already red face reddened some more until it looked like it was about to burst. "Well, Esther, it looks like you knew I was coming after you tonight." He grasped his wife's arm. She looked quite angry and perplexed. "Did you seek to mislead me and still save your real lover? I know who it is, it's that other editor, the one who looks like an actor."

"I don't think you'll find Hadrian in his room," said Reine.

"What do you mean? What is the world coming to when no one is in their own beds at night?" fumed Vicker. "All right, if it's not him, there's only one other man who probably

caught your fancy.”

“No man caught my fancy,” Esther protested.

“Oh, then why are you up wandering about?”

“I was going to get a midnight snack.”

“On the third floor?”

Marcus shut the door on the squabbling couple. “Well, that settles it. I’m never going to marry a woman who’s young enough to be my granddaughter.”

The edge of Reine’s mouth twitched, pleased. “Really?”

“Yes, really. Now where were we? Ah yes, I was thinking of paying you back.” He looked down at his empty hands. “What happened to the belt?”

She dangled the belt in front of his face. “You didn’t think I would let you get away with that, do you? Get back in bed.”

“Yes ma’am.” His tone was serious, but his eyes were glittering amused yet anticipatory.

Tuesday dove back into his hiding place beneath the stool.

XIX. Salla

12:00 AM

No one had been in the mood for games. There were already too many dangerous games floating about already. Predictably, Vicker and Esther retired early, both of them subtly avoiding Marcus or Reine whenever they were close by. Larrington said he had something to see to in the library. Diana pleaded a headache and also went back upstairs. Xanthia was apparently still incapacitated. She had surfaced to consciousness a few times, enough to be fed, but had lapsed back into a fever-induced sleep. Everyone else had stayed in the living room with the eerie trophy heads, brooding and thinking about past events. Marcus and Reine, though, kept quiet about the incident on the balcony to everyone except Hadrian.

Earlier in the day, they had tramped outside to the section of the building where the bedrooms faced the lake. There were a few bushes below the window and would have provided very little cushioning if Reine had fallen. The railing was a mangled mess on the ground. After an hour of examination, the railing looked as if it had given over to the pressures of gravity because the stress points had worn away. But it was difficult to tell, given the railing’s condition, whether it was just a natural accident or whether it had been tampered with.

“I don’t understand it,” said Tabora as she sipped more of the red wine, hoping that it would soon make her drowsy. “Why do my things keep disappearing?” That afternoon, she had discovered yet another piece of her jewelry had vanished.

“You’re probably misplacing them, dear,” her husband consoled her. “It happens to everyone.”

"You mean getting senile?" she smiled. "Long past due considering our ages."

"Senility would imply that you're already too far gone to notice anything," said Mary as she poured more wine into the emptying wine glasses. "You're still as sharp as a tack as far as I'm concerned. You actually noticed that your things were missing in the first place."

"True, true."

"What if," said Hadrian slowly, "they were stolen?"

"Stolen? What do you mean?" said Tabora.

"Somebody stole them. You didn't just misplace your jewelry or even lose them. Somebody took them."

"I should think that if a thief came by, we would have noticed it," Tabora replied, unconcerned.

"But Ira didn't install an alarm system," said Mary. "So a thief could have theoretically broken in without our knowledge. You're not in your room all the time so you couldn't have known who has been in your room while you were away. In fact, if Ira had been kidnapped, the kidnapper might have also taken something from your room. You are on the same floor."

The Baron steepled his fingers. "But what if you say is true, then you have as much opportunity to have stolen Tabora's belongings.

"Me?" the housekeeper squeaked.

"Of course," the Baron continued. "You have access to all of our rooms. You come in daily to put in fresh sheets and to replenish supplies to the bathroom if needed. Why not you?"

Mary frowned. "But I would never do that."

"Come on Stephan, you know the poor girl wouldn't do it," Tabora said, her words getting more slurred. "Ira would never hire thieves. And besides, she's the one who came up with the idea. Do you think a thief would want to draw attention to themselves like that?"

"I don't know, Tabora. What if she drew attention to herself to actually make herself an unlikely suspect even though she did steal things?"

"Silly hypotheticals," the Baroness declared. "What if you were the one stealing all my jewelry, hm?"

Her husband leaned back. "Also highly improbable, but an interesting scenario. Why on earth would I steal my wife's jewelry?"

"To pawn them off to get money for the failing company."

"If you can recall, I handed off the company to our son a long time ago."

"Yes, but you wouldn't have any qualms about helping out a relative in need, would you?"

"No," he admitted, "but still highly improbable. Last I heard, the company was doing quite

well."

Reine saw a flicker of something dark entering the den. She deliberately set down her wineglass. "Well, I'm not feeling terribly well."

"Are you all right?" Mary asked worried. "I could get something from the medicine cabinet."

Marcus shook his head. "I wouldn't recommend mixing pain killers with alcohol."

The housekeeper nodded. "You're right. Perhaps you should go to bed."

"Yes, perhaps," she said getting up.

"Let me help you," said Marcus.

She shook her head as she edged out.

"I insist." His hand closed around her elbow.

"Very well."

"Who else has access to the rooms?" said the Baron as the rest of the group in the living room, the Baron, the Baroness, Hadrian, and Mary, paid no more attention to the people leaving them.

"There's Palwick," said Mary, "But I don't think he's a likely thief. He has pretty high moral standards."

"But in mystery novels, it is always the butler who did it," said Tabora.

"Sure," said Hadrian, "But in Ira's novels it never happened that way."

"Well, I guess you're right. So who was the villain in her last novel? The clown from the nearby circus?"

"Something like that."

Reine raised a finger to her lips indicating to Marcus to stay quiet. She edged to the opening to the den and peeked around the corner. The room was dimly lit, but she could see that someone was hunched over the mysterious chessboard with a hand to his chin, pondering his next move. Finally he lifted his hand and placed his fingers to the tip of the black bishop and moved it.

She turned back to Marcus who frowned when she quickly motioned towards the foyer.

"What did you see?" he demanded as they mounted the stairs.

"Palwick. He's one of the players of that chess game."

"Which side?"

"Black."

"But he didn't start the game then," he mused. "Perhaps he was drawn to the white pawn that was mysteriously moved in the first place. I wonder if he knows who he is playing."

"Probably," said Reine. "He and his accomplice are probably enjoying the joke they're playing on us, driving us crazy trying to figure out who's mysteriously moving the chess pieces."

"Would he tell us who his opponent is if we asked him?"

She shrugged. "Maybe."

"Well, at least I feel a bit better since we know the identity of one of the players," said Marcus. "That chess game was getting a bit eerie for me."

"But then what if he doesn't know who he's playing? What if he's just playing because of curiosity? I know everyone says that they don't want to play an opponent who doesn't show his face, but I bet some people would find it exciting to play an unknown variable."

"I see your point."

"Mrowr."

Reine blinked, looking down at her feet as they reached the third floor landing. Tuesday was sitting on his haunches looking pleased with himself. Between his paws was a pair of lacy green panties.

"Tuesday!"

"Mrowr," Tuesday repeated. He daintily swished his tail waiting.

Marcus automatically scooped up the underwear as a blush crept across her cheeks.

"Yours?"

"Give me that!"

He grinned. "No. I'm keeping this as a souvenir." He stuffed it into his pocket. "You don't have a headache at all, do you? You were just lying to our friends down there."

"Marcus, give it back." She held out her hand expecting to be obeyed.

Instead, he took her hand and drew her closer to him. "Invite me in," he whispered in her ear.

"That's highly improper."

"Considering yesterday, I don't think there's anything that you really would consider improper."

She glared at him. "You're going to be punished for this."

He chuckled.

"And I don't mean it in a good way." She pulled her hand out of his and traversed the

hallway with Tuesday and Marcus close at her heels. "When I'm through with you, you're going to wish belts never existed." She turned the knob to her bedroom.

Tuesday was the first one to peer inside. Immediately, the hair on his back stood up and he hissed loudly.

"What is it, Tuesday?"

"Reine, back!" Marcus loped his arm around her waist and pulled her away as the door slammed the rest of the way open.

In the doorway, the astrologer stood like an avenging demoness. Without her turban, Xanthia's dark hair, streaked with white, flowed around her like foam. Her dark blue dressing gown that her cousin Diana had previously helped put on her while she was unconscious billowed like a storm cloud. Her face was pale. White. And her eyes glittered eerily as they fixed themselves on Reine.

"Where is it?" she demanded.

"Where is what?" said Reine.

Tuesday hissed and darted past her heels as she attempted to kick the cat. "The stones, you stupid woman."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I want them. They're the answer to everything, but you don't see that do you?" the astrologer sneered. "You're too wrapped up in that trash you consider scientific."

"Well, science makes a whole lot more sense than your mumbo jumbo," Reine retorted. "Why on earth are you in my room anyway? And how did you get in there?"

"Have you ever heard of picking locks?" Xanthia said haughtily. "Obviously not. I need those stones. The spirits have been trying to contact me for the past few days."

"But I thought you were an astrologer and not a medium," said Marcus.

"Yes, but one has to be flexible these days. I am a woman of many talents," she said arrogantly.

A door nearby slammed. "Will you stop that yelling?" said Diana. "I have a horrible headache and I'm trying to get to sleep." The older woman looked up at the little scene in front of Reine's bedroom. "Xanthia! What on earth are you doing up? Get back in bed or you'll stall your chance in recovery."

"I am feeling as fit as an ox," the astrologer declared. "I am an adult and you can't tell me what to do, Diana. Go back to your room and read your silly mystery books. I, for one, am more concerned about the real world."

"She wants to use my seeing stones to contact the spirit world," Reine said dryly.

"Good God, Xanthia, are you out of your mind?" said Diana. "It's one thing arguing with me, but I've had it up to here, and this, this accosting other people. You really need to seek

help.”

“No,” protested Xanthia. “I do not need to seek help. It is you.” But when she took a breath to continue her tirade, her eyes rolled up into her head and she dropped to the floor in a faint.

Her cousin rushed to her side. After touching her forehead, she declared, “It was a fever-induced delirium, I’m afraid. I’m so sorry about this.”

Reine shook her head. “I know she’s not quite well. Here, we’ll help you take her back to bed.”

XX. Rana

6:00 PM

She stalked across the den, occasionally jerking her head up to look out the window. The sky was dark gray and it was snowing. The trees were slowly getting bleached by accumulating snowflakes, but the lake was a deadly calm. She suddenly stopped and stared out onto the water to the island as if it was the source of all her problems.

Marcus had shown her the compass that he had found back in the catacombs. It was an odd shiny disk with strange symbols on it, symbols that she had speculated had its origins in the Free Masonic cult that had once flourished in the area when the original owner of the mansion, Phineas Cronan, had lived there. The arrow had not been pointing north. Indeed, it spun in different directions depending on where you stepped. The arrow was not in the least magnetic as they had found out when they tested it using a refrigerator magnet that they had swiped from the kitchen.

Through whimsy, she had taken out her seeing stones and had taken a reading to see if she could make sense of the artifact that he had found. But the black, blue, and white stones that she had drawn told her nothing. Instead, she had a sinking gut feeling as if she was missing something terribly important, something that happened to be right in front of her nose.

“We’re like amateur occultists,” she had told him, not a little bit frustrated. “We play at these tools, thinking that it will give us the answer when they are nothing but that, tools. We can’t see anything because we don’t have a gift for making obscure connections. At least I’m too blocked to see anything. Even through touching these stones and seeing that odd compass, I can see them only as trinkets. I’m still very logically thinking at the heart of this.”

“These are nothing but parlor tricks,” he agreed. “But I don’t think at the heart of it that we are that logical. I mean, think of the history of humanity. We came up with religion to explain things that seemed fantastical. People didn’t like to think of coincidences as mere coincidences. Something was behind them all, just as we think that everything here has been orchestrated by something or someone.”

“Of course,” she had replied irritably. “Think of Ira’s disappearance. She wouldn’t have left out of her own free will without informing us, would she?”

“No, of course not. But maybe we’re not blocked by logical thinking. What if we’re blocked by our superstitious thinking?”

"What do you mean?"

"What if we don't think that these trinkets don't work because there is some greater power behind everything else, so much so that maybe it's suppressing the answers that these clues might give us?"

"Are you serious? You sound like, heck, I don't know how you sound like except that you're getting perilously close to the incomprehensibility of Xanthia's delirium."

"Or maybe you're in denial." But he had been smiling.

Reine paced a few more times, thinking that she should maybe stop running around in circles and instead forget all of it by vegetating in front of the television when she became aware that she was not the only one in the room. She looked up and saw Palwick armed with cleaning supplies, a duster, a spray can of cleaner, and a rag to wipe of any other dirt.

"Good evening, Ms. Lee."

"Hello," she said nodding her head. Her eyes immediately glanced at the chessboard. Palwick had moved, but then the white pieces had also moved, presumably between the time Palwick had been in the den the night before and now. She briefly wondered if Palwick was actually playing himself.

"It's certainly getting colder at this time of year, isn't it?"

She glanced out the window at the whitening landscape. "Yes, it is. Do you play chess, Palwick?"

"I know of the game."

"I noticed that the white player has moved. What would you do with the black pieces?"

He set down the feather duster with an audible click. "Are you interrogating me?"

"I might be." She walked toward the chessboard and looked at the current layout. "I saw you last night moving the pieces."

He stiffened. "I beg your pardon."

"No need to. Beg my pardon, I mean. I saw you move them. I'm not blind. Why didn't you say anything about being one of the players in this game? Everyone would have found it fascinating. Instead, it's actually kind of spooky with chess pieces moving by themselves."

"I never said anything because nobody asked me," he sniffed. "I'm just the butler, after all."

"But you must have heard the comment that in mysteries, it's usually the butler who did it."

"If you're implying that I kidnapped Mrs. Reece..."

"I'm not implying anything. I'm just curious about the chess game, that's all. So who's playing the other side?"

"I have no idea," he replied. "I just saw the pawn moved and I thought someone might find it lively to see who took up the game so I did. It was purely out of curiosity. I assumed the other player might have been your friends, Mr. Block or Mr. Drenth, or maybe even the Baron since the three of them seem to be avid chess players. I wouldn't doubt that any of them would loudly deny that they were playing the game just to amuse themselves."

Reine carefully examined his face and decided that he was not lying. "Well, I've known my friends for a while. They wouldn't lie about something so trivial."

"Ha. Then you know nothing about men, Ms. Lee. Most will say anything to remain in the good graces of others or more importantly to their advantage."

Reine frowned but said nothing as Marcus entered the den with a book in one hand. The butler swiftly turned back to his feather dusting duties.

"I found something."

"Apparently," said Reine. "What is it?"

"A book on Free Masonic symbols," he replied. "Look, these look rather familiar, don't they?"

She peered at the open pages in his hand. "Yes. That one there, it means north. So that disk you found, it is a compass."

"So it is," he said nodding. "Quite disappointing really. I had my hopes up that it might be something more interesting. I remembered that alchemists in the Middle Ages also had some similar symbols that usually stood for chemical compounds. These same symbols also stood for occult things that were related to these chemical compounds such as angelic and demonic beings, the planets, certain types of personalities, and other sorts of magical properties."

"I didn't know you were so well versed in the occult, Marcus."

"I'm not," he scowled. "It just comes from editing the odd book now and again."

"Palwick!" Hadrian appeared at the entrance way with a laptop under his arm. Amanda the bulldog was not far behind. Seeing one of the settees, he lumbered to it and climbed up to the cushion for a small nap. "Mary said that you knew where the phone jacks were."

The butler slowly turned, giving the mystery editor a disapproving stare. "Yes, I know where the phone ports are. There's one in here against the wall near that phone. You should be able to find one in your room."

"I went through my room in meticulous detail. No phone. No phone jacks. I think that bedroom was entirely meant for smoking and nothing else. I wouldn't be surprised anyway." He sat down on the chair the closest to the small table that held a lacquered old style spin dial phone. He unplugged it and jammed in his own modem connection. "I'm assuming that the connection here is going to be extremely slow," he announced. "We're out in the middle of nowhere anyway."

"Are you working?" said Reine. "It doesn't seem like you."

Hadrian's laptop beeped as he turned it on. "I'm checking my correspondence, thank you

very much. Besides, who said that you can't work during your vacation?"

"Nobody said that you can't work during a vacation," she said, "I'm just surprised that you are."

"Well, you're sorely mistaken then. Hm." He stared intently at the screen. "Ira sent an e-mail."

"What?" she said surprised. Reine and Marcus immediately went over to Hadrian and stood over his shoulder to also look at the screen.

"Ira sent an e-mail?" said the butler, stopping his cleaning activities. "What does she say? Is she all right? Should I call the police and tell them to call off the search?"

"The e-mail is dated yesterday," said Hadrian. "And it's been e-mailed to me, Reine, and Marcus only. I wonder what she has to say." He clicked on the message that said "On Vacation" from Ira Reece.

Hello Darlings,

I hope you three have been having a fabulous time relaxing for the week. Mary's an absolutely wonderful cook and the scenery is gorgeous, especially during the fall. I hope you've had the chance to visit those ruins a little ways away on the trail and that the Baron took all of you camping on the island. I know I've been jaded to all those things since I have lived there for so many years, but I thought all of you needed some rest and relaxation after the hectic pace of your jobs in New York.

I'm sorry I did not give any of you advance notice about my rather hasty departure, but I just want you to be aware that I'm safe and having the time of my life down here in warm and sunny Cancun. Everyone here is so friendly and I've gathered so much more new material for my next book. When I'm not out having fun, I'm so busy writing that I haven't had a chance to catch my breath and to let you know how I'm doing.

But I do have another reason for writing. The police in Monadnock know I'm here so you don't have to waste your time calling them to inform them I'm safe. They know all about my situation. But I know you have to remain in the house, at least until the police call you to tell you it's all right to go back home after they've finished the "investigation" in two days. But the house isn't safe at all. Be careful dears, the old house has many tricks up its sleeves if you're not vigilant.

*Love,
Ira*

P.S. Hadrian, I trust you to take care of Amanda. I've been meaning to give him to you since I will not be returning to Monadnock. Marcus, I've left my latest manuscript in the vault in my room. It's not a mystery so I thought to pitch it to you first. The combination is six-four-oh-two. And Reine, I just remembered where I lost the twenty-fifth seeing stone. It's in the library somewhere.

"That's it?" said Marcus.

"Damn. Ira's switching over to literary fiction. They're all doing that these days. Well, there's also an attachment," Hadrian replied. "Let's see what it is."

"Do you suppose Ira also sent me a message?" asked the butler wistfully.

Reine looked up from Hadrian's laptop sharply. "Do you have an e-mail address?"

The butler's face turned arrogant again. "Of course not. Why would I have an e-mail address when the regular one works just fine?"

"Ah, well, too bad then. If Ira wrote you a letter, it'll arrive much later."

"Should I phone the police to let them know that Ira is well?"

"She says that they already know."

"Well, that's good to know," said the butler.

She glanced back down at the laptop. Hadrian had opened the attachment in the photo editor. It was a picture of Ira in a summery blue dress with flowers in her white hair. She was smiling and had her arms around two young men, both shirtless, tanned, well-built, and with long dark flowing hair.

"Lucky Ira," murmured Reine.

"She's hit it big, all right," agreed Hadrian.

"You don't suppose they're gigolos?" Marcus said neutrally.

Reine jabbed him in the ribs. "Feeling inadequate?"

"I doubt they're willing to be tied up."

"Tied up?" said Hadrian, clueless to the mischievous looks Reine and Marcus were exchanging over his shoulder. "Well, I don't know. Ira's pretty kinky in her books if you've bothered to notice. With the right amount of money, I'm sure these guys would be willing to be tied up."

"So you think Ira was tied up and kidnapped to wherever she is now?" said the butler, worried again.

"I don't think so," said Hadrian, turning his laptop around. "Take a look for yourself."

Palwick's eyes narrowed as he looked at Ira's picture with her two male friends. "She never said anything about going on a vacation to me."

"Apparently, it was a spur of the moment thing." Hadrian turned the laptop back around and closed that particular e-mail. "Well, let's see. Hm. Some more spam. Nope, I don't need help with my mortgage or my personal problems. What's this? Who's Bubba Leslie McLean? Well, it says 'Manuscript' as the header so I suppose it's an unsolicited manuscript."

"Don't you keep filters up for your inbox?" said Reine. "It also helps if you keep your e-mail address private."

"Nothing is private these days." Hadrian clicked on the message. "Geez. This must be

another piece of spam.”

“What does it say?” asked Marcus.

“It only says, ‘Keep away from her.’ It doesn’t make sense.”

Reine gave a nervous cough. “Um. I might be able to explain.”

“Please do.”

“The guy who owns the hardware store in town. His name is Bubba.”

“Yeah? And why would he know me? And how did he get my e-mail address?”

“Well, as to getting your e-mail address, I have no idea, but it was probably fairly easy since you said you didn’t keep it private. When Mary and I went to town to get the groceries, he, uh, attempted to hit on Mary.”

“I see.” Hadrian frowned. “I guess I’ll just have to ignore some scrawny redneck the rest of the time I’m here, huh?”

“He isn’t scrawny. He was tall,” Reine replied holding her hand up above her head to demonstrate Bubba’s relative height. “And very bulky. Sort of like a football player if you go for that type.”

“You mean he’ll crush me to smithereens, right?” said Hadrian getting a bit concerned.

She shrugged. “Nah. He’s a little slow, you know. A marble short of a whole set if you get my drift. I got him away from Mary before he did anything.” Unconsciously she rubbed her knuckles.

Marcus regarded her wearily. “Remind me never to get you mad.”

XXI. Sassur

9:00 PM

Dinner that night was tense. The atmosphere was heavy and foreboding and it was evident that everyone felt it. Conversation was spoken with tense voices and sometimes arguments would break out, especially between Diana and her cousin, Xanthia. The astrologer was still pale and had no recollection (or at least she had said she had no recollection) of the encounter just outside of Reine’s bedroom. But, as Diana had pointed out, she was feeling well enough to attend dinner without fainting.

But even the arguments could not diffuse the tension. Larrington continued to sit at the end of the table where his aunt Ira had originally placed him. His eyes were puffy as if he had lost a lot of sleep recently. He mumbled to himself about searching the garage at the base of the plateau. The Baroness reported another of her trinkets stolen. Vicker’s wife Esther continued to complain about her lost pin. What was remarkable was that she had finally donned a modest blouse that covered most of her skin. Vicker himself remained silent, eating quickly.

After dinner, Diana again pleaded a headache and wandered out of the living room to the

foyer. Larrington mumbled something about going to his car because he forgot something and also left. It was still quite early and the guests either lounged in the living room or paced around the room, looking at Ira's decorations, unsure and weary about making conversation, yet unable to leave because of general uneasiness.

"I've been having strange dreams," confided Tabora as Mary began pouring the after dinner port. "They're strange, bizarre and disturbing."

On that topic, Xanthia remained remarkably silent. Instead, she watched the rest of the guests covertly over her own glass of port, eyes glittering.

"I personally believe dreams are your mind's way of processing the day's events," said her husband.

"So if I dreamed of decapitations," the Baroness replied, "then what does that mean?"

He shrugged. "I'm not a dream interpreter."

"Why is it," said Esther, "that I don't feel safe here even though nothing has happened to me? This morning, I thought I saw a face in the mirror. I was quite rattled for the rest of the day."

"Your own?" supplied Hadrian.

She shot him a dirty look. "No. It was a man's face, quit lecherous, mind you."

"She was screaming this morning," winced Vicker.

"I saw a face in the mirror one morning," said Reine.

Mary set down the bottle of port. "And I concluded it was the ghost of Phineas Cronan. He does fancy the ladies."

"There are no such things as ghosts," Reine added.

Esther shook her head. "I was not hallucinating. I saw that face. But it wasn't an old man's face. Nothing that I would expect of someone like Phineas Cronan. No, I don't think it was the ghost. A demon more likely." She tilted her head, indicating the game heads on Ira's living room wall. "It looked like the cross between a moose and a human. With red eyes."

"An overactive imagination," Vicker said.

"Perhaps. But I didn't like it."

"Dreams are indeed strange things," Xanthia said quietly. Suddenly all the eyes were riveted on her. Everyone had heard of her confrontation with Reine. Diana had not kept quiet about the incident, determined to paint her cousin as someone who needed help. "Sometimes they do come true."

Her eyes darted briefly to the foyer, which no one but Reine noticed. "What do you mean they come true?" Reine said. "Like dreaming about winning the lottery and then actually getting the winning ticket the next day?"

"In my experience," the astrologer said, barring her teeth in a semblance of a smile, "it is never anything that benign."

Tabora gave a long suffering sigh and Amanda's ears perked up. The bulldog lumbered slowly toward the foyer and started barking.

"What is it, Amanda?" demanded Hadrian lazily. "I vow, I have no idea why Ira gave him to me. He'll make a better guard dog if he lost some weight."

Amanda continued barking.

"Maybe Tuesday finally decided to wake up from his nap," said Reine, getting up. The cat had been snoozing in her room for most of the day. She didn't doubt that the feline had climbed down the stairs and was now stalled by the yapping dog.

She walked to the entrance way where Amanda was standing, still barking. He momentarily stopped to look up at her, but then continued making noise.

"What is it, Amanda, an intruder? I don't see anyone coming in the front door." But she did see the door to the library open. Light was spilling out from it, into the hallway. "Hello?" she called out.

No one answered and she had a strange sense of *déjà vu* as she approached the door. A voice in the back of her mind told her to call out for back up from the people sitting in the living room, but curiosity and not a little bit of machismo also drove her toward the door. Amanda stopped barking, content that someone was investigating this little bit of oddity and trotted behind to see what was going on.

Reine peered into the crack afforded by the open door, but still saw and heard nothing. Steeling herself, she suddenly pushed the door open.

The first thing she noticed was a woman sprawled out in the center of the library, on top of the compass rose painted on the floor. She was wearing a dark blue robe and glittering objects were scattered around her person like broken glass. A man stood over her, like an angel of death in his black trench coat. He looked up at Reine with rheumy eyes.

"Larrington," she automatically said.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

Amanda started barking again.

"What have you done with her?"

"What are you doing here?" he repeated. He turned to her, strolling to her, his eyes intent on something that made her skin crawl. "This is none of your business."

"Yes it is," she countered, stepping away.

He suddenly made a grab for her, his hand clamping down on her forearm. Reine screamed.

"Quiet bitch," he snarled. "I should have never let the board hire you for the publishing..." he suddenly cut off with a piercing scream of his own as Amanda took a chomp at his leg. "Get

that infernal beast away from me!”

“Reine!”

She felt another pair of hands grab hold of her, wrenching her away from Larrington’s grip. “Marcus, Diana’s in there. She’s hurt.”

“Diana?” said Xanthia from behind the crowd of people who had rushed into the foyer to see what was going on. The astrologer pushed her way through the throng and took a slug at Larrington’s jaw before entering the library herself. Larrington let out another howl of pain. Content that Ira’s nephew was damaged enough, Amanda let go of his leg and followed Xanthia to examine Diana. Larrington kept howling dramatically before he tripped on his own untied shoelace and fell over.

“Should we tie him up and phone the authorities?” said the Baron as he and Hadrian hauled Larrington up and dumped him into the corner of the library while he glared at everyone while nursing his wounds.

“Yes,” said Xanthia, looking up from her fallen cousin. “It looks like he beat her up pretty badly. Thank God she’s still alive.”

“I didn’t do anything to her,” Larrington snarled. “I found her that way along with all that jewelry around her.”

“Jewelry?” Tabora moved in to observe the fallen woman. “Indeed. These are mine.”

“And here’s my pin!” added Esther triumphantly.

“She had stolen them,” Larrington spat out.

“How would you know?” questioned the Baron. “You’re the one who hit the woman. A far more serious crime than stealing.”

“I swear, I did nothing to her. Ask Reine.”

“It is true,” Reine admitted. “I didn’t see him hitting her. She was already on the floor, unconscious.”

Larrington smiled triumphantly.

“But,” she continued, “that doesn’t mean that he hit her before I opened the door.”

“I didn’t do it!” Larrington howled.

“Whatever the case,” said Tabora, “we’ll have to call the authorities anyway.”

“I shall get the phone,” said Palwick from the door of the library.

Vicker scowled at the mess. “So Ira is right about you. You don’t have much of a brain, hm?”

Ira’s nephew only stared at him sullenly.

"So what did you really see?" Marcus whispered to Reine once they had moved a little ways from the others.

"Not much," she said. "Larrington was standing over Diana's body, but anything could have happened. He really could be telling the truth. That he stumbled upon the scene by accident."

"What's that?" Tabora said, catching everyone's attention. "Ira, is that you?" She headed over to one of the armchairs near the fireplace. Something white, white hair in fact, peeked over one of the headrests.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Reine murmured.

Marcus put an arm around her shoulders.

"I thought Hadrian told us that Ira was having a vacation in Mexico," the Baron said, confused.

"Ira?" Tabora continued to call out. She walked over to the fireplace to look at the occupied armchair. She shrieked and drooped to the floor in a dead swoon.

Reine shuddered.

"Tabora!" The Baron loped over to his fallen wife and glanced at the armchair. "Oh God. What sort of abomination is this?"

Palwick walked quickly back to the library. "What is it, I thought I heard a scream."

"It was Tabora," Reine said grimly.

"Did you get the authorities?" said the Baron. "It looks like some psycho is loose in this house."

"I'm sorry to inform you that the phone is not working," the butler said. "I glanced outside. There's a snowstorm going on outside and I wouldn't be surprised that the storm has cut the phone lines."

"Just the phone lines?" said Vicker incredulously.

"The phone lines are separate from the electricity. It's fortunate if the electricity is out, but unfortunate if the phone lines themselves are damaged." The butler walked over to the fireplace and glanced at the armchair. He visibly blanched. "You're right, sir, there is a psycho loose in this house."

"Apparently it's not the butler then," Marcus said lowly.

"The psycho's right here," Vicker said indicating Larrington. "I think we should tie him up as the Baron has suggested earlier."

Larrington whimpered.

Esther rubbed her arms. "I, for one, at least am glad that the electricity is still on. It's cold out there and the last time the electricity was off, it was cold in here."

"I seriously doubt snow could damage power lines," Hadrian said. "Lightning yes, snow no."

Vicker, meanwhile, had taken the liberty to drag Larrington to a standing position and had tied his hands to his back. "We should keep him where we can see him."

"Good idea," said the Baron. He was cradling his wife who was slowly coming back to her senses. "We wouldn't want the bastard wandering around assaulting the women in the middle of the night."

"Could someone help me get Diana to her room?" said Xanthia. "If it's not obvious to any of you, I'm not strong enough to lift her."

"I'll help," said Hadrian.

But as Hadrian and Marcus lifted the middle-aged woman off the library floor, the lights went out. The fire in the library's hearth, however fortunately, remained burning.

The butler cursed. "Not again."

"You're not going anywhere, my boy," Vicker said loudly.

"I know I'm not going anywhere, old man," retorted Larrington.

"I'll get the flashlights and candles," volunteered Mary.

Reine quickly followed the housekeeper as she stepped outside the library. "Let me lend a hand. I'm sure you can't carry them all."

"I'm glad you decided to come with me," admitted Mary. "I know my way around here like the back of my hand and I know I'm not afraid of the dark, but it's good to have company."

"I know, with the recent events, I'm beginning to wonder if Ira inherited a horror house instead of a vacation house," said Reine wryly as the two women walked down the foyer back to the living room.

The fire in the living room was also unaffected by the power outage, but the flickering flames gave off strange shadows that danced across the room. Some of the light caught into the dead eyes of the hunting trophies mounted to the walls giving the room a macabre look.

"Sometimes I wished Ira didn't have to decorate this room with all those deer and moose heads," the housekeeper said, continuing on to the dining room after she had taken a candle from the mantle and lighted it with the hearth fire. "Sometimes they give me the creeps."

"So it was Ira's idea to put all those heads up there?"

"Actually, it was her husband's. Besides collecting books for the library, he was also a rather avid hunter. He would take the boat all the way to the other side, the other shore, mind you, and not just the island, and go hunting in the woods either by himself or with another buddy. He always brought back a kill to be beheaded."

"Perhaps that was what the Baroness dreamed about," Reine mused. "The decapitations, I mean. I wouldn't blame her for being rather disturbed about the whole thing."

"Me either."

There was a little light still coming into the dining room from the living room, but once they had entered the kitchen, everything was completely dark. Only the solitary candle that Mary carried gave out light. The tiny pool of light seemed weak compared to the encroaching darkness.

"The flashlights and the rest of the candles are in a drawer at the end of the kitchen," said Mary. "With all these blackouts, it would have been more convenient to place them in the living room."

A loud creak sounded overhead. Then a scrapping sound echoed into the kitchen from elsewhere. Reine thought she heard a faint hiss near her ear. She wrapped her arms around herself, shivering and wondering whether she was having auditory hallucinations. "Did you hear something?"

"You probably heard the house settling," the housekeeper replied, apparently unconcerned as she reached the target drawer and opened it with a squeak.

Reine edged closer to the light and the housekeeper. "I thought wooden houses settled. Not stone ones."

"Well, this one settles. Oh!"

The candle's light wavered and the taper slipped from Mary's fingers. It fell and hit the floor. Automatically, Reine grabbed a flower vase she saw on the kitchen counter and dashed its watery contents onto the flame to prevent it from spreading. The light went out in a loud sizzle.

"Good thinking Reine," said Mary. "Sorry about that. I don't know what made me be so clumsy."

A chuckle surrounded them in the darkness.

"Did you hear that?" Reine whispered.

"Yes," the housekeeper's voice wavered.

The chuckle seemed to grow louder. *Pretty. All mine.*

"Did you say something?"

"No."

You'll be pleased.

Reine shivered again as she felt something cold and clammy trace the back of her neck and briefly touching her shoulders. A dark pressure trickled along her chest.

Hm. Soft. Too many layers.

"Reine," Mary said faintly. "Are you touching me?"

"No. My hands are gripping the edge of the counter. Get a flashlight, Mary. Turn it on, now!"

There was a sudden clatter as the housekeeper frantically fumbled in the kitchen drawer. The laughter was definitely louder now, bordering on maniacal. The pressure became harsher. Reine could hardly breathe.

Suddenly, the flashlight flicked on and the chuckling disappeared. Reine looked down at her sweater and saw nothing. She touched her neck and felt nothing, not even a drop of sweat.

Mary was visibly trembling. "Help me get the rest of the lights, Reine and let's get out of here."

XXII. Aglo

10:00 PM

After the scare, everyone decided to go to bed and wait out the snowstorm. Palwick reminded everyone that the power was probably going to be fixed the next day unless something delayed the repair crews or that the snowstorm had still not abated in the morning.

The mannequin in the library was finally tossed into a bag to keep for evidence despite protestations that the real culprit might come back to destroy it. Reine had caught a glimpse of this one—this time the mannequin had been dressed up in a modern sleeveless black dress that had been torn from the waist down. Vicker had suggested that Larrington be confined to his rooms until the authorities arrived. The other men immediately seconded this idea and Larrington was stripped of his key and locked inside his room by Palwick.

The couples, the Friesners and the Baron and his wife, quickly went back to their rooms. The butler and the housekeeper momentarily remained on the ground floor to douse the fires and to clean up the glasses of port that had been left in their haste for excitement.

Reine followed Hadrian and Marcus who helped Xanthia carry her cousin up to the third floor. The astrologer opened Diana's bedroom door for them and gently the men placed the middle-aged woman onto the bed.

Xanthia smiled, but it was a tired smile that showed all of her years despite her unlined face. "Thank you," she said. "Diana, though, would be furious that she missed all of this."

"Missed what?" said Hadrian, "The ruckus downstairs?"

"No. Being carried by two attractive young men. It's probably a fantasy of hers considering she reads ten times as many romance novels as she reads detective stories."

Hadrian smiled. "Too bad, I guess. The mystery genre is always looking for avid readers."

The astrologer looked down at her battered cousin. An unsightly black and yellow bruise was already starting to form on Diana's right cheek. "First me and then Diana. You would think that both of us were jinxed."

"Do you remember what you did the night on the island?" Reine asked. "This might be related."

The astrologer shook her head. "I don't remember anything of what I did. All I remember was coming back from the outhouse and then I was back here in bed." Xanthia blinked her odd eyes. "All I know is what Diana had told me, that I had been found on the island pier nearly frozen."

Reine frowned in reply and said nothing else. The astrologer might not remember what she did on the island but she had a suspicion that the astrologer knew something else about it that she refused to tell them.

"Do you need anything else?" inquired Marcus. "If you need help, Reine and I are just next door."

Xanthia waved a hand. "That's all right, really. You've done enough. I'll stay with Diana to make sure she doesn't get worse. She was on the floor when we found her, remember. She might have hit her head and sustained a concussion." The astrologer shook her head. "Isn't it strange that the phone is also out? I would like to call for a doctor to check on her."

"The Baron has a cell phone," said Hadrian.

"No, that won't work," said Marcus. "I think it takes a lot of energy to call from out in the middle of nowhere where there isn't good reception. Besides, with the electricity out, there's no way to recharge the phone."

"And in the case if the Baron's phone is fully charged already," Xanthia added, "a doctor would take quite a while to get here because of the snowstorm."

"Pessimists," Hadrian muttered.

"Well, I'll have to tell you one thing," Xanthia continued, "Larrington was right on one account. Diana did steal all of the jewelry."

"And how did you know this?" Reine asked suspiciously.

"It's a bad obsessive habit of hers," the astrologer confided. "She likes pretty things. By the end of our stay I was hoping to come up with a solution to returning all those trinkets, but apparently this incident did pretty nicely in doing that."

"Yes, but now we have her injured in the process."

Xanthia shrugged. "Knowing Diana, it's a small price to pay for not losing her reputation."

The three editors nodded sympathetically to her plight, but as they exited the room, the astrologer grasped onto Reine's arm, fixing her with a steely stare.

"Diana told me what I said to you during my delirium."

"Don't worry Xanthia," Reine said gently. "You didn't mean it. You were in a fever."

"But sometimes the subconscious is right," said Xanthia deliberately. "I may be many things that society doesn't approve of, but when I think I'm right I usually am. This isn't conceit, I swear."

"Xanthia..."

"Listen. The stones. They will tell you what is happening. Pay attention to them. Ignoring them might be costly."

Reine finally left Xanthia with Diana, but she was rattled by Xanthia's advice. She wasn't one to put stock in occult divination devices but even if she did, she could hardly interpret the meanings of the seeing stones.

As she softly closed the door to Diana's bedroom behind her, she saw that Hadrian and Marcus were still standing out in the hallway, talking in low tones.

Marcus looked up at her and said, "You should also go to sleep to wait this snowstorm out."

Reine crossed her arms. "You're not telling me what to do." She thought of being in a dark room by herself, particularly a room in Ira's mansion and mentally shivered. Even if she was cracking up, she didn't want to be alone. "I can tell that the both of you are up to something."

Marcus shook his head. "You should go back to your room. What we're going to do doesn't concern you."

"Of course it concerns me. I'm coming with you whether you like it or not."

"Just fabulous," Hadrian told Marcus. "I knew you would blotch it up. I told you she had a mind of her own."

"I already figured that out a long time ago," he replied testily. "I was just hoping that this time it would be different."

"As I see it," said Hadrian, "it's like a little sister tagging along with her older brothers because she wants a cut of the action."

"I certainly want a cut of the action," Reine briefly agreed, "But I am definitely no one's little sister."

"Obviously," Marcus muttered. "all right, since you insist, let's get a move on with it. The faster I get this done, the better."

"So what is he attempting?" Reine whispered to Hadrian as Marcus stalked ahead of them.

"He wants to get Ira's manuscript," he whispered back. "We don't think Palwick would allow us back into Ira's bedroom in fear of 'disturbing the evidence' even though we think that Ira is safe."

"Think? Don't we know? We got an e-mail from her."

"An e-mail can be faked, Reine."

"Then what about the photograph?"

"It could have been something from a previous vacation that she had never showed us. It could have also been digitally altered."

"I didn't think of that," she admitted.

The three editors crept down to the second floor. The hallway was empty except for the single beam of light from Hadrian's flashlight.

"Put that light out," Marcus told him. "We don't want to look suspicious."

"We're already looking suspicious slinking about down here," he retorted. But he turned out the light anyway.

Reine held her breath and strained her ears at the encroaching darkness. She felt no heavy pressure. She heard no laughter. She let out her breath and quickly followed the two men soundlessly down the hallway. Soon, they reached the end. Hadrian twisted the knob and the door did not budge.

"I was hoping the butler forgot to lock the door," he muttered.

In the darkness, they heard a slight grinding sound as Hadrian inserted a thin metal wire into the keyhole. After a few seconds, they heard the click and the door swung upon.

"Come on."

The three of them hurried inside. Marcus managed to close the door softly and the three of them turned on their flashlights to illuminate Ira's bedroom. On the surface it looked like everything was untouched from their previous intrusion. The answering machine still laid on the table next to the door. The bed and its corresponding drawers were remarkably sparse and Ira's desk at the other end of the room was also meticulously neat.

"You don't suppose you know where Ira's safe is, do you?" said Hadrian.

Marcus shook his head. "Knowing Ira, she probably didn't put it in an obvious place."

"What about behind those Georgia O'Keefe paintings?" Reine suggested.

"Too obvious."

"Actually, that would just be like Ira," Hadrian said, flashing his light onto one of the strange paintings of flowers on the wall. "She knows that most people would think that she would hide things in places that aren't obvious. After all, she is a mystery writer. And so as a result, she would hide things in obvious places because no one would think of looking there."

"So you're saying that Ira likes to mess with people's minds," said Marcus.

"Exactly."

He shrugged. "I guess it wouldn't hurt if we looked behind them." He lifted one of the paintings. "Nope. Nothing here. Just a blank wall."

Hadrian lifted the other painting. "Nothing here either. I guess that theory was a bust."

Reine quickly tried all the drawers in Ira's desk. There was nothing but office supplies. "No

locked drawer." She shone her light onto the tabletop. "This desk is remarkably neat."

"Do you think she hid anything underneath these lamps?" inquired Hadrian.

"They're too small to hid a manuscript. Maybe we should look under the bed and in those drawers."

"Right."

She stared at the solitary red pen on the desk. Something wasn't right. Wasn't there another pen there before? She glanced at the computer, an inert piece of equipment that had no marking other than the company logo of the manufacturer. She noticed there was no power cord leading from the computer to the outlet on the nearby wall.

"I don't see anything under the bed. Do you, Marcus?" came Hadrian's muffled voice.

"Nope. Let's try the mattress."

She flipped one of the switches on the computer. It shuddered to life. The LED on the monitor blinked on.

"What's that noise?" Marcus demanded.

"The computer," Reine explained. "Apparently it's running on it's own battery. There's no power cord connecting it to the wall outlet."

"Nothing here," Hadrian said. "The drawers are next. I'll take the one near the window."

As she watched the computer run through its start routines, she noticed the CD-ROM driver blinking. She pressed the button and the tray slid open revealing an unlabeled disk. She took it out and rummaged in one of the desk drawers for an empty CD case. She finally slipped the disk into her waistband and continued to watch the computer as it booted up to its operating system.

There was a loud squeak as Marcus pulled out the bottom drawer of one of the wardrobes. "There's nothing in here."

"Of course not," Hadrian replied. "Ira must have emptied it out before she left."

Reine quickly accessed the computer logs and the most recent files used. "Geez. Someone's definitely been messing around with Ira's computer."

"What do you mean?" asked Hadrian as he looked up from the drawer he was examining. Marcus continued to discretely tap the bottom of the wardrobe drawer that he had opened.

"You were right about that e-mail being faked. I found the original copy here. It was mailed to us right in this house. The picture was also digitally altered. Apparently the culprit found a picture of two buff guys on the Internet and blended it with another picture of Ira."

"So Ira's still missing and she isn't in Cancun. The culprit apparently doesn't want the police to know about this since the e-mail told us not to contact them. Too bad the phone is out."

"Yes, it does seem like a bad coincidence, doesn't it?" Reine shut down the computer and

stood up, her eye still on the single red pen lying on the desk. "Yes, somebody was in here. I distinctly remember there being two pens on this desk and not one."

"Ah hah!" Marcus was busy rummaging in the empty wardrobe.

"What is it? You found something?" Hadrian demanded.

"There's a false bottom in this drawer. I figured it out since the wood seemed to slope at a strange angle. Ah, here it is." Marcus took out a piece of board and laid it on the floor. "I need some light."

Reine obligingly shone her flashlight into the wardrobe drawer. At the bottom was a small door locked by an old fashioned tumbler. Marcus spun the dial to the specified numbers and the lock clicked open. He withdrew a sheaf of papers from the bottom compartment and briefly flipped through it.

"Well, whoever e-mailed us knew about Ira's secret safe and her manuscript but didn't bother to steal it and submit it on their own."

At that moment, the door to Ira's room rattled. They froze.

"Who the hell is it, Palwick?" whispered Hadrian.

Marcus hastily placed the board back into the wardrobe and shoved it closed. "We've got to get out of here."

"Get out of here? Are you nuts? There's no place to hide except the bathroom, but that's too risky!" Hadrian hissed.

"The window," Reine said quickly. "Remember? There's a balcony between our rooms on the third floor and there's another one for this room. Come on!"

Marcus unlatched the window and quickly slipped out, followed by Hadrian and then Reine. The snow outside blasted them in cold fury, but she left the window open a crack and tilted her head to listen.

She heard the door rattling again and then she heard it swing open.

"Who..."

Marcus slapped a hand on Hadrian's mouth.

"I know it's here somewhere," a masculine voice drifted from the interior of the room. Reine recognized the voice as that of Vicker Friesner, the South African entrepreneur.

"What did she say in her e-mail?" The feminine voice was that of Vicker's wife, Esther.

"She said that she knew that Ira liked to hide things in strange places. But she knew specifically that this was in a drawer somewhere. It has the map."

"Fantastic. I'll help you look, it'll go faster."

Reine shivered outside in the balcony. She could see nothing in the darkness and the

blinding snow. Her ears were already numb and her face and hands were becoming icicles. She hoped fervently that the slamming of drawers would go faster.

"It's cold in here," she heard Esther complain. "Look the window is open a crack. No wonder." The window slammed closed.

Reine cursed under her breath.

Hadrian touched her shoulder. "Look what Marcus found."

There was a trap door on the balcony that Marcus had opened. When he opened it, a staircase for fire escape swung down from its hiding place beneath the balcony and landed with a thump to the icy ground.

"What was that noise?" demanded Esther from within the house.

"Just the house settling dear. Old houses tend to be like that."

The three of them hastily climbed down. At the end, Marcus and Hadrian managed to swing the ladder back up to its place underneath the balcony. It locked itself with a clang, but it could hardly be heard over the winter wind's howling. They trudged back to the sliding doors that led into the den and with a few seconds of Hadrian's locksmith skills, they slipped back into the lingering warmth of the darkened interior.

A flashlight suddenly shined in their faces.

"What have you three been doing?" Mary demanded. "Hadrian! What on earth happened to you?"

He dusted the snow off his clothes. "We've been taking a walk out in the snowstorm."

"A what?"

"You don't want to know," said Reine.

"Well, what have you been doing?" Hadrian asked her.

The housekeeper sighed. "I've been working with Palwick in an attempt to get the emergency generator working but no luck. I heard a noise in here and thought I'd investigate."

"We've been doing a bit of investigating ourselves," Hadrian replied.

"Hmph." She touched his hands. "You're cold."

"They'll warm up pretty quickly if you help me," he said lasciviously.

Reine coughed. "Uh, Hadrian, would you mind if I borrow your laptop?"

"Sure, but the battery only lasts a couple of hours and there's no phone connection so you can't send e-mail for help if you're wondering."

"I only need it for an hour, maybe." She turned to whisper to Marcus, "Do you still have that

manuscript?"

"Yeah, I hope it's still dry."

XXIII. Calerna

11:00 PM

They could still see the moving lights of flashlights underneath Ira's bedroom door when they arrived on the second floor.

"They're being rather slow about searching," remarked Hadrian as he motioned for everyone to enter his bedroom. "They must be even more meticulous than we were."

"Who's searching Ira's room?" demanded Mary. "As far as I could tell the last time I was in there, there was nothing of interest. Apparently Ira had cleared up everything."

"Actually, no," said Reine. She covertly studied the housekeeper and decided finally that it was safe to confide in the younger woman. "We three were just in Ira's room before we had to climb down the balcony to get out."

"So that's why you came in through the den," the housekeeper mused. "Well, if you three were in there before, who's in there now?"

"The Friesners."

"Why would they be in there? I thought Vicker Friesner had not seen Ira in ages."

"That may be true, but they could have corresponded before this little deranged house party." Reine fished out the compact disk at her waistband. "Hadrian, where's your laptop?"

"On the desk. Where did you find that?"

"In Ira's computer," she said absently. "Which reminds me. Do you have access to Ira's computer?"

"Me?" said Mary surprised. "Well, I guess lately since we had opened up Ira's room, but usually no. Palwick and I don't have the key to Ira's room."

"That's odd," Reine replied. "Because when we got into Ira's room, it had been locked again. I wouldn't think that it would be locked because nobody has a copy of the key."

"I suppose you could lock it from the inside," said Hadrian.

"How? I didn't see any little knob or switch on the door to do that."

He shrugged. "Maybe you could also use the same piece of wire that can pick the lock to lock the lock."

"Somehow, I had the impression that that particular trick is impossible," said Marcus.

Reine slipped the disk into the computer and opened the only file that Hadrian's computer could read from it. "Well, look at that, a map of the house. It doesn't show any details

though, just the rooms in general."

Marcus took out the manuscript and flipped through it again. "I was thinking maybe a map would be stuck in here somewhere."

"Well, you're never going to find a map that way," said Hadrian. "You need to go through the pages slower."

As the men poured over Ira's manuscript, Reine examined the layout of the mansion. "Hm."

"This is quite interesting," Mary said, looking over her shoulder. "What are you looking for?"

"It turns out that the e-mail that Ira sent us is not really from Ira at all," Reine replied. "The e-mail was sent from Ira's computer after she had disappeared. And the photo attempting to prove that she was alive and well turned out to be digitally manipulated."

"Really? So all in all, Ira's still missing?"

"Yes."

"And what are you trying to find?"

"If you've noticed, small strange things have been popping up the past couple of days. Or rather it started ever since everyone arrived at this house party. I wouldn't be surprised if someone here knew what was going on. I'm inclined to think that Xanthia knows more than she's willing to tell us."

"What about Diana and Larrington?"

"They might be trying to find the same thing that we and the Friesners are trying to find. Marcus and I once saw them attempting to search the house for treasure."

"Oh, so you think there's treasure in this house."

"I'm not sure. Ah!" Reine pointed triumphantly at the bottom panel of the map. "I finally figured out what was wrong about this. There's an extra level to the house that doesn't belong here."

Mary frowned. "That looks like a basement."

"So you must know where it is, right?"

"Actually, I didn't know there was a basement in this house."

"I found something, Reine."

She turned at Marcus's voice. "Oh." She stared at the piece of parchment in his hand. There was a diagram of strange Free Masonic symbols that indicated the compass directions that exactly matched the compass that he held in his other hand. "What on earth does that mean?"

"It means," he said deliberately, "That whoever e-mailed us about the location of the manuscript had an inkling or knew outright that I was in possession of the compass."

"But you never showed it to anyone except me," said Reine.

"Well, I got a good look at it now," said Hadrian.

Mary nodded. "But that does no good because we haven't seen it before the e-mail."

"Remember what Xanthia told us. Diana is a pickpocket. She could have entered my room while I was away and saw it. But she didn't take it because it wasn't pretty enough."

"Yes, that's right," said Reine. "But why would she enter your room? You're a man. You don't have pretty trinkets."

"She might have mistaken my room for yours."

"Well, whatever the case, it's very possible that someone took a peek at Marcus's compass and recognized it from some drawing in Ira's manuscript. But who would have access to Ira's manuscript and make the connection with the compass. Furthermore, why would they want to give the manuscript to Marcus in the first place if this was true?"

Marcus opened his mouth to make a suggestion when a knock sounded at the door.

Reine took the disk out of the computer and shut down Hadrian's laptop.

"Damn," Hadrian muttered. "Who is it at this time of night?"

"Quick," Mary said motioning to the bathroom. "It's going to be kind of awkward if they find that Hadrian has a party in his room."

"I'm not a boy," glowered Hadrian. "I'm an adult. No one can question who's a guest in my room."

"Well, it's going to be quite strange to explain one, let alone three different people in here with you. Most people would think that we're having an orgy," the housekeeper explained.

"Well, maybe we are," he replied.

"Oh God," Reine said as she and Marcus were pushed into the bathroom by the housekeeper. "As if we need any more strange things happening around here."

"He just has his mind in the gutter," said Mary as she closed the bathroom door. She then opened it back a crack and the three of them maneuvered themselves to peer outside to see what was happening.

Hadrian opened the door to his bedroom. "Er. Hello?"

"Ah, Mr. Block," said Palwick. "I've been checking up on Larrington and he wanted me to inform you to be more discrete in your orgies."

"Orgies?"

"Ira's nephew is attempting to get some sleep despite his predicament and he is complaining that you are too loud."

"Well, there's only me here. Why would I be too loud? See? No one. No orgies." He motioned to the empty room. "Tell Larrington that he's hearing things. Maybe Vicker hit him too many times in the head."

"I did not see Vicker hitting Larrington but perhaps you are right. He's a bit unhinged to say the least. Perhaps he's hearing the long gone orgies of one infamous Phineas Cronan."

"That's probably more likely."

When the butler left, Hadrian shut the door. "That's a good one. Let's blame some non-existent ghost for the extra noise we make. You guys can come out now."

But when they opened the bathroom door, there was another knock.

"Oh hell. How busy can it get at this time of night without any electricity?" he moaned.

"Palwick again, probably," whispered the housekeeper.

"He's rather like a tenacious dog, isn't he?" remarked Reine. "By the way, where's that bulldog, Amanda that's always hanging around Hadrian?"

"I saw the beast sleeping underneath one of the footstools," Marcus whispered in her ear. "I'm surprised he slept through all this noise."

"Well, good evening Hadrian," a syrupy female voice came from the front door.

"Er. Hello Mrs. Friesner. How's Mr. Friesner?"

"He's sleeping quite soundly, thank you very much. You're not doing anything tonight?"

"Kind of hard to considering the power and the phone lines are out."

"Too bad. I wanted to ask for your advice." Esther finally burst through the door, surprising the mystery editor. He tried walking quickly away from her, backwards, but managed to trip on the rug and fell backward in bed. Esther was wearing one of her flimsy nightgowns.

"Hussy," the housekeeper muttered under her breath. "I suppose I'll have to go save him, don't I?"

"It's rather amusing, actually," said Reine as Marcus softly chuckled. "But Vicker Friesner is probably not far behind. And he has a gun, unfortunately."

"Oh my." Mary took off a large robe that had been hanging on a hook next to the shower and shrugged into it. She tied the belt so that her clothes were obscured by the folds of the robe. "Wish me luck."

Outside, Hadrian was stammering. "Wait a minute, doesn't your husband miss you? I was sort of thinking of going into the shower, I mean playing chess. That's it! I was thinking of playing chess, in the den."

"In the dark?" Esther purred.

"Hadrian!" Mary shouted from the bathroom. "Is that Palwick again? Tell him to go away."

"Who's that?" Esther said, suddenly straightened out.

"Well, didn't I tell you I was rather busy?" said Hadrian. "Now's not a good time to chat, Mrs. Friesner, if you excuse me..."

Mary stepped outside and pretended to look shocked. "Mrs. Friesner! What on earth are you doing here?"

Esther had the grace to flush. "Um, I just wanted to ask Mr. Block about something. His advice, you see."

Hadrian clambered out of the bed and stood behind Mary, using her as a shield. "Really Mrs. Friesner, you've come at an inconvenient time."

"Esther!"

Reine groaned. "It's Vicker."

"I hope he's not brandishing that revolver of his," Marcus replied.

"No such luck."

Indeed, Vicker Friesner strolled into Hadrian's room like a soldier into enemy territory. His revolver was pointing in Hadrian's general direction. "Ah hah! I've found Esther's lover. You're going to pay dearly, my boy, especially since I also know that you're the only one who has access to Ira's room."

"What do you mean?" said Hadrian, obviously confused.

"You can pick locks, that's what."

Mary placed her hands on her hips. "Get that gun out of our faces, Mr. Friesner. I know that Mrs. Reece would never approve of your highhanded behavior. Hadrian is not Esther's lover. He's mine. And if you were wondering where he was, he was in this room the past two hours with me."

"Insatiable thing, isn't she?" Hadrian said proudly. "Oof!" Mary had jabbed him once, sharply in the stomach.

"Well." Vicker lowered the gun but he still eyed Hadrian suspiciously. "I guess I'll have to take your word for it. Esther!" He dragged his wife out the door.

Hastily, Hadrian slammed the door shut and wiped his forehead. Reine and Marcus cautiously stepped out of the bathroom. "You're right, Reine," the mystery editor told her. "Everyone in this household has gone berserk."

XXIV. Salam

12:00 AM

The housekeeper was thoughtful as she sat on the edge of Hadrian's bed. "May I see that

diagram of the compass again?" she asked Marcus. "It looks awfully familiar."

He handed her the sheet of parchment that he had stuck into Ira's manuscript. She smoothed it out as he gave the manuscript to Hadrian. "Put this in your suitcase. For safekeeping. I have a feeling that someone might search my own luggage without my knowledge in the near future."

"What makes you think that they won't search mine?" said Hadrian.

"In the e-mail, the manuscript was directed to me," he explained. "They would naturally assume that I'm guarding over it."

"I know what it is," Mary said suddenly. "The compass looks familiar because it's the same one on the library floor."

"It is?" Reine peered at the parchment and squinted. "Now that you say so, I think you're right. Perhaps we should go down to the library to check up on it."

"Go down to the library with all the traffic out there?" Hadrian said, jerking his head toward the door. "Don't you think we'll get caught?"

"We can pretend we're going to play chess," Reine said blandly.

"Or maybe Chinese checkers," supplied Mary. "There are four of us, remember. Chess is a two-player game."

"Whatever," Reine waved a hand. "The point is, if we're to go as a group, who exactly will question us? The Baron and the Baroness are definitely asleep. Xanthia is watching over Diana. Palwick is probably in his quarters. Larrington is locked in his room."

"Well, that leaves the Friesners." Hadrian shuddered. "And one of them has a gun."

"Somehow, I doubt they will be disturbing us any time soon," said Mary.

Marcus shrugged. "Don't depend on it."

Finally, the four of them trooped out of Hadrian's room. The hallway was once again clear and dark. It was also silent, and for that Reine was grateful as they quickly headed to the library. In that darkened room, Hadrian and Marcus started up the fire in the hearth again as Reine and the housekeeper examined the parchment and the floor with their flashlights.

"You're right, Mary. They are exactly the same. Why haven't we noticed it before?"

"Most people don't even notice what the color of the carpet is even if they've lived in a house for over twenty-years," she said. "I think perhaps we got lucky this time because the floor in this library is so unusual."

"Perhaps we should also compare this with the compass."

The fire in the hearth finally caught the tinder and the small twigs that Hadrian fed it. Immediately, the library was filled with a warm salmon glow that flickered with strange shadows among the books and the furniture. To Reine's relief, there was no sign of vandalized mannequins sitting on the armchairs.

Marcus dug the shining compass out of his pocket. "Look, the arrow is spinning."

Reine quickly walked over to him and glanced over his arm. The arm on the compass was slowly rotating counterclockwise, unable to determine a direction. "Try walking around. Perhaps it will soon stabilize."

He nodded and took a step forward. Instead of slowing down, the arrow seemed to be spinning faster. "It's getting worse."

"Walk further then and see what it does."

He took another step and the arrow spun yet faster. He took three more steps and the arrow was whizzing. But suddenly the arrow stopped in the middle of his fourth stride and began turning the opposite direction. "What?" He frowned and took a half step back. The arrow stopped, pointing straight ahead at an innocuous looking shelf of books.

"You're standing on the center of the compass on the floor," Hadrian remarked.

Marcus looked down at his feet. "So I am. So what does this mean? That something is located on that shelf? Behind that shelf?"

"We can take a look," suggested the housekeeper. She walked over to the shelf to skim through the titles. "All of these books are on geography. Or the occult. Strange."

"Actually, that isn't strange," said Hadrian. "That might just be what we're looking for."

Marcus tucked the compass back into his pocket. "Then perhaps it's a particular book that we're supposed to be looking for."

"I don't see what looking for a book is going to do us any good," said Reine. "Ira's missing and a mysterious person is sending us e-mail. People are searching Ira's room."

"Don't forget that we saw Diana and Larrington in here a few days ago," Marcus reminded her. "They might actually be onto something."

"Perhaps a map," supplied Hadrian helpfully.

"I thought we already found a map," said Reine. "On that compact disc."

Mary began leafing through a treatise on the early North American colonies. "Well, there's a lot of books here. Let's get cracking."

"Maybe it's one of these," Marcus murmured as he took out a book that said 'Black Magic' on its cover. "It seems likely to me considering all the odd things occurring lately."

A creaking sound behind them made all of them stop their work to turn around. The library door was opening by itself to reveal a tall dark figure. Reine held her breath, hoping that this was not a repeat of one of her horrible nightmares. The figure finally emerged into the dim light, revealing Vicker. He had his arms crossed at his chest. Behind him, Esther emerged from the darkness carrying a flashlight. Both of them had changed from their nightclothes to something more pedestrian.

"Well, Esther, what did I tell you? All of them are in cohorts with each other. They must have found the map before us."

"What map?" said Reine, playing dumb.

"The map to the treasure, of course," said Vicker arrogantly. "I have heard Ira say something about the old Phineas Cronan burying most of his life savings somewhere in this house. Esther, here, overheard the overzealous Larrington and Diana discussing about the treasure on the night most of you were staying over on that island, camping. So after all of this rumor, I decided to see if it might be true."

"Why would you want treasure?" said Marcus. "You're already an international tycoon."

"True, money is of no object to me," Vicker Friesner acknowledged. "But to me, it is the hunt of the treasure that inspires me the most. I was hoping to get to it first."

"So what about Ira?" Hadrian said.

"What about Ira? She's on her vacation in Cancun, didn't you say? She's not going to notice that a treasure under her house that she had not been aware of is missing." He reached behind him, but his hands came up empty handed. "Damn it. Esther, where is it?"

His young wife shrugged. "The last time I remembered, you were pointing it at the editor and the housekeeper back in his room."

"Looking for this?" The Baron stepped into the room, the barrel of the revolver briefly pointing to the bewildered editors and housekeeper before training it on the Friesners. The Baroness stepped from behind him carrying a small pistol that was trained steadily at the people near the bookshelf. "It seems that you have dropped this during your marital altercation in front of Mr. Block's bedchamber."

"That thing's not loaded," said Vicker.

The Baron tsked. "Don't think to trick me, Friesner." He patted his side. "I had also brought my own with me, but I thought, what the hell, two is better than one."

"Baron? Baroness? What is exactly going on?" said Hadrian.

"Oh, no one's going to get hurt if you do exactly as we say," said Tabora easily. Despite her age, the older woman's eyes sparkled dangerously. Her husband moved the revolver, making the Friesners join the rest of the guests near the bookcase. "We've been waiting quite a while, knowing that someone here was smart enough to figure out the puzzle. We had a sure bet with Vicker."

"Me?" Vicker said surprised.

"Yes, you," she said. "You were always so gullible when Ira and I played our tricks on you when we were young. We knew you would immediately sniff out adventure when you heard about Phineas Cronan's treasure. Larrington, with his financially greedy mind, and his kleptomaniac partner Diana Goldstein figured out what all of this was about first, unfortunately, but both of them put together don't have enough brains to figure out exactly where it was. Vicker, now you could have figured it out."

"Somehow, I don't think that as a compliment," he muttered.

"It is though." Tabora smiled, her white teeth gleaming. "Now, you three editors. I've heard Ira rant and rave about how brilliant you three were. Admittedly, you were an unknown variable. I didn't know if you would act together or separately on the hunt. But in the end, it didn't matter, did it? Everyone came to the same conclusion. And you three figured it out beautifully."

"We didn't even know there was a treasure," Reine protested.

"But you couldn't resist a puzzle could you?" the Baroness arched an eyebrow.

"So you knew all along that I had a compass that could direct us here?" said Marcus.

This time Tabora frowned. "What compass?"

Marcus shut his mouth. Apparently she knew nothing of the trinket that he had found in the catacombs.

"You know, the one on the parchment," supplied Mary.

"Oh, you mean pavement," the Baroness sneered. "All you housekeepers are all the same. No education."

Mary stiffened, but Hadrian placed a hand on her shoulder in warning.

Apparently the Baroness knew nothing about the copy of the compass stuck in Ira's manuscript either. Some other force was at work. Reine cleared her throat. "Yes, of course. We remembered the compass on the library's floor and naturally figured it out from that."

"Quite clever then," said the Baroness. "Now what were you doing before we came in here? Don't try anything or we will start shooting someone."

"We were trying to find a book," Reine said slowly. "We think it may be in one of the books on this particular shelf."

"Then what are you waiting for?" said the Baron. "Hurry up and find it!"

With many curses, the six people turned to the book shelf and began pulling out books and flipping through them before discarding them into a pile nearby.

"Any ideas?" Marcus whispered in her ear.

"Ideas? I have no ideas," Reine retorted. "I can't have any ideas with my life threatened like this!" She reached for the next book on the shelf she was working on. She glanced at the title. "It's about Cancun. How fitting." She tossed the book onto the growing pile without flipping through it.

"You're right," Marcus conceded. "Besides, the Baron's the only one who has a cell phone."

Reine peered into the shelf and saw something glittering at the back. "What is this?" She reached in and plucked a small silvery colored stone from its perch in an indentation on the shelf. "Wait a minute. I think this is the twenty-fifth stone that Ira was telling me about. The

one she lost a long time ago.”

“Reine, this is not the time to talk about seeing stones,” Marcus replied, exasperated as he threw another book into the pile. “Can’t you see we need to look for something important here?”

The shelf itself began to shutter and collapse inside itself.

“Get out of the way!” Hadrian called out.

Everyone stumbled backward as the shelf began sinking into the floor in a loud groaning noise as rock grated against rock. When the shelf completely disappeared, there was nothing but a large dark hole, enough to fit two people, side by side. Esther shone her flashlight into it revealing a curving staircase leading downward.

“The basement,” Mary breathed.

“Good God, they’ve did it,” chattered Tabora excitedly. “The treasure is going to be ours!”

XXV. Sadalabra

1:00 AM

Reine found herself at the head of the line of people tramping down into the bowels of Ira Reece’s mansion. But, as she reflected, it made sense that there was a basement down here. The mansion after all was built on top of a plateau that could have been hollowed out before the foundations was poured in. One of her hands held her flashlight, which helped light up the path a few feet in front of her. Her other hand was firmly gripping Marcus’s hand. Behind him was Hadrian and Mary, then the Friesners, and finally the Baron and the Baroness at their backs holding the weapons, ready to fire in case of any sign of mutiny.

The darkness of the basement was cold, damp, and stale. She was glad that she at least was wearing a sweater. The foreboding atmosphere gave her images of dank dungeons and abysses, much as she had pictured when she was younger, devouring hordes of science fiction and fantasy novels. What was down here? Spiders? Bats? Skeletons? Or was it something more sinister? She had thought she had seen everything after the adventure in the catacombs.

“Do you see anything yet?” Tabora called out. Her voice echoed downward like an eerie and shrill bell. The tunnel downward sounded hollow as her voice bounced against the walls.

“No,” Reine answered dully.

“And I thought she was such a nice lady,” Mary murmured to Hadrian.

“Often dark things lurk under a nice exterior,” said Hadrian darkly.

To keep herself from tripping and collapsing, perhaps of hysteria, and also from keeping her mind from wandering to thoughts of revenging ghosts who liked to get physical, she counted the steps that spiraled further and further downward. Sixty-one. Sixty-two. Sixty-three. How many steps were there? How deep into the bowels of the mansion were they getting into? One story deep? Two? Three?

The staircase ended at the hundredth step. Reine paused, staring at the door in front of her. It was obviously old, but the wood it was made of looked tough enough to withstand sustained damage from a battering ram. There was a small window at the top of the door, covered in an iron grate. The handle was an iron ring. There was also an old fashioned keyhole just below it.

"Open it," Tabora commanded.

"You expect me to say 'Open Sesame'?" Reine retorted.

Tabora glared at her and pointed her pistol in her face menacingly.

"Do as she says," Marcus whispered.

"Yes, do as I say," the Baroness sneered.

She turned back to the door and took a deep breath before pulling on the handle. The iron felt bitterly cold on her fingers. They were so cold that it felt like they burned.

The door did not budge.

"You," the Baron tapped Hadrian on the shoulder with the butt of the revolver. "Open the door."

"But Reine couldn't open it."

"Then pick the lock open!"

"Yes, sir," Hadrian muttered. He moved passed Marcus and Reine and took out the wire he had used on Ira's bedroom door and slipped it into the old fashioned lock of the basement door. He twisted. Something in the door squealed. He twisted twice more and a clunky mechanism in the door reluctantly clicked. He pulled the door open and a musty air, strangely perfumed with lavender, rushed outward to engulf the guests.

"I recognize that perfume," said the Baroness. "It's from somewhere. I can't remember now."

"Does that mean that someone has been down here recently?" Vicker asked.

"Be quiet," said the Baron. "All of you, get in there. The treasure must be down here somewhere."

Reine took the lead again, deliberately pacing slowly. Just inside the door was a brief foyer, completely bare. A heavy dark curtain blocked the foyer from the rest of the room. She placed a hand in front of her. The curtain felt soft, as if it was made of velvet. She pulled and the curtain gave way with a squeak as the hooks holding the curtain to the ceiling slid to one side. She let out a breath she had not known that she had been holding.

The interior was an immense stone cavern that could have held a huge feast during medieval times. Or more likely, as Reine mused to herself, one of Phineas Cronan's infamous occult ceremonies and orgies. At one side, a hearth the size of a store front window blazed in a cold yellow light. She stepped inside, allowing the others to trail after her.

Opposite to the hearth was an altar similar to the one that she had seen in the ruins in the forest. This one, though, was made of stone and was still intact. It was draped with a dark cloth. The rest of the room was completely empty. She looked up and could not find the ceiling since the light did not reach all the way up there.

"The treasure is somewhere in here," said Tabora, breaking the silence. "It must be over there." She waved her free hand, indicating the altar.

A noise suddenly startled all of them. The Baron and Baroness instinctively swung their gun toward it. A door beside the altar that they had not previously noticed, opened, admitting a figure clad in a black cowl. Reine squinted, seeing past the open door to something familiar. She saw snow and Mary's battered pick-up truck.

"The door," she said in comprehension. "It's at the base of the plateau, near the garage. Why didn't anyone notice that before?"

"You're right," Mary replied. "I had noticed the door, but I thought Palwick stored all his gardening tools in here."

"Be quiet you two," Tabora hissed. She aimed the pistol at the strange figure at the altar. "Who are you?"

The figure took off the cowl, revealing a lined face and snow-white hair. A few of the guests gasped.

"Ira!" said the Baroness obviously surprised. "I thought you were in Cancun."

"As tempting as it is, I couldn't leave loose ends here," she replied. "I am leaving. Soon. But there were some other matters to take care of. Like donating the house to the Historical Society."

"You can't!" Tabora protested. "There's the treasure..."

"Ah, yes, Phineas Cronan's treasure. Did you think that I would not follow up on that tale as soon as I heard of it, Tabora?"

"Well." She waved her pistol. "What about that thing?" she said indicating the altar. "The treasure must be there, right?"

Ira smiled strangely. "After all these years, Tabora, I thought you better than a mercenary. I guess I was wrong. Go see for yourself, if you care."

Eagerly, the Baroness, followed closely by her husband, strolled toward the altar.

"Well, Reine, I trust you found the twenty-fifth seeing stone?" said Ira. "I knew where it was all along, of course. I had hoped that you would find this place on your own, but apparently things didn't go quite as planned."

"Yes, I found the seeing stone," Reine frowned. "All the good that it did."

"And you found the manuscript?" she asked Marcus. "I think it's pretty good myself, but I want your opinion first."

"I found the manuscript," said Marcus, "but I haven't had time to read any of it. You put the picture of the compass in there, right? And you e-mailed us. You somehow sneaked back into the house without our knowing."

"It was a rather easy thing to do when everyone was asleep," she said breezily.

"So are you taking your dog back with you?" Hadrian asked.

"Yes, that part I was lying about," said Ira. "I hope you're not disappointed. I'm sure Amanda has taken quite a liking to you."

"Actually, that's fine," he said quickly. "I'm positive that your bulldog is much happier with you. You've owned him longer."

"I'm glad you haven't been kidnapped," said Mary.

"Is that what everyone thought I was?" she said amused.

"So is there really treasure there?" inquired Vicker. His wife watched speculatively at Ira and then at the Baron and Baroness who were busy pulling away at the cloth on the altar. She seemed to reach some inner decision to not join into the materialistic fray.

"You'll see," the mystery author replied enigmatically.

"Oh my God, there is treasure!" Tabora was looking down at the altar in awe. "It's beautiful!"

"We're definitely going to rebuild our fortunes with this," the Baron agreed.

Both of them bent over, intent on reaching the treasure when abruptly they toppled over into the hollowed out altar. Their screams were abruptly cut off when their feet disappeared over the edge.

"Ira! What happened to them?" Vicker sprinted over to the altar. "Oh God."

Curious now, the others hurried to the altar to see what happened. Reine had the sinking feeling that it had been something awful but that out of morbid curiosity, everyone just had to see. It was like passing a car wreck on the interstate.

She reached the scene right after Vicker and peered into the hollowed out altar. It was actually a clear pool that was illuminated from the bottom. The bottom indeed was littered with coins and jewels, all of them glittering in an eerie light. The Baron and Baroness were floating on top of clear water, face down, but the water was slowly turning red. She turned away and breathed deeply, trying not to be sick.

The others turned away afterwards and stared at Ira who had the dark cloth in hand, ready to place back on the altar.

"It's very difficult to retrieve any of the goods to the surface," Ira explained. "The coins and jewels are protected by glass boxes that are unable to be corroded. That liquid you see in there is not water but an extremely poisonous acid. It kills on contact and slowly dissolves everything until there is nothing. I was hoping you, Reine, would have found this first. You have the scientific expertise to figure out how to bring the rest of it up. It would have been

yours. It still can be yours."

"I don't know if I want it," she said wryly. "There are two dead people in there."

"An unfortunate accident," Ira conceded. "But perhaps necessary. Tabora was never that mentally stable to begin with. Her husband is weak enough to follow her."

"So nothing has been retrieved from the trove?" said Marcus. "You needed Reine to get it?"

"I needed Reine to get at Phineas Cronan's treasure," she agreed, "But something had been retrieved from it once before. Part of that single glass box that was brought up had been used to finance my first book sale. The other part..."

Reine reached in her pocket to pull out the seeing stone she had just found and the pouch of the other twenty-four stones. "The other part. You gave to me."

END