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Elf Alert!

by

Jonathan Edward Feinstein

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Author's Foreword

The fact that of the first nine novels I wrote, this one is being posted to the web site last is probably significant. It wasn't my favorite. I did not enjoy writing it until I was about halfway through and I think it will be obvious where I suddenly stopped and replotted the story in order to make it a bit more fun. It was real eye-opener to me, the point at which I realized that I hate writing about unpleasant people in dark situations. My hat is off to those who can do it, but if I cannot sympathize with a main character I'm better off not writing the story.

The story also ended too soon. I reached what should have been the end of the book and realized the piece was just too short. I considered going back and stretching the story out by added additional incidents, but it just did not seem the right thing to do, so instead I just let my characters wake up the next day and move on to the next assignment.

The book is a patchwork piece. It's not entirely bad. In fact it does have a lot of good points. It just doesn't hang together well. Some times when proof reading my stories I find myself thinking they're pretty good, and sometimes I shake my head and mutter, "No wonder I couldn't sell this turkey!" I did more of the latter than the former this time around. Still, I really liked working with one of the characters. I may bring him back sometime in another context. I'd mention his name, but it ought to be obvious and I don't want to spoil one of the good parts it for anyone.

Something strange happened while I was writing this one, however. The first half or so was written during the latter part of Operation Desert Shield which some readers may remember as the dress rehearsal for the first Gulf War. The real funny stuff began to happen as soon as I started writing *Elf*

Alert! .

I'd write a scene and then a day or three later it would be reflected in some way in the real world. The first couple of times that happened I didn't really notice it. I also won't give examples because the parallels were hard to explain and some of them only meant something to me, but they were there. And once I noticed them they got more pronounced. It was a nervous time in the world; there have been periods that were more so, the Cuban Missile Crisis springs to mind, but, still, the period of Desert Shield was one of uncertainty. And there were more than a few scenes in the first half of this book that reflected the uncertainty. I was very uncomfortable with the whole quasi-military situation in the book and the obscure parallels I kept noticing did nothing to ease my mind. Then Operation Desert Shield mutated into Operation Desert Storm just after I started writing about the assault on Boston (I don't think that gives too much away). However that was the last time my story presaged something that happened in the real world and just as well. I had more fun with the story after that. Hopefully you will too.

Like my other stories, this book really is offered to you free. However, if after reading it you feel it was worth a dollar or two, rather than sending it to me, why not make a donation to the New Bedford Historical Society? The New Bedford Historical Society was organized in October 1996 as a non-profit Massachusetts corporation dedicated to documenting and celebrating the history, legacy and presence of African Americans, Cape Verdeans, Native Americans, West Indians and other people of color in New Bedford, Massachusetts. For more information contact the New Bedford Historical Society at: P.O. Box 40084, New Bedford, MA 02744 (508) 979-8828 <http://www.nps.gov/nebe/nbhs.htm>

Jonathan Edward Feinstein
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PROLOGUE

Yesterday

"Look out!" Honeywine screamed as her husband of two centuries was cut down in what should have been the prime of his life. An elf ought to live for a thousand years and eventually die peacefully in a field of flowers, but that had changed over two decades ago when the humans' Industrial Revolution had kicked into full swing. Instead of flowers and music, Oaklimb Earthfriend now had a musket ball in the chest. Honeywine wept at the sight of bright green life-blood staining the front of his tunic. The damage done to their people by cold iron was minimal compared to that by hot lead.

"Damned elves!" the gun-toting human spat as he quickly reloaded the family heirloom. He'd be damned if he allowed a pack of freeloading fairies to steal his crops.

Blossom, Honeywine's oldest daughter, had rounded up her three siblings and got them running in the right direction when she realized that her mother wasn't moving. Honeywine was kneeling over Oaklimb's still body, weeping uncontrollably.

"Mama, hurry!" Blossom urged her, all too aware that the farmer had nearly finished reloading the gun.

Honeywine paid no attention, her tears mingled with the blood of her husband, adding the necessary catalyst to properly dispose of an elfin body.

Oaklimb began to smoke; his body rather than cooling was rising in temperature. There were only a few wisps of smoke coming from his fatal wound at first, but soon light gray smoke was curling up off his entire body. His clothing began to show char marks.

The farmer's musket roared at Blossom, who was tugging urgently at her mother, but this time the ball failed to find its mark and Blossom ducked needlessly as it whistled by just to her left.

"Mama, please!" she begged as the billowing smoke from her father's body grew ever thicker. Honeywine refused to budge. Blossom had seen this before. An elvish marriage bond was strong, sometimes too strong. It was not uncommon for the surviving spouse to lose all his will to live and to join the departed in the funereal immolation.

Blossom tried again to shake Honeywine out of her death-trance, jumping lithely back just in time as her father burst into blindingly bright flame. It was too late to save Honeywine now; she was dead and burning as brightly as Oaklimb. Blossom picked herself up and ran for dear life as the farmer's musket roared behind her once more.

"Shit!" she heard him swear behind her. He had other problems now; his crops were burning. In a minute both Oaklimb and Honeywine had been reduced to white ash blowing on the wind, leaving only a small patch of vitrified ground to mark their passing.

Blossom ran, leaving the farm far behind her. Now it was up to her to see that she and her siblings lived long enough to answer Oberon's summons. They had to get to Faerie - it was no longer safe on Earth - but it was such a long journey and there were just too many dangers along the way.

Oberon had promised that there would be an accounting for all this someday, but not today. If not today, Blossom swore to herself, then tomorrow.

i. Out of the Frying Pan

One

The elves were giggling again. *God! How I hate when they do that*, Jared thought sourly. The world had really gone to hell since they returned.

He was sitting on an unkempt pile of rotting hay in a dark, windowless, jury-rigged cell in the basement of a semi-collapsed building somewhere to the north of his Southeastern Massachusetts home. He thought he might be in Brookline; what little he had seen of the outside world seemed to suggest that, but there was no way to be sure. Jared was unconscious when they brought him in.

There was a small pit in one corner of the room, which was intended for "sanitary purposes" as the elves snickeringly called it. Just the opposite really, but it kept Jared from having to live in his own waste, although from the smells that assaulted his olfactory organs it was hard to tell the difference.

Looking toward the door in the subdued light Jared was dimly aware of the grimy bowl his captors had slid through the rough hewn slot at the bottom. The elves giggled again before moving off.

"Well, well," he said to the walls, "I wonder what's on the menu today." There had been some disturbing rumors about elves lately. Supposedly these once herbivorous pacifists had turned to cannibalism. Well, not cannibalism really, Jared silently corrected himself. Humans and elves were not the same species and were certainly incapable of interbreeding, thank God! But Jared didn't fancy ending up as a blue plate special for a pack of pointy-eared terrorists.

Jared heard an incoherent groan from the far side of the cell. His roomy, a soldier as far as could be told from the scraps of uniform he still wore, was awake. It looked as though his rank insignia had been torn off, but the nametag said "B. Holmes". There wasn't enough light to read his dog tags, so Jared thought of him simply as "Holmes". He was no Sherlock and Jared was no Watson so that made them even.

Holmes had been moaning and running a high fever from several nasty infected wounds since Jared had been thrown in that stink pit three days earlier. Jared had selflessly and maybe foolishly used his first water ration cleaning Holmes up as best he could, binding his wounds with strips of cloth made from a tee shirt. *Not exactly sanitary*, Jared thought when that was done, *but better than the filthy rags they threw in, laughing, when I asked for bandages.*

Jared couldn't tell if his ministrations had done any good and Holmes had finally stopped moaning shortly before dinner the previous night. Jared's best guess had been that Holmes had died and he was unwilling to check out that hypothesis, but now it appeared that Holmes must have been sleeping comfortably for a change.

Jared rolled off his pile of hay and crawled over to the one Holmes was on. As he neared the wounded man his knee fell into a pool of something slimy. Jared tried not to think about it. Holmes' forehead was still warm, but it was much cooler than it had been; maybe only a degree or so above normal. Either that or Jared was getting sick too. He did a quick inventory of aches and pains, and decided that while he was still stiff and sore from the beatings the elves had inflicted on him, he was not yet feverish.

"Who?" Holmes croaked out hoarsely.

"Laker," Jared replied quietly as though in his condition Holmes would be incapable of enduring full-pitched conversation. "Jared A. Laker. You?"

"Bernie Holmes." Actually Holmes wasn't up to saying even his own name that easily. He choked it out one grunt at a time. Jared tried to get him to go back to sleep, but Bernie would have none of that and kept talking. "Where you from?"

"Acushnet," Jared told him.

"Where's that?"

"Just north of New Bedford. Know where that is?"

"Yeah," Bernie replied after a pause. "About an hour south of Boston." He paused and looked Jared

over. "You're not military," he said noticing the non-uniform style of clothing Jared was wearing.

"No, strictly civilian."

"They feed us yet today?"

"Depends on what you call food. They slipped a bowl of something under the door a few minutes ago. I've been forcing a bit down your throat whenever you were conscious enough to swallow it, but it didn't seem to agree with you."

"Nothing about those point-eared freaks agrees with me," Bernie replied with more spirit than he had shown so far, "but you gotta eat if you wanna live, and, Laker, I wanna live. Live and get back at those stinkin' elves. Understand?"

Jared nodded. "What did they do to you?"

Bernie tried to lift his head and see the rest of his body. To give him credit, he nearly made it up on his own. Against Jared's better judgment and at Holmes' insistence Jared helped him sit up, rearranging the damp straw behind him. When Holmes was finally satisfied with his posture Jared brought the bowl the elves had shoved at them. The contents would have been an unappetizingly sour stew were they in more pleasant circumstances. As it was, however, elves were lousy waiters and that was the only food they were likely to see for another day. Bernie told his story in between bites.

"I was born in Ohio," he began. As he spoke he seemed to gain strength so, after a few minutes, his pauses became less frequent and the story started to flow. "A small college town called Hudson. Ever hear of it?" Jared shook his head. "Didn't think so. Well, I was always a bit lazy and my grades weren't enough to keep me in school, so when I lost my student deferment back in '70, I quickly enlisted before I could get drafted. It meant I'd be serving for four years instead of two and during the 'Nam era that wasn't the best way to stay alive, but that way I got to request where I'd be stationed. No guarantee I'd get what I asked for, of course, the army'll screw ya every time, but I did get into OCS and my first assignment put me in Europe. After that, I made the Army my career eventually advancing to..." he lowered his voice to a low whisper then, "lieutenant-colonel. That happened just after I came out of Kuwait a while back. Looked like we'd be at war again real soon then, but none of us expected what happened next."

"Remember when the elves first returned to Earth? Seemed harmless back then, didn't they? And concerned for the ecology too. Got a lot of organizations to back them, Sierra Club, World Wildlife Federation, and Greenpeace, especially Greenpeace with their armed Environmental Strike Force."

"The ESF is still with them, but they refer to themselves as the Greenpeace Elite," Jared told him.

"I know," Bernie agreed. "It's their fault I'm here. When the Point-ears took Boston I was at Fort Devens. A lot of jokes were made at the time and we went in so cock-sure of ourselves. What could a bunch of skinny elves do? We still thought they were pacifists then. They refused to use human weapons. No wonder we thought it would be an easy victory."

"The bastards let us right into the middle of the city before they struck. The unit I rode with came all the way down Boylston Street without encountering a soul. Can you imagine how eerie that was? Miles and miles through the city and not one person in sight. And the quiet. The city was absolutely silent except for our own vehicles. When we got to Boston Common I ordered a halt while I and a few other officers walked a little way across the grass. General told us to wait there for further orders. As we walked, the

pigeons followed at a short distance. They had a predatory gleam in their eyes, I swear. That should have tipped us off, you know? Nobody had been feeding them; they were back to scrounging around. Most pigeons do that, but the ones at the Common have been used to the supplemental feeding of stale bread and peanuts and whatnot by the people who frequented the place.

"These birds looked damned hungry, I tell you. In retrospect - we all got twenty-twenty hindsight, you know - I see that meant the people were not being allowed to run free and hadn't been for days. Not in the city."

"But where were they?" Jared asked.

"In the buildings, I think, at least those that were still alive anyway. The elves killed everyone who resisted and did it instantly and without remorse, or so I was told. Anyway, I was just receiving orders from General Miller to start searching the buildings when they struck.

"It seemed laughable at first. Tiny little arrows and bright lights flashing on and off. It was confusing but an M-25H is a force unto itself. Yes, our troops had all the latest equipment - we weren't taking any chances on that count - but soon the damned evil magic of those elves began to take effect. Confusion spells! They cause us to shoot at each other as often as we shot at the enemy.

"I was luckier than most. One of my men managed to get the spell-casting bugger before we wiped ourselves out. We lost contact with the high command then. I think the Point-ears were jamming our radios. I ordered a retreat, but we only got as far as the Prudential Center before we were under attack again. We tried to take the Pru where the Point-ears were attacking from, but their defensive posture was too strong.

"Instead, we took the Sheraton next door, hoping we could attack the Pru from there. The place was mostly empty so at least there was a lot of room to barracks the troops. At first we did pretty well. There wasn't a window in the Pru facing us intact and our heavier guns were causing structural damage in the upper floors where the magical attacks continued to come from, but we'd been relying on the old stories too much. We grew up hearing about how vulnerable they were to 'cold iron'. Remember the fairy tales? And Kipling for that matter? Supposedly the merest touch of 'cold iron' was fatal nor could their spells defend them against it.

"Well, forget it! Maybe those tales were true once, I don't know, but there's not much to them now. Oh, a bullet through the body will kill them as dead as you or I, but first you gotta hit 'em. Somehow they've found a way to protect themselves.

"Soon after we started bombarding the Pru, they put our big guns out of commission and you want to know how? My own stupidity, that's how! I forgot that the whole Prudential Center was undermined with parking areas. They just caused the pavement under our guns to soften and collapse. Zap! No guns."

"I don't see how you could have predicted that," Jared protested.

"On the contrary, Laker," Bernie disagreed, "I already knew I was dealing with magic. I shouldn't have left myself vulnerable to such an obvious ploy. Especially one that might have been used by conventional forces."

"But that's like saying you should have expected them to use their magic to twist your guns into pretzels or to close up the muzzles so that they would explode the next time you used them."

"I should have, Laker. That's just the point. This is war; there aren't a whole lot of rules, you just do everything you can and hope it works better than everything they can do. And remember these bastards never signed the Geneva Conventions.

"Once we were down to our M-25h's and lesser hand-held weapons, the Point-ears resorted to aerial tactics."

"What?"

"Paratrooper elves. They jumped off the Pru, landed on the Sheraton's roof, and started cleaning us out top to bottom. Only a double handful of us managed to escape, via the same underground parking lots that did in our guns.

"The ten of us who survived had to wait until nightfall to get away from the Prudential, but that we did, quickly crossing Boylston Street and then carefully making our way west on a number of parallel streets. I'd swear it took us an eternity to skulk our way down Commonwealth Avenue to Kenmore Square and when we got there, we weren't prepared for what we found.

"There were humans there. Real people. They were wearing khaki uniforms that, in the artificial light, looked almost like ours. We almost ran forward in our relief, but at the last moment we saw what was wrong with that picture. They weren't ours. Their uniforms bore the insignia of Greenpeace. To think I used to support those bastards. I liked their stance on whales and the harp seals particularly and I've never been fond of nuclear weapons, but I never thought they'd turn traitor."

"I don't agree with them either, but you have to admit that they're only being consistent with their ideals," Jared pointed out.

"That doesn't make them right!" Bernie Holmes spat out vehemently. The action caused him to start coughing and that drained a lot of energy out of him. When he finally regained his composure, he fixed Jared with a vicious stare. "We humans ain't perfect," he told Jared. "I'll be one of the first to admit that, but we would have solved the environmental problems on our own. There was just no cause to ally with the damned Point-ears; not when they turned military and started attacking the human governments. Especially here in America. Hell! We took them in, treated them as equals, even granted them citizen status when they qualified. Their entire coup was an act of treason from the start!"

Jared nodded his agreement and said, "So what happened next? That was all over a year ago."

"So it was. Well, we tried to circle around Kenmore Square - we decided to do a little recon work before the sun came up. We still hadn't seen any civilians - can't count Greenpeace - and thought we might try peeking in at Fenway. The people had to be kept somewhere and a lot of people could be contained there. It wasn't any good though. We kept having to evade Greenpeace patrols and eventually found ourselves holed up in an alley in the middle of Kenmore Square, with a hint of false dawn visible in the eastern sky. We broke into one of the buildings and found that the pizza shop in the basement was deserted although the upper floors were in use.

"We spent a nervous day in that little restaurant, keeping lookouts near both the front and back doors, but, for what-ever reasons, neither the elves nor their allies chose to come inside.

"I nearly killed Corporal John Ston when he turned on one of the pizza ovens," Bernie confessed. "It was one of the most stupid things I have ever seen, but we managed to turn it off without tipping off anyone outside. The power was still on inside and there was edible food in the refrigerator, but there was no way

I was about to let anyone do any cooking. The smells would have been noticed outside. Instead we ate our food cold. We were able to find some leftover spaghetti and sauce, bread, a few meatballs, and a fair amount of cheese and pepperoni. We saved the cheese and pepperoni for later. It would keep better than any of the rest of the food and could be eaten as it was. When night came I also decided to take whatever sausage we could manage. There was always the chance that we might find a place where we could cook it safely.

"As we left the pizza shop I looked back toward Kenmore Square . There seemed to be a lot of activity going on so I edged toward the mouth of the alley.

"A couple dozen marines were being marched into the square. I'd heard they were in on the assault on Beantown - came in from the north. There was supposed to be heavy air support as well, but we never saw any of it."

"Elf magic neutralized that first," Jared supplied. "I understand the only survivors of the 82nd Airborn were the ones who were able to bail out before their planes blew."

"That would have been before we even entered the city," Bernie commented. Damn! our communications must have been jammed even then."

"What about the marines?" Jared prompted.

"There were a couple dozen of them. Did I say that? Yes? Well, the Point-ears had their Greenpeace goons line them up. There were four officers among them; two lieutenants, a captain and a major. The officers were pulled out of line and shot. That's when I found out what their POW policy was. Kill any officers outright and haul the rest of them off to 'Ecological Education Camps.' I'm a bit ashamed of what I did next, but I'll tell you anyway. I removed all traces of rank from my uniform. At the time I told myself that it was necessary that I escape and tell my story, but even now I can't help but wonder whether it was also an act of cowardice."

Bernie was quiet for a while and Jared didn't know what to say to that so the silence stretched on. Finally Jared realized that his cellmate was waiting for some sort of response. "No," Jared told him kindly. "I don't think it was cowardice. Especially if you didn't feel fear at the time. You're right. It was your first responsibility to report back to your superiors."

"Thank you," Bernie replied, relieved. "I had all my surviving men remove all marks of rank as well so to all appearances we looked like a small group of privates. Although we couldn't completely hide what we had done.

"Finally we backed away from Kenmore Square and started heading toward the Fenway. As we passed within a couple of blocks of Fenway Park , we saw the stadium's lights were on and we heard the sound of singing coming toward us when the wind was right."

"Singing?"

"Yeah. They were singing hymns, praying for salvation. We edged closer to the park and saw what I'm sure was the same group of marines being escorted inside. That was our big mistake. As we tried to move on we ran right into a large group of Greenpeace commandos. We were caught with our pants down and had the choice of surrender or die.

"We were ordered to drop our guns and our packs and then we were marched inside. The only time I

ever got a free pass into a ball park," Bernie tried unsuccessfully to laugh. The noise he made was more from pain than anything else. "We were marched right out onto the diamond and told to sit down on the wet grass. The seats in the stadium were already full. The Point-ears kept trying to stop the singing, but that was our only successful attempt at resistance. I think the hymns and prayers hurt them in some way, but they're tough. Don't be fooled by their fragile appearance. They might feel pain as easily as we do, but it takes a lot to take them out."

"Was Fenway full of soldiers like you?" Jared asked.

"Not even close. There were maybe a thousand military personnel. The rest were all civilians and we were all scared to death in there. I'm not ashamed to admit it either," Bernie said defiantly. "A group of people in the right-field bleachers tried to leave en masse and were shot down by the Point-ears' human allies. After that nobody tried to get away, although some joker along the third base started a wave about an hour later. A few warning shots were fired before the elves cast some sort of spell into the crowd. A moment later a great cry went out and many people just died."

"Horrible," Jared murmured.

Lieutenant-Colonel Holmes nodded agreement. "We weren't moved until mid-morning. Then we were marched out of Fenway Park and back down Comm. Ave. to Massachusetts Avenue and then across the river into Cambridge. The Elves had totally taken over M.I.T. I guess they thought it was appropriate that they should now control such a well-known symbol of the technology they declared to be their greatest enemy.

"We were each assigned a bed in one of the dormitories there, but there weren't enough beds to go around, so we were put on sleeping shifts. When we weren't sleeping we were either being lectured, exercised, or fed. Mostly the first two. They didn't feed us very well.

"The elves weren't putting up with any resistance from us either. Anyone who argued with them, anyone who questioned what they were saying too strongly, anyone who tried to escape was summarily killed. It didn't matter whether it was by gun or by spell. One peep, one failure to obey an order brought instant death.

"I was at M.I.T. for two weeks. During that time three of my men were killed and the rest were taken out with other people to other places. I never saw any of them again. Finally I was ordered into the trailer of a large semi along with another hundred people. We were very cramped in there and the ventilation was miserable. Two people died in that trailer before we got to our destination; a man and a woman. Others had passed out and the rest of us weren't much better.

"I suspect they took a round-about route for it took nearly three hours constantly moving to take us to what turned out to be a large armed camp devoted to what the elves call 'ecological education' in southern New Hampshire. I didn't know that at the time, of course. Given the length of the trip I'd have sworn we were at least a hundred miles further than that, but then we weren't supposed to know where we were."

"How did you find out where you really were?" Jared asked.

"When I escaped two weeks ago," Holmes replied. "Or was it longer? What's the date?" Jared told him. "Call it two and a half then. I guess I lost more time than I thought. The less said about 'ecologyland' the better."

"Ecologyland?" Jared laughed, then quickly stifled the impulse.

"No, go ahead, Laker. Laugh. It's supposed to be funny. It's a human joke. It's what we called the camp. The Point-ears named it after Robin Goodfellow, called Puck, who they claim was a martyr to human technological aggression. That's where they're probably going to take us next when it suits their purpose.

"I was there for almost a year before my chance to escape came up. One year during which the damned Point-ears didn't just talk ecology at us, don't believe the propaganda. They also demonstrated with sophisticated tortures. They would infect us with various diseases claiming that was only what humans had done to Mother Earth. At one point they shaved a group of us completely bald - not one hair on any part of our bodies - and then we were forced to lie down in the sun all day. When we were finally allowed to get up with the horrible sunburns we'd collected our condition was likened to the damage done by cutting down the rain forests and strip-mining."

"So how did you finally get away?"

"Sheer luck. There had been numerous escape attempts; tunnels were a particular favorite, but as the ranking prisoner I held back, looking for the best opportunity to get the greatest number out. Three weeks ago one bright young lady - she called herself Lucy - pointed out a spot along the perimeter fence that was partially shielded from the security lights at night.

"I should mention that this place looked like your classic movie POW camp. A rough oblong of chain-link and barbed-wire fence with guard towers every hundred yards, although this fence was made of hardened bronze, not steel. It was a big camp, however, roughly one third by one half a mile and it ran across several hills. With a camp that large I suppose it shouldn't be surprising that there was a weak point in its defenses, but I was very suspicious. In all the time I had been there, no escape attempt had been successful, unless you count death as success.

"I spent the next few days and nights watching the spot Lucy had indicated. It wasn't totally shielded, but then she hadn't claimed it was. From careful observation I calculated that particular point went unwatched at night for about fifteen minutes at a time and that a shallow rut could be quickly scraped out under the fence that wouldn't be visible at night.

"Finally I decided it was time to move. That was a very nervous business. We all knew that there were traitors among us. The Point-ears' human allies had many volunteers placed among us. Most of the previous escape attempts had been foiled because informers had tipped off the elves. I had to decide who could be trusted and who would have to be left behind. I was so uncertain that the only ones who were prepared for the attempt was the first group to leave. Rumors were circulated to other groups but never with the correct location or time. One by one my trusted aides would wake up those who were next on our list to leave. We kept that up for six hours during which time over half the prisoners in the camp were able to slip out before we were caught and the alarms went off.

"It was every man for himself at that point. The elves quickly closed off our escape route with some sort of death spell. I saw most of my aides die in the horrible grip of a blue aura that made them writhe and scream in agony until they were finally allowed to die half an hour later. Only my insistence that I be the last to leave saved my life.

"I ran back into the camp then and I'm certain I was being tailed. I couldn't go back to my bed. Everyone else in my dormitory had already been evacuated, so I started looking for ways to commit creative mayhem. That's when I noticed that there weren't any electrical lines running in the camp. It's

strange how you can fail to notice the obvious. I'd been there for a year and I'd never noticed that there was not one example of electrical technology. Their lights were run by magic as were most of their vehicles. They had a few fossil-fuel burners, but in retrospect I realized that I had very rarely seen an elf when one was in sight. It's my theory that the elves' supposed immunity to cold iron is due to some new form of magic they have. They're just as vulnerable to their old nemesis as they ever were, I think, at least when they are off guard.

"I saw one accidentally burn his hand on a steel dumpster during the confusion. That's when I realized that maybe the old stories might actually have some truth to them. The elves have some sort of magic shield against cold iron, but they have to maintain it. It's just a defense, not a cure. Strangely enough that was also when I found my way out of Camp Goodfellow .

"Next to the dumpster there was a truck that had been half loaded with large plastic drums full of garbage and a number of empty drums nearby. It may sound like the plot from a B movie, but sometimes the old tricks work best. I grabbed an empty drum and placed it within the group of full ones. Then I climbed inside and pulled a lid down over me and waited. It was an hour before daybreak. My legs were all cramped up in there and it was damned cold until the sun came up. Then it became as hot as it had been cold and I began to roast.

"Fortunately, whoever had been loading up the trash came back just after dawn and finished up. The guards at the gate checked a few of the drums at random, but I managed to go undetected. I concluded that with the big search going on for all the escapees, one guy in a garbage can wasn't exactly high priority.

"Once we were well beyond the camp gate I popped the lid off of my can. At first I couldn't move. It was sheer agony even to try moving my legs, but I eventually got out of the drum and made my way, mostly by arm power, to the back end of the truck. As far as I could tell, the driver either didn't know I was there or else didn't care. That was fine by me, but I didn't intend to be there when he arrived at his destination. Wherever he was going there were bound to be more elves.

"I did my best to massage my legs, get the blood flowing again and as the truck slowed down to make a turn, I jumped off and rolled into the tall grass at the side of the road. I just lay there for over an hour, staying out of sight of the few passing vehicles.

"When I finally got up I noticed that I was at the base of an entrance ramp to I-93. I started following the road, ducking out of sight whenever I heard an approaching vehicle until I found an abandoned Chevy in a rest area just south of the state line. It must have been stolen shortly before the elves started their hostilities and then left there, since I couldn't find anything wrong with it. Took me a while to figure out how to hot-wire the sucker. It might take a pro only seconds, but if you've never done it before it can take hours.

"I finally got the car going by dusk and continued on south, but I was spotted by a Greenpeace helicopter when I made the turn on to Rt. 128. I gave them a fair chase, but I had been riding on fumes from the start and I finally ran out of gas not too far from here.

"They worked me over pretty good, as you can tell, and I've been in this pit ever since sinking in and out of consciousness. Laker, I'm very tired now. Help me back down, will you?"

"Get up!" a woman said, poking the muzzle of an automatic rifle roughly into Jared's ribs. Two large men in dark green uniforms similar to the one the woman wore stood in the doorway. A stylized globe was emblazoned on their left breast pockets and right shoulders.

"Uh?" Jared asked intelligibly as he struggled to get to his feet.

"Reveille!" she spat, giving him another poke and sending him back to his pile of hay. "Rise and shine! Wakey, wakey!" she added with vicious humor. She then started in on Bernie Holmes. Holmes groaned and tried unsuccessfully to get up on his own power, but he was far from recovered and only fell back exhausted as the woman berated him. "Help him," she commanded Jared.

"He shouldn't be moved," Jared replied, earning himself another jab.

The woman nodded at her two companions and they picked up Bernie roughly. Bernie moaned and coughed in futile protest as they dragged him out of the cell.

"Move it!" the woman ordered Jared, indicating the door with a wave of her gun. Jared shrugged as he got back up and shambled out the door.

The basement beyond the cell was as he remembered it - a poured cement foundation half filled with debris, several greasy, narrow windows, and a stairway heading upward toward an unbearably bright doorway. There were three other cells in the basement as well, but they had already been emptied.

Jared made his way up the stairs into a plain hallway. Unlike the basement, the upstairs section of the building had been kept clean, although it was desperately in need of fresh paint and wallpaper. There were no elves in evidence, but Jared thought he heard footsteps coming from the second floor. If what Bernie had told him was true, they were probably avoiding exposure to the weapons of their allies. Jared made a private note of that. The spells that grant immunity to the destructive effects of cold iron must be complex or difficult to maintain, Jared thought to himself. He could see that it was still dark outside. The bright light in the hallway was being provided through elvish magic.

As he stepped outside he saw six armed men and women holding about ten people who looked as miserable as he felt in a straight line while Bernie was thrown roughly into the back of a small truck. The truck had seen better days and had been painted white not too recently for an earlier lettering job showed through. "Ball Provisions" the faded, partially covered sign said, "Meats and Gourmet Items."

"Where are you taking us?" a woman asked as Jared got in line.

"Shut up!" a uniformed man replied predictably.

"He's on, Jake," said one of the men who had put Bernie in the back of the former meat truck.

"All right," Jake replied. "The rest of you get on the truck one at a time. Try anything and you're dead. Move!" The line move sluggishly and seemed to ooze into the back of the truck. As soon as Jared was on board the back door of the wood-lined steel box was shut and locked behind him. Two sharp slaps against the side of the truck were the only warning they had before the truck started moving.

There was absolutely no light in the back of the truck and nobody inside had anything to say for a while,

concentrating more on groans and wheezes as the truck hit any number of bumps and pot holes. Jared tried to make himself comfortable and got a splinter in his hand for his troubles. He was working blindly toward removing the splinter when he heard his name being called.

"Laker?" a woman's voice asked over the echoing road-noise. "Is there someone here named Laker?"

"Here," Jared replied.

"Your friend wants you," she told him simply. Jared felt his way to the front of the box, apologizing with almost every crawling movement for bumping into someone. About halfway back someone fondled him in response. He hoped it was one of the women, but he rushed on regardless.

"Bernie?" His inquiry implied far more than a mere investigation of his comrade's identity.

"Uh!" Holmes replied as the truck hit another bump. "Laker, I'm in bad shape. What size shoes do you wear?"

Jared was confused by the sudden change of subject. "Shoes? What has that got to do with anything?" It occurred to him that Holmes might be delirious, but Jared didn't know what else to say.

"What size shoes, Laker? It's important!" Bernie insisted grabbing Jared roughly by what was left of his lapels.

"Uh, nine and a half D, ten maybe depending on the shoe."

"Take mine."

"What?"

"Take my shoes and give me yours, Laker. I had these boots made special before we hit Boston. Not only are they steel toed, but each has a small iron bar hidden in heels. I figured that such a clutch weapon might come in handy, but I'm in no shape to use it just now. Take my boots. If I live you can always give them back, but if I don't I want you to find a use for them."

"All right," Jared said hesitantly as he started to remove his own shoes. Someone nearby had heard the conversation and removed Bernie's boots and handed them to Jared. "How do these work?"

"Like any other boots," Bernie replied with an unseen smile. "You put one foot in front of the other and repeat a lot." He tried to laugh at his own joke but the effort hurt and the laugh rapidly degenerated into a groan. "Sorry," he said after a few minutes, "I couldn't resist. Just pull sharply at the back of the heel." Jared did so. He couldn't see in the absence of light but from the feel he could tell he was holding a small rubber handle attached to a very short bar of metal. "It's not much," Bernie told him, "but in a clinch it might come in handy. Just remember that it has to be a surprise or they'll have their defenses up. Ugh!" he concluded as the truck hit another large bump.

Jared felt Holmes' forehead and found that his fever had returned with interest. After another few minutes the ride got a bit smoother.

"I think we're on a highway now," a man's voice opined from the darkness.

Nobody replied directly but one woman asked, "Where are they taking us?" Jared told them a bit of

what Bernie had told him about Camp Goodfellow which did nothing to relieve the tangible mist of fear that filled the back of the truck. After Jared finished with Bernie's story, mood turned to panic. People were still talking a few minutes later when the truck started veering wildly back and forth.

Outside they heard the sounds of automatic weapons' fire coupled with a loud boom that might have been a grenade. They all flattened themselves out on the floor as a line of holes was stitched into the side of the truck. Someone was attacking, but the prisoners weren't sure if that was cause to cheer. Most were too busy screaming to care at the moment.

The driver of the truck continued his evasive actions at full speed for almost a whole minute before catching a bullet. The truck's body skidded sideways for a brief moment before finally tipping over. The prisoners were thrown violently against the bottom wall of the truck, now screaming at its own torture as it scraped against the pavement.

Then, just as the wall was starting to have dangerous holes worn through the thin sheet metal, the truck slid off the pavement and over the road embankment, bringing a sudden halt to its forward momentum.

The prisoners were battered and bruised and several had broken bones as they were thrown about. Now all were groaning and several were crying piteously as the back door of the truck was opened up sending a flood of early morning light over them.

Most were too miserable to care who was opening the door, but over his own moans Jared heard a hard-edged woman's voice say, "There're people in here. Quick! Move them out before this thing blows. Medic! We have wounded! Gently, boys. They're not the enemy and they're wounded." She walked into the truck as she spoke. "Shit! What a mess."

"Shelby!" a man shouted almost in Jared's ear. "This one's a soldier. Private, I think."

"Lieutenant colonel," Jared corrected him between groans.

"What's that, man?" the nearby man asked.

"He's a lieutenant-colonel," Jared repeated, trying to enunciate clearly through a badly split lip.

"Really? Shelby, we've got an officer here. He's in bad shape though."

"An officer? We could use him. Medic! Take care of him first!"

A man in camouflage fatigues with a dark red cross emblazoned on his sleeve came forward and checked out Bernie. A moment later he got up and said simply, "Too late. I'm sorry."

"Are you sure?" Shelby asked.

"He's been dead for at least fifteen minutes."

"Then we didn't kill him," Shelby said with relief.

"Not likely and even if I'm wrong, I doubt he'd have lived regardless. Look, see this wound on his arm?"

"Badly infected."

"Exactly. It looks like someone tried to clean it up, but without a disinfectant he was doomed from the start. Now excuse me. I have living patients to attend to."

"Sure, Doc," Shelby said, letting him go. "Mike, Bill, get this last one out of here quickly," she indicated Jared. "I smell gas."

Jared felt himself being lifted to his feet as the one Shelby had referred to as Mike asked, "Can you walk, man?"

Jared took a tentative step and felt an intense pain tear its way up his leg on a direct course to the pain center of his brain sending whatever excessive energy the brain couldn't handle down his arms. He gasped as the shock waves echoed back and forth through his body.

"It's either a break or a sprain," Bill commented matter-of-factly. "You take top, I'll grab bottom." They picked Jared up as gently as they could and rushed out of the fallen truck. They were only a few feet outside when a great hiss filled the air just before there was an immense explosion of the fuel in the gas tank.

The force of the explosion knocked Mike and Bill, with Jared between them, to the ground. Jared, however, was spared the greatest part of the pain when the initial shock caused him to lose consciousness.

Three

"What about this one, Doc?"

"Broken arm, sprained ankle, multiple minor contusions, abrasions, and lacerations. He'll live," the doctor summarized, "but he won't be too comfortable for a while."

"Hmm, that doesn't sound too bad. Why's he still out then?"

"Shelby, each of his wounds may be minor, but when put together he's taken a pretty bad beating. We had to fill him up with painkillers just so he could get some sleep."

"Well, how soon do you expect him to wake up?"

"Why all the concern, girl? New love interest?" the doctor teased her. If looks truly had lethal potential, the glare she shot venomously at the doctor would have left him a paraplegic.

"I just want to finish the job," she told him tightly as he laughed off her poisonous gaze. "Doc, all the others we picked up on the raid have been processed and sent home, except for the one who died. A pity that. We could use more officer material, real military, not the home brew we've been having to deal with."

"Shelby, you know most of the officers in the New England area were killed months ago. That's why we use the organizational style we do."

"Disorganizational, you mean."

"The system works."

"I suppose. Anyway all the others opted to go home, those that still had a home. The rest went to live with relatives. Wimps. Not a single one of them stayed to fight."

"Not everyone has fire in their veins, girl. Most people just want a normal life."

"Normal? Did you say normal? What sort of normality can anyone have with the elves out there trying to kill us?"

"Very few believe those tales if they haven't seen it for themselves. You know that, Shelby."

"I suppose."

"Will you two keep it down?" Jared muttered just barely loud enough to be heard. He had been aware of them from the start but it took a while to fight his way to the surface of his drug-thickened slumber. "I'm tryin' to sleep."

"You should try to wake up," the doctor told him.

"Why? Is it time for a sleepy pill again?" Jared asked, feeling a little energy flow through him in spite of his lethargy.

"I think you've had enough," Doc replied like a bartender fifteen minutes before last call. "I wouldn't want you getting addicted. Aspirin only for you, dear boy, at least for a while. If it gets too bad let me know and I'll re-evaluate your situation."

"Bernie?" Jared changed the subject. "What happened to Bernie?"

"Who's Bernie?" Doc asked.

"The soldier who was in the truck. Lieutenant-Colonel Bernard Holmes. Oh. I remember now. He's dead isn't he?"

"I'm afraid so. Had been for sometime too. I'm sorry. Look, you must be starving. Literally. You haven't eaten in a couple days and from what the others told us I'm not sure you could count what the elves fed you as food. There's probably more nutritional value in a MacBurger. For all the talk about ecology and health foods those damned Point-ears spout off with, you would think they'd feed their prisoners better."

"Maybe that was the point. However, now that you mention it I am hungry. What's on the menu?"

"I'll go see what I can dredge up for you. In the meantime do you feel up to talking?"

"I feel down to sleepin'," Jared replied. "Still a bit groggy, but you're prob'ly right. I ought to wake up. Hey! Why can't I move?"

"We have you restrained. We're very busy here and there were quite a few times we had to leave you unattended for an hour or more. We certainly didn't want you falling out of bed, especially with all the work I put into you. Shelby, you may talk to him, but don't push yet. Mr. Laker, you might notice that

you're mumbling a bit." Jared nodded. "Can't be helped you took a nasty cut in the lip. I stitched it up carefully, it'll probably heal without a scar, but I don't want you to use it too much. If it starts to hurt again, or even throb too much, tell Shelby here and she'll stop questioning you." He shot a look at the woman in question which told her she had better stop when that happened. Then the doctor got up and left the small infirmary.

As his eyes followed the doctor's back Jared noticed his surroundings for the first time. He was surrounded by walls of dark green canvas - a tent. That made sense. He had probably been rescued by the Resistance, even if the U.S. government denied its existence, and the Resistance would have to be mobile. The tent had been sectioned off with other walls, some wood, and some canvas, all easily collapsible. He was still strapped in a small hospital cot, which he was finding increasingly less comfortable as he woke up. He was relieved to find no saline drip pouring itself into him. There were several other cots in this section - all empty - and a small metal desk in one corner with a sheet of plywood next to it. The plywood sheet was studded with hooks from which several clipboards had been hung. However at the moment only one clipboard had any papers attached to it.

Then Jared experienced a jolt as he focused in on the only other person in the room. Shelby was a mass of intense energy only barely contained by her skin. Her straight, dark red hair, worn fairly short, and golden eyes seemed to accentuate the impression that she was made of fire. There was a hard intensity to her and Jared immediately realized that she saw him only as a subject of her work, not as a person.

"Your ID says your name is Jared A. Laker," she said flatly. "That so?"

"Who wants to know?" Something about her set him on edge. Normally he might have found her quite attractive, but hers was the beauty of a volcano in full eruption, magnificent but hardly approachable.

"Wrong!" she told him. "I already know my name, what's yours?"

"You already know mine," Jared snapped.

"What's the 'A' stand for?"

"Anarchy."

"Don't get smart with me, Laker!"

Jared glared at her. "Then don't ask questions you aren't prepared to hear the answers to."

"Anarchy?" she asked disbelievingly.

"My folks were Libertarians. Read a little too much of Mary Ross-Byrd, so when the celebrities were naming their children 'Chastity', 'Moon', and 'Snow' mine decided on 'Anarchy'. Somewhere along the way they took pity on me and chose to make that a middle name only."

"I don't know," Shelby said thoughtfully. "Anarchy Laker has a nice ring to it."

"Yeah? What would my friends call me? Anny?"

"How about 'Archie'?"

"Without Betty and Veronica? No thanks! It's bad enough with a name like Jared."

"So what do your friends call you? Jerry?"

"No. They call me 'Jared'."

"All right, Mr. Laker, how about some of your life story?" For a brief moment, Shelby's shield of impersonality seemed to move aside and let a little friendly warmth through. Now, however, she was back to her official pose.

"What do you want to know? Where do I start?" Jared felt a faint throbbing in his lip. He decided to keep quiet about that until it got a bit worse. In the meantime he tried to pace himself.

"Start with what you do for a living and how you ended up at the tender mercies of the Point-ears," she suggested with particular vehemence that Jared hoped was directed toward the elves.

"Well, I support myself by working as a salesman at Jordan's in Swansea, although I suppose that's a bit debatable by now. What I really do is write. Fiction and poetry mostly."

"Get anything published?"

"Not much. A couple short stories in a local magazine and a few poems. Haven't made any money at it yet."

"You call that being a writer?" she scoffed.

"A writer writes," Jared replied hotly. "You'd be surprised how many people you run into who say they've been meaning to write something someday. I used to be like that too, but merely saying that you want to write doesn't get the job done. You have to finish too. Most people who start, never actually finish a piece, especially the long ones. You have to do both, start and finish, if you really want to call yourself a writer."

"And what have you finished?" Shelby asked.

"A couple novels," Jared replied, "a handful of short stories, and a few dozen poems. I even got a few of the poems in print supposedly for money, but the magazine folded up before they paid me. It's this damned war with the elves. Publishers have had to cut way back. Hell, most of them are still trying to relocate since we lost New York."

"Who has time to read these days?" Shelby shrugged.

Jared looked at her strangely. "How long have you been out here in Point-ears territory?"

"What makes you think this is enemy territory?"

"Your last comment. In human-controlled territory, life goes on almost normally, aside from all the special reports about the war efforts."

"I've never understood that," Shelby admitted. "How can the radio and television stations just keep broadcasting like that?"

"It's part of the war effort," Jared explained. "Any disturbance in the natural electromagnetic field hurts

the elves and constant broadcasts on a wide band are something they have trouble dealing with."

"We don't get many broadcasts around here."

"The experts say the elves are using their magic to block them, to give them limited areas in which they can operate comfortably. That's also why they keep attacking transmitters and the easiest way for the government to keep up the barrage is to encourage the broadcasters to keep broadcasting. Leaving receivers on is supposed to help too, but most people can't afford the electricity to run something they aren't using even with the government supplements. I'll say one thing, though. TV has gotten much less interesting since we lost L.A. over a year ago. There have been a few new shows from out of Chicago, but they seem like amateur productions."

"War is hell," Shelby muttered sarcastically. "So how'd you end up with the elves?"

"I was on a picnic with a few friends in a nearby park, when the Point-ears pulled off a raid."

"On a picnic?" Shelby asked coldly. Her tone indicated her low opinion of him. "During a war you were having a picnic?"

"Life goes on," Jared remarked matching her tone, "even in a war. Besides there had been no reported elf activity in the area for months. We weren't the only ones there. There were several groups, mostly families."

"What happened to everyone else?"

"About half were killed immediately when they either tried to defend themselves or ran for their lives. Elves don't have much sympathy for anything other than exact compliance."

"And you just gave up and groveled for your life?"

Jared curled his lip at the woman, eyes stabbing hatred toward her. "Wrong! None of us just gave up. I think a few who ran might have gotten away, but the rest of us did what we could."

"And what was that?"

"Bloody little, I'll admit. The state government, or whatever is left of it insists on enforcing a ban on all handguns, and the local authorities are paranoid about granting new licenses for hunting weapons, so it's almost impossible for the average citizen to legally carry the one sort of weapon that would be most effective. One of my friends had a hunting license before the war and brought his rifle with him. He managed to take out three of the little freaks before they got him. All I had was an Arkansas toothpick - not legally kosher but tolerated. It didn't do me a lot of good though. I never got close enough to use it. After my friend and a man in the park started shooting, the Point-ears started tossing spells at us. I managed to avoid a falling tree knocked over by an explosive spell only to expose myself to another spell that put me to sleep."

"The next thing I knew, I was being taken north along with a dozen others, none of whom I knew. I'm not sure where they took us. We were not usually allowed to see outside the trucks and vans they carried us in, but I got a peak every now and then. We were brought somewhere into the Boston area. I know that because I was able to see the Hancock and Prudential buildings. After that we were split up."

"I spent the next few days, or nights rather, being moved from one site to another. They always moved

me at night. I think it was so I wouldn't know where I was. Each time they moved me a new bunch of guards, both elf and human, got to 'educate' me."

"Educate?" Shelby asked, interested in spite of herself.

"Yeah. Each bunch seemed to feel it necessary to teach me what would happen if I made trouble for them while in their custody. One or two beatings a day became almost a habit but one I was quite willing to break. Finally after a week or so they threw me in the same cell with Bernie.

"He was in bad shape. I couldn't see what I was doing very well, but I did my best to clean and dress his wounds. For a while I thought it might have helped, but I guess not. Well, after three days in that hole, we were moved again, this time with the others who were in that truck. Bernie thought our next stop would be a major prison camp in New Hampshire."

"Camp Goodfellow?" Shelby supplied the name.

"That's the one. You know it?"

"There was a major prison break recently, an attempt rather. Most of the prisoners were recaptured, but a few managed to hook up with us. Was Bernie at Camp Goodfellow?"

"So he said. Claimed he was the one who masterminded the escape."

"Damn!"

"What?"

"We could have used him. The few who managed to escape from that prison camp told us about him. An excellent leader. He kept the morale up among the prisoners for over a year while working toward a truly effective escape attempt, rather than allowing them to use up their energy on useless, quixotic attempts."

"From what you say, his attempt wasn't too successful either."

"But it was well planned. He just wasn't aware of all the elves' magical capabilities. With our knowledge and his capabilities, we could have booted the Point-ears out of New England, maybe all of America."

"Why not the rest of the world?"

"One step at a time, Laker. There are other groups like ours overseas. Could be that they'll succeed before we do and they'll come to help us. In the meantime our job is to kick the elves out of New England. After that we'll see what else needs doing."

"Fair enough."

Shelby waited a few minutes before asking her next question. In the uncomfortably silent interval she tried to size Jared up. Would he have the necessary spark? Would he stay and fight or opt to go home and let someone else do his fighting? "None of your companions wished to stay here, but we make this offer to all former prisoners of the elves," she began. She was, in fact, very proud of the neutral tone she managed to maintain rather than show her disgust for those who would not stay. Such a display could unduly affect a potential recruit's decision. If the effect was negative, then they would lose a valuable

fighter for the cause, but if it was positive then they would have a new recruit who might not be totally committed. Either way was potential disaster. General orders commanded that recruits be presented with the choice with as little bias as possible. Shelby followed orders and followed them well, not with unthinking obedience, but with a creative flair that had brought her far within the Resistance. "Will you stay and fight with us? Will you join the Resistance?"

Jared considered the offer. "Bernie told me something while we were together. He wanted to live and pay the Point-ears back. He didn't make it and I suppose someone ought to take up the fight for him, but I also have family and friends at home. People I care about and who care about me. Further, they don't know what happened to me or to the others at the picnic. I need to let them know I am all right and what happened to the others. I can't just lightly leave all that behind."

"There may be a chance to send a message back across enemy lines," Shelby told him, still keeping her voice unemotional.

"Right away or sometime in the future?" Shelby shrugged an answer to his question. "That's what I thought. I'll need some time to think about it."

Shelby's reply was halted by the return of the doctor accompanied by a tall, muscular man Jared had not yet met. The doctor held a tray with the promised breakfast on it, but the other man carried a clipboard as though it were a weapon. Shelby stood at attention immediately.

"That him?" the unfamiliar man asked the doctor abruptly as they entered the tent.

"Yes, general," Doc replied flatly.

"Jared A. Laker," the general said with out preamble, "you are under arrest for crimes against mankind."

Four

"What?" Jared asked helplessly. In response the general threw a newspaper a newspaper at him. Jared managed to get his good arm up before the rolled-up slab of newsprint slammed into his face. He uncurled it and stared in disbelief at the front page.

"LAKER GUILTY!" the banner headline read. He quickly read through the story. He had been tried in absentia. According to the story, witnesses at the Freetown State Forest picnic area claimed that he had collaborated with the elvish raiding party. Supposedly he had lead the elves to this perfect opportunity for terrorism and had been seen fighting at their sides shouting various Greenpeace slogans. It was a complete fiction, but the court had bought it, found him guilty, and sentenced him to death.

"Don't I get to defend myself?" Jared asked desperately.

"The Resistance doesn't have the time for lengthy trials, Laker," General Harry Lee Grimes replied. "You've already been tried and found guilty."

"But I didn't do it!"

"There are prisons full of people who say that," Grimes told him predictably.

"And every so often they're telling the truth," Jared snapped back. "I ought to get an appeal at least. You have to admit that my own testimony would be additional evidence."

"He's right, sir," Shelby added. "He should have the chance to give his side of the story."

"What's it to you Shelby?" Grimes asked. "In love?"

"With him?" she spat. "Not hardly. But what he's told me so far differs sufficiently from the charges."

"Charges to which he's already been found guilty," Doc pointed out blandly. Jared couldn't tell where he stood on the matter. The general was downright hostile and he was certain that Shelby was only defending him out of a devotion to her own ideals. Certainly she hadn't shown him any warmth he had noticed so far. Doc, on the other hand, had been warm toward him from the start and had not shown any change in behavior as he had given Jared his breakfast tray.

"Without being present to defend himself," Shelby replied. "We may be working under war-time conditions, but we have to give him a chance to present his side of the story before we shoot him."

I was right, Jared thought to himself, She's only being fair by her own lights.

The general held his hands up for silence and considered what they had said. "All right, Laker," Grimes said at last. "I'll give you the chance to defend yourself, but I'll warn you right now that you will be tried by a military court of the Resistance, not a civilian court. We don't have the time for that nonsense. You will be interrogated by a tribunal of officers in two hours. You have the choice between whether we use drugs or not. Tell Dr. Holloway what your choice is. Good day." Grimes turned on his heels and marched quickly out of the infirmary tent.

Once he was gone Shelby's fairness vanished as she looked at Jared with slightly less respect than she might give a latrine. The latrine, her eyes told him, at least had a use. "He's all yours, Doc," she said coldly and followed Grimes out the door.

"Ah, the rewards of duty," Doc sighed.

"Excuse me?" Jared asked.

"What you just saw was a well-rehearsed scene, not that they planned it, mind you. It's just that we've been through this sort of thing several times these last two years. The only difference is that Shelby and I traded roles this time around. Normally I'm the one talking about a fair trial and Shelby is playing devil's advocate. The general, however, is always in favor of a quick execution. I'm not sure why Shelby leaped to your defense there, but she did. My own comment was more a dig at her than an attack on you. Unlike Shelby and the general, I heard you talking in your sleep, and having heard some of the things you said I doubt you're a traitor to mankind."

"That's comforting to know."

"Not really. I can't testify. Well, actually I can, but the drug-induced ramblings of a wounded man are more than likely to be discounted by the tribunal."

"Drugs," Jared said questioningly. "General Grimes said something about using drugs?"

Doc looked distinctly uncomfortable. "You haven't eaten much of that yet," he said pointing at the breakfast tray.

"It's not the most appetizing glop, Doc. What are these? Grits?"

"Good guess for a Yankee," Doc replied. "Yes. They're a favorite of the general and somehow he managed to have a large personal stock. I think that's why he was so gruff with you. He doesn't like the idea of my giving his food to a possible traitor, but I hit him with the old medical emergency excuse. He doesn't have to like it though."

"But I hate grits."

"Can't please everybody. I'll try to get you something a little more substantial for your next meal. We don't have much to choose from here. This was the closest I could come to a suitable first meal after enforced fast. Eat up, it's getting cold. Here, let me freshen that coffee for you."

"Doc," Jared said after the man had returned with a hot cup of coffee, "you didn't answer my question."

"You noticed that, did you? Well, as the general said, we don't spend a lot of time with trials. You'll be given the chance to tell your side of the story and then the tribunal will decide whether or not they believe you."

"And the drugs?"

"Well you have the choice between being interrogated under the influence of one or more of various inhibition reducing drugs, or just testifying on your word of honor."

"You mean they'll give me some sort of truth serum before questioning me?"

"You got it," Doc replied uncomfortably.

"No lie detectors?"

"They can't be used here. The elves can detect any use of electricity because it disturbs the natural electro-magnetic field. They are very sensitive to that."

"So it seems to me," Jared said thoughtfully, "that my story is likely to be accepted if I testify under the drugs."

"That is so."

"But you don't want me to?"

"I don't like administering such drugs to anyone."

"How likely are they to believe me if I don't use drugs?"

"Not very," Doc Holloway admitted reluctantly. "Look, son, this isn't like getting drunk. The drugs we

have are dangerous and very difficult to administer properly. This isn't like the movies. I could probably work with sodium pentathol safely, but we don't have any."

"Doc," Jared said after an uncomfortable moment, "the way I see it, I don't have much choice. If I testify under the drugs I might die, but I'll almost definitely be killed if I refuse your truth drugs."

"That too is true," Doc told him solemnly. "I just cannot recommend them."

"Well, I choose them anyway."

"Very well, I will tell the general," Doc replied as he turned to leave the infirmary. "Oh, by the way," he called from the door, "that lip of yours is looking a bit inflamed. Better give it a rest. God knows it won't get much rest during your trial."

Then Jared found himself alone in the tent still strapped into his cot. He shrugged and forced down the rest of his grits. Afterward, still feeling some residual grogginess from the pain killers, he surprised himself by being able to fall asleep.

It was raining outside when he woke up. He found the gentle arhythmic patter against the canvas roof soothing, until the binding straps of his bed reminded him of his predicament. A gust of warm damp air flowed across him as the door to the infirmary opened and General Grimes entered with Shelby and another man.

"Laker, this is Captain Rymut," Grimes said introducing the stern-faced man beside him. "You already know Captain Shelby."

Captain Shelby? Jared thought, surprised.

"We'll be your tribunal," the general continued. "Are you ready?"

"Yes, sir. I am." Jared answered simply.

"Good." Grimes didn't sound as though this was good at all. "Dr. Holloway has informed me that you will testify under the influence of our truth drugs. Is this so?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right. I want you to read and sign this waiver." Grimes handed him a clipboard and a pen. "It states that you are submitting willingly to this interrogation, are fully cognizant of the risks involved, and undertake them willingly."

Jared read the waiver and it said, in unnaturally clear legalese, exactly what the general claimed it did. As he read, Doc entered the room with a nurse and a carefully prepared case of syringes and vials. Jared shuddered a bit as he saw the tools of Doc's profession, but signed the waiver and handed it and the pen back to the waiting general.

"Roll up your sleeve, please," Doc requested.

"Would it be too much to ask to sit up for a moment first?" Jared countered. "These straps are a bit tight."

Doc looked at Grimes who nodded microscopically. "Sure," Doc replied, releasing the straps across Jared's chest and waist. There was still one across his thighs, but he was able to sit up with a little help. Jared stretched as best he could and then allowed Doc to inject a clear fluid into his arm. "This is fairly fast acting, but it will still take a few minutes."

"While we're waiting," Jared commented, "I could use a bed pan."

"We can do better than that," Grimes replied. "Captain Rymut and the doctor here can help you to the chemical toilet."

After all that time on his back Jared would, indeed, have needed help to get to a small unit in the next room even if he had not sprained his ankle. By the time he was done he was starting to feel clumsy. Doc told him that was one of the effects of the drug and that he probably wouldn't remember much of anything from then on.

Doc was right. Jared remembered being assisted back onto his cot and General Grimes asking the first round of questions. After that he only remembered the experience as a vaguely pleasant conversation with three good friends during which Doc would occasionally shoot another dose of drugs into his arm.

The drug did not put him to sleep. In fact it was mildly stimulating and hallucinogenic. After the tribunal left, only Doc and the nurse remained in the tent. Jared talked to them too. They didn't have to ask him questions. Once he had started, there was no stopping him. He spoke about his life, his hopes, and goals. He discussed deep philosophical issues and at one point tried to play a game of boardless chess. That didn't work too well as his mental image of the board kept turning into a Pachisi board. A very pretty wooden one made of rock maple with the lines neatly milled into the surface. But the dice that came with this imaginary board had no pips and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't roll a "5" in order to bring out one of his pieces. Doc, on the other hand, seemed to roll nothing but fives, but Jared thought he was cheating.

Somewhere in the back of all this, Jared knew that this was an hallucinogenic high that some of his friends back in college would have traded their tuition money for, but that thought kept itself floating on the periphery of his conscience along with the hopes that the gunk in his veins was not addictive. All thoughts of the tribunal, however, seemed to have been banished for the time being.

Eventually the parade was over and Jared, no longer sustained by the stimulant barely finished the green and pink, lemon and mint flavored goo that Doc assured him was just ordinary grits before falling asleep.

The first thing he saw when his eyes opened the next morning was Shelby's face watching him intently. Captain Shelby, he reminded himself. Jared thought she was beautiful, although he felt her hair was too short. However it was the beauty of a statue - cold and aloof. She never seemed to smile or to let her guard down. Jared found himself wondering what she would look like with a smile on the arctic landscape of her face.

"Good morning, Mr. Laker," she said in a pleasant contralto - still no smile.

The words echoed poundingly through his head and he snapped his eyes painfully shut. As the shock waves rolled back and forth through his cranium a single thought surfaced through that mental storm. "Oh my head!" he whispered.

"Here," Shelby said a little more softly. "Doc said you should drink this as soon as you woke up."

Jared accepted the large cup filled with a pale lime-green liquid suspiciously. "What is it?" he asked.

"Gatorade. The drug is an intense diarrhetic. You've lost a lot of water. Drink." Jared did and found that it tasted better than it looked. He imagined that he felt the liquid replenishing his body immediately, but decided that was more in his mind than his body. "They say that stuff tastes good if you really need it." Shelby commented.

"It's true," Jared assured her after chugging the pint.

"I'll take your word for it. I've never needed it that bad."

"Any chance of an aspirin for my head?"

"Not until after breakfast. Doc noticed you stirring a while ago and went to get you something. He should be back any moment now."

"Not more grits," Jared groaned.

"No. The general's private stock is safe once more. Doc says you should be up to soft-boiled eggs and toast this morning. I can give you coffee if you like."

"Please." Jared watched as she walked over to the coffee pot. When she came back, she helped him sit up. "I'm not strapped in anymore," he noticed.

"Of course not," Shelby replied. "You passed the test. The tribunal found you not guilty. If we hadn't you'd be dead now."

"Not even a last meal?" Jared asked, having nearly choked on his first sip of coffee.

"We don't waste supplies on proven traitors," she said flatly. He stared at her a moment and then shrugged. He was still alive and with a lot of luck might stay that way. "So that brings us back to the question I asked you yesterday. Will you go home or stay and fight?"

"If I go home, I'm still likely to be shot on sight as a traitor."

"There is that possibility. We will give you a copy of the findings of the tribunal."

"A note that is not likely to be read until after I'm dead."

"Good point. We can send word of our findings to your local court so it can reverse its findings."

"All right, but that will take time. I suppose when you do that I can also send a few personal notes to family and friends?" Shelby nodded. "Like I told you yesterday, somebody has to pick up the fight for Bernie and it seems that the torch has been passed to me. I'm not sure I could live with myself if I just extinguished it and went home. I have to stay for a while anyway. How long before I'm up and about?"

"A week and a half, two weeks for the ankle," Shelby told him. "That cast on your arms will be there about a month or so and another couple weeks until you reach full strength in your arm."

"That long? Ouch. I've never broken anything before."

"Well, we can start briefing you on the way we work this afternoon if you like, and you can help with the paperwork in a few days. That's a standard chore here for those with minor wounds and it will free up a healthy man or woman. But don't worry, we'll have you on the front lines as soon as possible."

"We have a front? I thought we were operating behind the lines."

"Just an expression. Many of our tactics are guerilla in nature, straight from the pages of Che Guevara." As Jared let that sink in, trying to remember what he read on that subject in college so long ago, Shelby said one more thing just before breakfast arrived. "Welcome to the Resistance, Mr. Laker."

ii. And Into the Fire

One

There was no basic training in the Resistance. You either lived or died while learning the job. Jared received more advanced training than most because his broken arm kept him pushing paper at headquarters. He wasn't sure what sort of organization he expected, but this wasn't it.

"There are exactly three ranks in the Resistance," Shelby had told him, "privates, captains, and generals."

"That's it?" Jared had asked. "Then who's this guy who filed a report calling himself Squad Leader Jones?"

"Squad Leader is a job description not a rank. We have squad leaders, group leaders, and what-not, but the rank is still private. This isn't the army, Laker. Rank here is the determining factor as to how much you get told about what's going on. Generals know everything we learn. Privates are told only what they need to know to accomplish their missions. Captains are somewhere in between. We get told whatever the general thinks we need to know in order to advise him, which is mostly everything, but even we only know the codes from one day to the next."

Jared didn't buy it and a couple weeks after Doc had allowed him out of the infirmary he discovered that the daily codes were about the only true secrets around. General Grimes might not release intelligence to the troops, but nobody stopped people from talking. His intelligence came from the squad leaders' reports, but everyone else knew whatever their buddies told them, which was considerable. As in any group of people, there was an extensive system of "scuttlebutt". Rumors were rampant and often mutually conflicting, but the average person's basic knowledge of the situation seemed sound.

The lack of security shocked Jared at first, but he remembered a lesson from an introductory anthropology class he had taken once. There were two types of cultural models: 1) the model of the way things were supposed to work and 2) the actual way they worked. So here too, there were the official channels and the unofficial ones. Both worked quite well when kept in balance. Jared knew better than to rock the boat.

What he could not deal with was the utter chaos in the offices of headquarters. Whoever had set up what passed for a filing system had to have been semi-literate at best - the sort who would file his lunch

under "S" for sandwich. Headquarters didn't run smoothly, but it coped well with a bad situation.

Jared knew the old army axiom about never volunteering, but had not yet learned that in the Resistance pointing out a problem was the best way to get assigned to it, so when he complained about the files to Office Captain Watney, he merely shrugged and told him, "Well, fix it."

Fix it he did and by the time Doc certified him as one hundred percent, he had the files in reasonable order, had even written a small manual which clearly defined where everything was and should be, and knew more about the inner workings of the New England area Resistance than anyone else except General Grimes himself. In the field, however, he was an utter novice.

A recruit's first assignment was to acquire a weapon. Jared was given no instruction as to how to get one and by asking around he learned that the most common way was to pick one up off a fallen Greenpeace activist while on the first mission. Jared's blood ran cold at the thought of going out unarmed. The only weapon he had was the pair of boots Bernie had bequeathed him and he doubted that the bars of iron in the heels would be of much use except as a surprise tactic - something to be held back for maximum effect.

He looked through the files and discovered that the resistance had a small, badly stocked armory. Most of the weapons were assault weapons for specific uses and were assigned to a unit for the duration of a mission that needed them. The paperwork that was necessary to get something from the armory was formidable, but by that time he was well versed in the system.

Jared didn't need to own a personal bazooka or a mortar. He certainly didn't want to carry an ancient cannon around with him, but he did need a personal weapon. The only personal weapons that he could find were a small collection of .22 pistols. He spent the requisite three hours filling out the needed forms and then brought them to Shelby, whose authorization he needed for even so much as a slingshot.

"A .22, Laker?" Shelby asked amazed. "Why in God's name would you want a .22? Too many mice in the dorm?"

"Captain," he began reasonably.

"Shelby," she corrected him. "Only the general calls us by our ranks."

"Shelby then, Is that a first or last name?"

"None of your business," she snapped.

"Sorry. Anyway, if you think I'm going out on my first mission without so much as a boy scout knife to protect me, you've got another thing coming."

"But a .22?"

"It seemed a better choice than the battering ram and I wasn't sure if I'd be able to replace a grenade. We do have to replace anything we take out you know."

"What good will such a small pistol be?"

"It's enough to give me the ability, however limited, to defend myself until I can acquire something better. Did you know we have a forty-five percent attrition rate among our rookies?"

"I'm aware of that, yes," Shelby replied tightly.

"Why do you think that is? The lack of training? The lack of weapons? Correct on both counts! Well, I can't do much about the training part, but I'll be damned if I go out without some sort of weapon."

"Oh all right. Here," she said, signing the triplicated forms, "get yourself a pea-shooter too if you want. Then again there's not much difference." She laughed mirthlessly at her own joke. Jared thanked her and trotted off to the armory.

The old man in charge of the armory hadn't ever seen the forms Jared used, most green recruits found it easier to break off a tree branch to use as a club or find a rock to throw, but after a protracted argument allowed Jared to have the weapon he asked for. He even got a case of ammunition that he didn't have to sign for.

There was no practice range. General Grimes had made it a court-martial offense to fire a weapon uselessly. Jared appealed to him on the basis that no shot fired in practice was ever truly useless, but Grimes refused the request.

With only an hour before he was to leave on his first foray, Jared realized that he knew practically nothing about guns, nor whether this one would work, but a large muscular man named Otis, who looked as though he'd have been more at home on the beaches of Malibu, helped him inspect the gun. Together they found the barrel was unreasonably dirty, but the firing pin was intact and a little cleaning and oiling brought the gun up to spec.

"When you find a real gun," Otis told him laughingly, "bring it and I'll show you how to take care of that too."

Two

Finally the time came to leave. Jared was not the only rookie on the team. Dennis was just a kid in his late teens, but the Resistance didn't ask that sort of question. They were too desperate for anyone willing to fight. From what Jared could tell, he had run away from his nice safe home just outside of human-occupied Springfield in order to join the cause and fight the evil, aggressor elves. Unlike most Resistance novices, Dennis came equipped with his own gun. Jared suspected it was his father's hunting rifle, but it was better than a .22 pistol or a two-inch long bar of iron.

There were five others in their party including Shelby, three men and one other woman, all of whom had been out before and were armed with Greenpeace-issue M-25e's, slightly older, although more reliable versions of the weapons Bernie's men had been armed with. The other woman also wore a .38 revolver in a holster on her hip, and one of the men carried five custom-made knives, or so he claimed. Jared was only able to spot four of them.

Shelby carried an alternative weapon as well - a bullwhip with steel tips on the leather blades. Nasty. The weapon, assuming she knew how to use it, and Jared never doubted that for a moment, could do a great

deal of harm to a man, but would be utterly devastating to an elf.

"Our mission tonight," Shelby told them quietly, "will be to find a good ambush place along Route 128 and wait for a truck or convoy conveying goods for the Point-ears. We will then attack and thereby disrupt their supply system. We are also to take anything that may be of value to the Resistance."

"God!" swore one of the women, a square-jawed brunette named Jean. "Another scavenging raid? When is Grimsey going to send us out on a real mission?"

"Shut up, Jean!" Shelby snapped. Two of the men muttered agreement. "You've been around long enough to know better. And if any of the rest of you agree with Jean here, I'll say this much, but only once. After that you're out. General Grimes has been conducting an excellent campaign against the elves and the results prove it. Every successful mission cuts a fresh wound into the enemy. If the general felt that now was the time to conduct a major raid, he'd tell us. As one of his captains I can assure you that now is not the time."

"I keep hearing that," Jean replied challengingly. "If not now, when?"

"Ask the general!" Shelby snapped back. "Maybe he'll tell you, but I won't." Jean glared fiercely at her captain. "Jean, if you want out, just say so."

"I'm the best," Jean replied, patting the revolver at her hip. "You need me and you know it."

"You're good," Shelby acknowledged with deceptive ease, "but I have no need for any prima donnas on this team. You think you know better, then go talk to the general maybe he'll give you the promotion you think you deserve, but it won't come with my recommendation, not if you're going start throwing snits. This is a team and we all depend on each other. Now are you going to be part of the team?"

Jean glared at Shelby and the two locked eyes. Finally Jean backed down. "Yes, ma'am. You're the boss," she acknowledged.

Shelby let the matter drop. "Let's go," she said instead.

Route 128 had been called "America's Technology Highway" back before Silicon Valley was a twinkle in someone's eye. Later as high technology became a mega-business the word "highway" was changed to "region" as the trend toward decentralization came to mean that all the manufacturers would move out of the tightly packed center of Boston and relocate, just as tightly packed, in the suburbs. The road itself snaked better than half way around the city in classic ring-road fashion and was one of the few such that had stood until just before the elfish coup without a red, white, and blue interstate number sticking up out of the shoulder at predictable intervals. The road was a three-mile walk from the base camp.

"Inside?" Jared asked when they arrived. "Headquarters camp is situated inside '128'?"

"Where else?" Jean replied scornfully. "Did you think we were holed up in the Berkshires?"

"But we're practically in the city."

"Not hardly," Mark, the man with the knives, cut in. "The Hub is a good seven or eight miles away from base."

"The Hub?" a thin blond man asked with a heavy Texas accent.

"That's right, Jim," Mark replied. "I keep forgetting you're not from around here. "The 'Hub' is one of the nicknames for Boston . If you look at a map, you'll notice that the basic road system in southeastern New England is built like a series of concentric circles with spokes. Boston is at the center of the formation - the Hub. The formation goes way back, even the old country roads follow the pattern as far out as two hundred miles."

"Keep it down," Shelby snapped out of the darkness of the moonless night. "A girl can't hear herself think. I want to make sure we didn't take any wrong turns." She pulled a map out of her bag and a mini-magnum flashlight. Jared caught the green and orange logo of a regional supermarket chain on the map's cover. Edging closer he noticed that someone had made dozens of additional notations on it with a thick red marker. It wasn't a military map, but it was good enough for this sort of operation. "Good," she said at last. "We're in the right place."

"How can you tell?" Dennis asked.

"See that exit sign across the way? It's for the Route 2 exit. If we'd taken the wrong branch in the path a mile back we'd have been too far north to see it. Jean, there should be a rest area with an abandoned Hojo's and a gas station about a quarter mile south of here. Take Dennis with you and check it out to see if there's been any activity lately."

"I can move faster on mine own," Jean objected.

"I'm sure you can, but he needs the experience and a second pair of eyes will help."

Jean considered that and nodded. "C'mon, rook!" she called him. "Let's see how fast you can do the silent quarter-mile." Pretty fast it turned out and they were soon out of sight. Everyone else was quiet for a while.

"Seems strange," Mark commented nodding toward the dark and empty highway. "It wasn't all that long ago that this road was never empty. Now look at it. We've been here ten minutes or better now without a single vehicle within sight." There were sounds of agreement.

"If it wasn't this empty," one of the other men replied, "we'd never be able to pull this off. As it is there's always the chance that there won't be anyone on the road tonight."

"What do we do if that happens?" Jared asked.

"We go back to base and try again tomorrow night," Shelby told him matter of factly.

"Just what are we looking for" Jared asked a few minutes later. "More prisoners?"

"No offense, friend," Mark replied, "but rescuing prisoners from a transport is a pain. There are always injuries, usually caused by our own efforts, and tonight we don't have Doc with us."

"Jean is a good paramedic though," Shelby admitted reluctantly. "Just don't tell her I said so. She is one of the best we have and if she ever gets that ego of hers muzzled she will get that promotion to captain she wants."

"Right," Mark agreed, "but as to your question, Laker, no we don't really want to rescue prisoners tonight although none of us would hesitate to do so if the opportunity presents itself. Prisoners require

medical attention and of the entire lot we found you with, only you stayed to fight with us."

"And that was mostly because I couldn't go home. I wish I could honestly say I was here because of my promise to Colonel Holmes, but that was such a small part of my decision."

"That's good!" an older man said, sticking out his hand toward Jared. "Nathan Hayes. Call me Nate. It wouldn't be healthy for you to be here for someone else's reasons. You need your own reasons to fight."

"I'm not sure if staying because I can't leave is all that great a reason," Jared pointed out.

"Maybe not," Nate agreed, "but it's your own. Look, kid, I've been with the Resistance from the start - I was in Cambridge during the coup. In the past two years I've seen a lot of friends come and go and I've heard all sorts of reasons to fight, but the ones who seem to die for the cause first are the ones who are here because of someone else's reasons. That's too distracting, I say. You're too busy in the clench thinking about what the person you're fighting for would think of you. No, kid, you gotta be here for yourself first and foremost, and worry about what others might think when your life isn't on the line."

"Sh!" Shelby cut off any other comments. "I hear someone coming." All talking stopped immediately as the party listened to the sounds of approaching footsteps. Weapons were brought to the ready and were aimed in that general direction.

"Hiya, boys!" Jean greeted them in a low, sexy voice as she came into sight. "Glad to see me?"

"Where's Dennis?" Shelby asked shortly.

"Left him back at the rest area. By the way it wasn't a Hojo's, but a multi-junk food plaza - burgers, chicken, donuts, and frozen yogurt and it didn't look completely abandoned either."

"It used to be a Howard John son's a few years ago," Nate put in.

"Well the roof over the gas station is still orange," Jean admitted.

"Why is Dennis still back there?" Shelby insisted.

"Jackpot!" Jean replied. "Remember how we emptied the gas tanks about a year ago? Well, they're full again, and somebody neatened up the restaurant. The gas grills are clean and the electrical coolers and freezers have been replaced with gas-powered models."

"So why did you leave Dennis there?"

"While we were checking the place out he noticed some approaching headlights. We ducked out the back door and made it to the woods just as a three-truck convoy pulled in to the station. We all know that we're not equipped to take that many vehicles if they're moving, but if we could ambush them while they're still in the station, we can take all three intact and drive them back to camp to boot. Not bad?"

"Excellent!" Shelby replied with a predatory gleam in her eyes. "How many men were there in the trucks?"

"Only six, Greenpeace uniforms on every one of them," Jean said with the same blood-thirsty attitude Shelby exhibited. Jared noticed that and winced. "We'll take them by surprise. It'll be over in minutes."

"We don't know how long they're going to stay there though. We might miss them in the time it takes to get there."

"Maybe not," Jim drawled. "What sort of fuel are they using. Diesel? I thought so. Used to drive a semi before I fell in with you all. Diesel fuel foams a lot. If they're topping off, they'll be there a while waiting for the bubbles to die down so they can fill the tanks completely. Maybe long enough for us to catch 'em with their pants down."

"Good enough for me," Shelby said decisively. "Let's move out."

They found Dennis near the edge of the woods that surrounded the service area. One of the trucks was parked at the gas pumps with a man filling its gas tank. The other two were unloading something into the back of the restaurant.

"What's going on, Dennis?" Shelby asked.

"Those two," he indicated the trucks that were being unloaded, "have already topped off their tanks. I don't think they were very empty. Five of the people who came in on the trucks are unloading them. You can see the sixth by the third truck."

"You can see all that from here?"

"Naw, I've been moving around a bit. There's a good spot just behind that light pole where you can get some good shots off into the backs of the trucks."

"Any idea of what they're unloading here?"

"No, ma'am. Small boxes, large boxes, heavy ones, light ones. There ain't much light so I couldn't read the markings."

"Hmm," Shelby considered it. "What ever's going on, it's a major change in activities. You're right, Jean. We have hit the jackpot. When I give the word, take Dennis and Jim and go to that spot near the light post Dennis just mentioned. Mark, think you can take the one at the pumps quietly?"

"Piece a cake," Mark replied.

"All right. Take Nate for back up, but give Jean and her team the time to get into place. Jean, wait until someone else starts shooting before you go into action. Okay? I want Mark to get his target without alerting the others. However if something goes wrong I don't want to lose the element of surprise. If you hear shots fired, that's your signal. Mark, after you and Nate take your target, circle around the gas station and pick off any one who tries to run out the front door, but don't shoot until they actually leave the building. Everyone else, remember the light is awful here, whatever you do, don't go out the front of the restaurant. Any questions?"

"What are you going to do?" Mark asked before Jean could.

"Laker and I," she emphasized Jared's name, "will wait here. We have a good view of both the back door and the gas pumps. I'll know if and when you and Nate are successful and can pick the right time to start shooting. This is also a good place to set up a cross-fire from. Anything else? Good. Move out." A moment later Jared found himself alone with Shelby.

Jared took a brief glance at the man at the gas pumps and then turned his full attention to the men unloading the other two trucks. One, two, three, he counted to himself, four, and five. Six and seven? Oops!

"You're an odd one, Laker," Shelby's cold whisper cut through his thoughts.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Most novices on their first mission are busy asking, 'What now?'. You aren't doing that."

"I've been helping debrief others as they came in from their missions," he replied without taking his eyes off the restaurant's open back door. "You might say I've managed to learn a bit from their mistakes. Asking a lot of unnecessary questions is a good way to come back dead, especially since I'm only armed with this 'pea shooter' as you called it. Speaking of which, Jean and Dennis counted wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"So far I've seen seven different people going in and out of the trucks. There may be still more working only inside. Whoops, there's number eight."

"They must have been riding in the back of one of the trucks," Shelby concluded.

"That would be my guess. Nine and ten. Slightly bigger than we thought, hmm? Eleven."

"Damn. Maybe a little too big."

"We do have surprise on our side. Twelve and... No, I've seen him before. Twelve."

"Stop that."

"Sorry. At the moment there are four known in the backs of the trucks and eight inside, maybe more."

"Are they going back and forth at an even rate?"

"No they seem to go in clumps. I've counted as many as eight outside the building at once."

"Jean has got to have noticed the extras by now," Shelby considered. "She may send someone back. Damn! She may also decide to go for the glory and stay in place unless I come to get her."

"Let's assume the latter," Jared suggested.

"What makes you say that?"

"She just seems the type."

"You're probably right. If she stays put, there aren't that many extra men working. Counted any more?"

"No. Twelve is all. There may be some working only in the trucks or in the building. If you want my best guess, I would say there are probably from fifteen to twenty, counting the guy at the pumps."

"Don't count him anymore," Shelby commented grimly. "Mark just took him out. How many outside the building now?"

"Five."

"All right," Shelby paused to do a quick mental calculation. "We start shooting when there are eight again. That six?"

"Uh huh," Jared confirmed. "Now it's four," he said as two went back inside.

Another minute passed and finally there were seven men known to be outside. "Come on!" Shelby said nervously. Just as she said it two more left the building making it nine caught outside. "That's nine!" she hissed. "Open fire."

Shelby suited her actions to her words and the night woke up to the rudest of alarms as she fired her M-25e, spraying steel-jacketed death at the two men just entering the doorway. Almost immediately more shots were heard from Jean's position, two sets of rhythmic bursts punctuated by the slightly off-key roar of Dennis' hunting gun. Jared didn't expect his little .22 pistol to do any good, but he fired it in the general direction of anything that moved in the lighted doorway. A moment later the light went out and only the flash of gunfire gave him a target to aim at. Unfortunately that helped to even the odds.

"Stop shooting!" Shelby commanded him. "You're only giving them our position. Wait until you see them."

"In this light?"

"The moon's up now," Shelby pointed out. "Still a bit low, but there's enough light to see by. Just let your eyes adjust after all the fireworks. Jean and her boys are still firing anyway. There's one!" She fired a quick burst, this time missing her target.

"What now?" Jared asked. "Rush the building?"

"And get cut down by our own people?" Shelby shot back disgustedly.

"I was thinking of going through the side door."

"There is no door on this side and Jean's covering the one on the other side."

"There is now," Jared replied firing the small pistol at the plate glass window. A fair collection of cracks appeared in the glass, but it essentially stayed in place. "Damn!"

"I think you meant to do this," Shelby smiled, firing a burst from her M-25e. The window dissolved. "We have got to get you a better weapon!"

"I see a few over there," Jared replied, surprising himself by the casualness of the remark.

"Don't be so hasty," Shelby laughed. "There may be a better selection inside. Cover me and then follow at my signal." Without waiting to see if Jared had any questions, Shelby took off, furtively making her way across the narrow open pavement between their position and the wall beside the newly opened window. Jared fired a few half-hearted shots toward the open doorway and was rewarded with a burst of muted automatic gunfire and the sound of shredding vegetation overhead for his efforts.

Something odd about that sound, like it wasn't loud enough, Jared thought. Then he shelved the thought as a dangerous distraction. A twin burst of gunfire sprouted out from Jean's position accompanied by the single roar from Dennis' rifle and the man with the strange weapon fell to the ground. Shelby waved then and it was Jared's turn to make the crossing.

He launched himself out from under the nest of leaves and branches that had settled on him and ran a zig-zag course more or less imitating the route Shelby had taken. There was more gunfire going off as he ran. Some of it from the window Shelby had destroyed. He dived for the pavement and rolled to his left and then got up and ran again.

"Nice moves," Shelby commented dryly as he reached the wall. "You'll have to tell me what the circus tumbles were in aid of."

"Anything to keep from getting hit," Jared said, gasping for breath.

"The shots were mine. I was firing into the window to cover you."

"Oh."

Shelby fired blindly into the window again then said, "We haven't the time to discuss this, just follow my lead."

Together they crouched beneath the ruptured window and then took turns getting up to see what they were shooting at. After a minute there was no sign of life inside and Shelby jumped up and into the restaurant. Jared stayed at the window while she made her way to the kitchen door.

There was nobody in sight in the front part of the restaurant, but there was a lot of gunfire to be heard. When he joined her at the kitchen door, Shelby indicated silently that she would lead the way into the kitchen. She burst through the door to find an empty kitchen. Jared came in next and pointed with his .22 pistol toward the storage rooms. Shelby nodded and led the way again.

Staying away from the back door she looked into the first of two rooms and found it about half full of boxes. "We'll check those later," she muttered. There was a shout from outside. Shelby approached the back door carefully and asked. "All clear, Jean?"

"All clear on this side," came the reply.

"Hold your position while I check with Mark," Shelby shouted her instructions. "Laker, stay here." He nodded and Shelby went back out front and called to Mark.

While waiting, Jared decided to check out the other storage room. The steel door looked strong and, worse, it was closed. He doubted that he could kick it in so, carefully standing to one side, he tested the handle and found it unlocked. He stayed out of the possible line of fire as the door swung open, squeaking softly on long-neglected hinges. Nothing happened and he moved in with his diminutive gun at the ready. The room beyond the door was a long, thin closet mostly lined with steel shelving. There were a few boxes at the far end that Jared could only barely make out in the subdued light. Somewhere behind him he heard Shelby call out an "All clear!" and then the lights came on.

In that first blinding moment, Jared was only marginally aware that someone was jumping up from behind the boxes in front of him. From between his squinting eyelids he saw the fuzzy image of a Greenpeace

commando with his M-25e rapidly rising up to point directly at Jared's chest.

The moment became trapped in emotional molasses. Jared struggled against the morass of slowed time to bring his small gun to bear against the khaki-clad man. Slowly, ever so slowly, the commando's finger squeezed the trigger of his automatic rifle. He braced himself against the expected recoil and finished pulling the trigger back.

Suddenly time broke free of its adrenaline-invoked constraints as a single click erupted from the rifle and Jared realized that the lethal tool had jammed. He finished bringing the .22 up and fired, only to discover that it was empty.

Before Jared could decide what to do next, a dark brown, serpentine shape lashed out next to him and struck the Greenpeace soldier on the right shoulder. The sharp metal blades of Shelby's whip slashed through his uniform and left an ugly wound beneath it forcing him to drop his weapon.

The commando surrendered immediately, holding his hands up, palms outward, although he winced visibly as he tried to raise his right arm.

"Jared, Mark, tie him up," Shelby indicated the solitary Greenpeace survivor. "We'll question him later. Jean will see to his wound after she finishes with Dennis and Jim."

"What happened to them?"

"Jim only twisted his ankle," Shelby replied, "but Dennis caught a bullet or something. I don't know how bad it is yet."

A few minutes later they knew. The bullet or something had knicked Dennis' aorta. It had taken several minutes for the large artery to finally let go, but once it did he was dead in minutes.

Their captive was defiant, refusing to answer any questions. Nate wanted to beat a few answers out of him, but Shelby stopped that saying, "He isn't going anywhere except back to camp. Let the general make any further decisions."

"If you say so, captain," Nate replied sullenly.

"I say so!" she snapped back crisply. Before she could say anything else they both heard a shout coming from one of the storage closets. "What's up?" she asked rushing toward that room.

"Guns!" Mark told her triumphantly. "Lots of them. Must be a hundred or better."

"One hundred and twenty-eight," Jim grinned. "I'd put money on it if I had any."

"What makes you say that?" Shelby asked.

"Elvish mathematics operates in base eight. My guess is that there are two times eight squared or one twenty-eight rifles here. Have you noticed what's different though?"

"Gold metal," Shelby noticed. "They're made of brass?"

"Or some other copper alloy," Mark supplied. "They don't seem all that much heavier than conventional weapons. The label on the packing calls this an M-26. Take a look at the ammo." He tossed her a

cartridge.

"What the hell?" Shelby muttered as she inspected it. Most of the cartridge looked normal, but the projectile appeared to be a small brass dart. "A brass fl  chette!"

"A what?" Jared asked.

"Fl  chette," she repeated. "A small winged projectile. The M-25h uses them, but those are made of soft iron. What is this?"

"Haven't you guessed, Shelby?" Mark asked. "These are weapons that the Point-ears can use. We also found a couple tons of dried rations and enough night scopes for an army."

"And," Jim added as he entered behind Shelby, "I just got a peek in the third truck. It has some even heavier weapons on board. We got lucky tonight. Real lucky."

"Too right," Mark agreed. "Not only did we get an unexpected windfall of weaponry, but this is radical change in Point-ear strategy if they're going on the front lines with something more than magic. Something big is up. Something that will make the last two years look like a mere rehearsal."

Three

General Grimes was sitting at his desk when he heard the trucks approaching. His office was formerly a bedroom in the only building in New England Resistance headquarters, an expanded Cape Cod cottage surrounded by several acres of forest. When they had first moved to this site, two months earlier, he had offered the building to Doctor Holloway. Doc, however, had turned down the offer on the basis that he was used to the infirmary tent they'd been using for over a year. He did, however, reserve the right to use the basement if they were still there come winter.

Immediately following the sound of trucks approaching, Grimes heard the "red alert" alarm sound its bone-chilling throughout the camp. Pausing only to buckle on his gun belt in which he carried a pair of matched vintage Colt .45 revolvers, he moved with deliberate haste toward the back door of the house. As he entered the yard he saw with pride that all his men and women were rushing into place like the well-drilled team that they were.

Less than a minute later the first vehicle came into view; an eighteen wheeler emblazoned with the stylized globe of Greenpeace. The clicks of almost five hundred safeties being turned off could be heard over the roar of the truck being driven in a gear ratio far too low even for the slow speed it was moving at.

"Hold your fire," Grimes said in a normal voice to Captain Rymut who echoed the order to everyone else. "There's something wrong about this," he continued conversationally. "Shouldn't be coming in with their lights on if it's an attack."

The trucks, three of them in all, came in slowly and, under the watchful eyes of every able-bodied Resistance fighter at headquarters, came to a halt just as they filled the wide circular driveway at the front of the house. All three motors were turned off and a tense silence settled over the tableau. And then,

clearly audible to all assembled, the rumbling sound of the current "all clear" signal could be heard being rapped out from inside one of the trailers.

With that Shelby stepped out of the middle truck and shouted, "Not bad, huh?"

"Captain Shelby!" Grimes shouted back. "Advance and report!" She did and quickly told her tale. "Very good," Grimes admitted, "but you took an awful chance coming in that way. Why didn't you sound the "all clear" on one of the truck's horn?"

"On an air horn?" Shelby countered. "General it's two-thirty in the morning. It would have been heard for miles."

"So were the engines."

"True, but the Point-ears would be expecting engines. The horns could have been a sign of something they needed to investigate."

"Very well, you seem to have thought this out. Doc!" the general called out over his shoulder. "We have wounded. Captain Rymut, organize a detail to get these trucks unloaded. Captain Shelby you and your team stand down while that's going on. You'll have to return those trucks before dawn."

"Return them, sir?"

"That's right, captain. As tempting as it might be to keep them here, that would make us stand out too much. When the Point-ears learn of this raid, they'll be scouring this area looking for us. There are a lot of people living in tents these days and most of ours are hidden in the trees anyway, but we just don't have anywhere to hide the trucks here."

"What about in New Hampshire ? That warehouse just outside of Concord has a covered enclosure that has more than enough room."

"You'd never get there by day break today," Grimes told her.

"True, but we can go west and get out of Point-ears territory for the day and then double back tonight."

"Hmm. All right, do it. I have some papers to send to Captain Correy anyway. New codes for the next month or so and all that. You can take those and pick up whatever reports he has to send. Select two-thirds of the weapons and half the foodstuffs and bring those to him as well."

"Even the heavy stuff?"

"Especially the heavy stuff. Anything we can't get comfortably under cover here should be put in storage up there. I'll send him orders to inventory everything he gets. Wait for that inventory and bring it back. After I've had a chance to consider what we have, I can decide where it will ultimately go. Something wrong, captain?"

Shelby caught herself staring at General Grimes. "Sir, I don't recall you ever explaining an order."

Grimes chuckled, "No, I don't believe you do. It doesn't happen very often." He didn't go on to explain that he had been thinking out loud. Let Captain Shelby think he was granting her a special privilege. After tonight she deserved it.

It was a shame about the rookie, but this was a war. People died during wars. Grimes didn't like it, but there wasn't much he could do about it. He didn't approve of those who measured victory in terms of body counts and every death felt like his own personal failure, but each man or woman who returned from a successful mission was similarly a victory. Harry Lee Grimes had hundreds of victories to counter-balance each failure.

Jared now had a "real weapon" as Otis would have called it. The only problem was that he didn't know how to use it or maintain it and Otis, who had promised to teach him, was busy unloading the trucks. When that was over Shelby's team would be moving out again, so instead he turned to Mark and Nate for guidance while they were waiting.

"Well, at least I won't have to worry about rust," Jared said as they gave his M-26 the once over. The group had gone to the mess tent where they were able to coax a late meal out of the "mess sergeant". After that Shelby excused herself to supervise the reloading of the trucks and Jean offered to help. Mark and Nate raised their eyebrows at that, but said nothing. Soon after that Jared brought the subject around to the new rifle.

"Says who?" Mark replied. "Brass and bronze corrode too, you know."

"Right," Nate agreed. "The corrosion is green instead of red, but it's just as real. What were you expecting? Stainless steel? Even that needs cleaning and oiling."

"Not for corrosion," Mark amplified, "but to keep everything working smoothly. Well, let's take this baby apart and see what she's got."

"Good idea," Nate harmonized. "We can clean it as we go."

"Clean it?" Jared objected. "But it's brand new."

"And fresh out of its packing," Nate shot back. "Laker, this needs a complete cleaning before you can use it safely. Let's move over to that table. We can lay it all out as we go."

"I'll take notes," Jim drawled from a nearby chair, getting up to join them. They looked at him. "Well, this is a whole new weapon that we've never seen before. Somebody ought to write a report and I'm too keyed up to sleep right now anyway."

Mark nodded and placed the M-26 down on the table. Piece by piece, they disassembled the weapon and cleaned each part. When they were done it was neatly arranged in several pieces on the table.

"Now here's your first exam question, Laker," Nate said looking at the pieces of gold-colored metal on the table. "What's wrong with this picture?" Mark looked at Nate and quickly stifled a laugh.

Jared figured it was a trick question, but made a stab at it anyway. "It's in pieces?" he guessed hesitantly.

"No, that's intentional. Try again," Nate laughed.

Jared stared intently at the brass puzzle. Having very little experience with any sort of weapon he didn't really know what to look for. Jean walked into the room quietly and watched with silent amusement at the four men.

After a full minute Jared made another guess. "The safety is off?" Everyone broke up.

"Laker," Nate replied when he finally got under control, "the safety couldn't be more on. Something's missing."

"Here's a hint," Jean offered, approaching the table. She carefully placed a long, thin piece of bronze with a pointed steel pin sticking out at both ends. "It's called a firing pin. There was a box full of them in one of the trucks and I figured you'd need one. They seem to have made the pin with bolt and carrier as a single replaceable unit. Without this piece," she told Jared, "your gun is just a pretty piece of brass."

"Interesting," Mark noted. "Even with their iron allergy the Point-ears were forced to use it for the firing pin."

"Good steel is still harder and more durable than bronze," Jim replied. "That's probably why this assembly is all one piece, for safer handling of what to them is a hazardous substance."

"I don't get it," Jared admitted. "Wouldn't brass be too soft to build a rifle out of?"

"It was good enough for some of the best cannons ever made," Nate replied, "and brass can be hardened by hammering it."

"Yeah, but," Mark interjected, "brass has a memory. Unless you keep hammering it, it will slowly soften up again and this should be heavier than it is if it's going to be strong enough."

"So maybe it isn't brass or even conventional bronze," Nate suggested. "Maybe it's some other alloy."

"Like what?" Mark challenged.

"Aluminum bronze?" Nate shrugged. "Maybe it's some new alloy we've never heard of."

"Maybe. It sure is pretty. It'll be a shame to have to blacken it."

"Blacken it?" Jared asked. "What do you mean?"

"Laker," Mark explained, "the elves might like fighting with shiny golden weapons, but a stray glint of moonlight off this baby could get you killed some night. Those Greenpeace commandos were using these things. Looked like they'd been treated with something like blueing. We'll have to do likewise or you'll be an easy target."

"Well, that explains why their weapons sounded so funny," Jared said. "I thought they sounded strange, as though they were muffled. And the sound of the fléchettes shredding the foliage was something I've never heard before."

"The cartridges are smaller than in bullet-chucking guns," Nate commented. "Fléchettes fly longer and more accurately and they do more damage, so they don't need as much power behind them to do their job. Smaller cartridges also means you can get more shots to the magazine. The ones I saw look identical to those made for the M-25h, except that they're made of brass instead of soft iron. When we get back I'll do some tests for barrel hardness and the like. You might prefer to use iron fléchettes instead of brass."

"For now, however," Mark added, "you'd better stick to what we know will work. And now for your

next trick, you can put your gun back together."

"You took it apart," Jared accused. "Aren't you going to help?"

"Only if you need help. You're going to have to do this by yourself sometime. You might as well start now."

Jim finished his notes and went to another table to rewrite them in some semblance of order.

Jared shrugged and went to work. After a moment he realized that the weapon's parts had been laid out in a systematic manner and wondered why he hadn't noticed that before.

"Uh uh," Mark stopped him about halfway through. "Put the firing pin assembly in next."

"That makes sense," Jared admitted. "I was wondering how I'd get it in after the rest of the gun was together."

"Sorry about that," Jean apologized. "Didn't want to disturb the display, so I just plunked it down to the side."

"Mellowing out in your old age, Jean?" Mark asked maliciously. "Or are you just tired." That earned him a mild glare.

"Mr.Nevada ," she replied coldly, "We are supposed to be a team, and it seems that we're going to be working together for an extended period of time. It seems only natural to me that we should behave like a team, don't you think?"

"I don't know," Mark replied, "We have such a nice workable hate-hate relationship. I'd hate to ruin it."

"Phah!" Jean turned away from him. "Don't forget to load the magazine, Jared," she said in what he thought might be meant to be a pleasant manner.

Jared went back to the reassembly of the M-26. He was just about finished loading his spare ammunition clip when Shelby stepped into the room. From her stance and half-opened eyelids, she was looking tired.

"Enough R&R," she said matter of factly. "Saddle up team. It's to time move on out."

Four

The radio whined out an amateur rendition of an old country tune and had been doing so since the convoy had reached the border of the elves' anti-radio shield at the onset of false dawn.

"Must you listen to that?" Shelby asked for the fifth time since the radio had returned to life.

"It's that or the CB, but nobody seems to be talking at the moment," Jared replied.

"But why a country station?"

"The truck only has an AM radio and almost no antenna. This is all I seem to be able to pick up. Sorry I caught the amateur hour, but since the elves started their war, that's what we have the most of. Anything to keep the stations on, especially at night."

"I'd still think there would be more to choose from,"Shelby opined.

"Feel free to check for yourself. What I really want is a news broadcast, but I'll settle for anything that will keep me awake while I drive. Face it, you keep nodding off."

"I was working while you and the boys took time off," she replied defensively.

"Hey, I didn't mean anything by it, but I've been awake as long as you have. We're going to have to stop and catch up on our sleep soon."

"We will. I originally planned to go intoWorcester , but our latest intelligence says that we may lose it to the Point-ears soon."

"So what's the plan? Keep driving the country roads until we run out of gas?"

"No, the general is sending us toFortDevens . I have a packet to drop off there and you can tell the base commander what you told us about Colonel Holmes. We're also to drop off one of the M-26s with supplies in case they haven't seen them yet."

"How much longer?"

"Hard to say,"Shelby said consulting a map. "We'd have been there by now if we'd taken the Pike, but these two-lane country roads are slower."

"Nice to see people living almost normally in houses again, though," Jared pointed out.

"Mmm, with electricity and everything,"Shelby agreed.

"Free electricity," Jared amplified. "The lights are left on all night. It's supposed to help slow down the elves' progress, but I'm not so sure. The theory is sound, but it didn't stop the initial coup in the big cities."

"Didn't Colonel Holmes account for that?"

"Maybe. That hypothesis of his sort of made sense. The trick is to catch them with their guard down."

"Sounds like the key to successful military strategy since the beginning of time,"Shelby replied sourly.

"True enough," Jared agreed cheerfully.

"About fifteen minutes."

"What?"

"We should be atFortDevens in fifteen minutes. If we're where I think we are, we should turn left at the next intersection."

"You mean the one we just passed as you said that?"

Shelby looked out the window for some sort of road marker. "Uh, yes," she replied at last.

"I'm not good enough to pull off a three point turn in one of these rigs. The closest I ever came to driving a semi was driving with a boat on a trailer hitch."

"There's another turn coming up in a mile," she assured him. "It's not much of a road, according to this map but it angles back toward where we want to go."

"All right."

"Breaker one nine," Jim's tinny distorted voice drawled out over the CB radio. "This is Sun Dog callin' Big Boss Lady. C'min, Boss Lady."

"Jim," Shelby exhaustedly replied into the CB microphone, "this is Shelby. What do you want? Over."

"We've been wondering when the next rest stop is going to be, skipper. Over."

"One of these days," Shelby said to Jared, "that man's odd sense of humor is going to push me a bit too far." Then she pressed the transmit switch and told Jim, "We'll stop when we arrive at our destination and not before. Now prepare to turn left at the next intersection. Over."

"Aye, aye, Cap'n!" Came the reply.

Shelby's estimate was fairly close and fifteen minutes later the three-truck convoy was admitted under guard through the main gate of Fort Devens. It was another four hours after a comprehensive identity check and debriefing before they were allowed to sleep. The base commander, a Brigadier General Peter Meisterhaus wanted to keep Jared in the Stockade after he was identified, but Shelby stepped forward with an additional packet containing the transcript of his Resistance trial.

"Very well," General Meisterhaus said at last. "I will forward this to the proper authorities. Your exoneration is likely to take months, Mr. Laker. In the meantime I suggest you keep your head down and stay out of human-held lands, especially in New England. Your face is very well known at the moment."

"Posted to every tree?" Jared asked, smiling.

"Worse, every TV screen. The newsies have made you up to be the greatest traitor since Benedict Arnold."

"What? Why?"

"With reporters? Who can say? Frankly, I think we've been breeding them for stupidity. Last time I had a reporter ask me an intelligent question it was the cameraman that fed it to him. Two years ago I was giving a briefing and one tele-idiot asked me to describe my security measures."

"Should have shot him," Shelby put in.

"Hmm? Yes," the general agreed. "Instead I made the error of explaining why giving him such details would not be a good idea. I must have used too many two-syllable words because when I got done

another one asked me the same question, and then another and another."

"And another?" Mark added.

"Mmm, no. Then they started asking why I wouldn't answers their questions."

"Of course your answers were pretty much the same at that point."

"Exactly. The way I figure it, we've been breeding male and female reporters for stupidity, and any of their children who are incapable of understanding anything beyond time-worn adages like 'the people have a right to know' are allowed to be reporters themselves and breed for the next generation. Of course this is nothing new. Reporters have always been this way. Give them the right of free speech and they mistake it for the right to know and report everyone else's business. Do you know that they still actually ask for battle plans in advance? I even heard of one network jerk who tried to go to court to demand that the press be present at a meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The court threw the case out immediately but the press kept whining about it for weeks. Then they got their revenge by swaying public opinion against the war. That made our job more difficult to say the least.

"Less funding and pro-elf demonstrations nearly crippled our effectiveness until the elves made the mistake of killing everyone at theAtlanta headquarters of the Cable News Network. Since then we've had unconditional public and journalistic support from most quarters."

"So things are better,"Shelby concluded.

"Not better, but no worse either.Washington is still under siege and communications in and out of the Pentagon are sporadic at best.FortDevens is almost as isolated as the New England Resistance. We hear from other bases every other day or so, but for the most part we're on our own."

"What about reinforcements?"Shelby asked.

"We do some recruiting in the human-held territory around us, but most of our new people are shipped in from other parts of the country. The Midwest and thePlainsStates are still predominantly human territory as is the South. The Point-ears hold mostly industrial cities along the coasts. They haveMilwaukee too, along with most of the cities along theOhio andMississippiValleys .Cleveland andPittsburgh are still ours and I've heard rumors thatOmaha is being prepared to serve as the nation's capital ifWashington should fall."

"So are we at least holding our own?" Nate asked.

"I'd like to think so," General Meisterhaus replied, "but there's only so long you can tread water before you go under. Damned elves and their human allies currently control over twenty-five percent of the world. Dozens of governments have fallen to them already and with every victory they get stronger. How much longer can we hold on just staying where we are?"

"Good point,"Shelby admitted. "Well, my lot hasn't had much sleep lately, general. I hope you won't mind if we excuse ourselves for a few hours."

"Of course not," he replied. "Lieutenant Mulvaney here will show you to our visitors' quarters."

They thanked him and followed the lieutenant out. Fifteen minutes later, they were all sleeping.

Five

Shelby's squad didn't leave Fort Devens that evening nor the next. General Meisterhaus requested that they stay and give a more detailed description of the conditions inside the Greater Boston area. In return, he had his own intelligence officer prepare a summary of reports from all over the world for them to take back to the Resistance.

The team used the two days rest to recuperate and prepare for the next leg of their trip. They also spent several hours at the base firing range, where Jared got to fire his M-26 for the first time. The gold-colored weapon created quite a stir at the range which culminated in some helpful tips from Master Gunnery Sergeant Mace Toepfer, whose ulterior motive was to get a closer look at the new made-for-elves weapon.

"It appears to be nearly identical to the M-25h," he told them later after a detailed examination, "although the anti-jam mechanism in the magazine looks like an improvement."

"It's not perfect, Gunnie." Jared told him about the jammed weapon he faced in the abandoned restaurant.

"Automatic weapons will jam every now and then," Toepfer replied. "It's in their nature. This one seems to have incorporated a few changes that I've customized my own weapon with."

"Is that why it was given a whole new number - M-26 instead of M-25i?" Jared asked.

"Hah! Those numbers don't really mean much these days," Toepfer laughed. "Whoever is making these guns probably just thought this makes it look like more of an improvement than it really is. Why, even the ammunition is interchangeable."

"He can use the M-25h cartridges?" Nate asked.

"Don't see why not," the gunnie replied. "They have the same specs - size, charge. What more do you want? Besides why would you want to fire brass darts at an elf when an iron one might do better?"

"Any chance of picking up a few cases of iron ammo?" Jared asked.

"Sure," Toepfer replied. "What have you got to trade?"

Not a lot, Jared thought, keeping it to himself.

"Let me handle this," Jim said stepping up with a predatory grin. "Just remember that as your agent I get fifteen percent." Jared nodded his agreement and sat back to watch what happened next. The master gunnie countered this move by suggesting a change of venue and soon Jim was drawling his way through a negotiation with the base quartermaster. Half an hour later, Jared needed help with all the stuff Jim had bartered his brass ammo for.

"Jim," Jared began as they walked away with their prizes. "I appreciate the iron fléchettes and the oil cloth wrappers to keep it all in, but what's with all this other stuff?"

"The Meals-Ready-to-Eat or the equipment?"

"Well, both really. You don't really want to eat that stuff, do you? And I can't imagine what you expect to do with a solar pizza oven or a drawing table. We're going to have to walk back to HQ from Concord, you know."

"Trade goods, although some of the MREs are actually edible," Jim replied in explanation. "Concord is one of our big storage facilities. There's no telling what I can trade these items for. That solar pizza oven is especially valuable behind enemy lines where any use of electricity might be detected."

"But we still have to carry anything we get back with us."

"Not necessarily. Ultimately, I intend to trade mostly for ammo credits. The haul we made the other night puts us in pretty good standing already, but these few items I just traded your ammunition for should better than double your credits and be a nice bonus for me."

"He's right," Nate agreed. "The Resistance will only give you so much credit before cutting you off. The only reason you got that cap gun you used the other night was because it is virtually useless. I'll bet they threw in a case of .22s just for the heck of it. Am I right?" Jared admitted that was so. "See. Now if you'd wanted an automatic rifle, assuming they had one, they might have let you borrow one but you'd have had to pay them back for the use of it and the ammo in double value."

"That much?"

"Uh huh," Nate nodded. "That stuff is very expensive to us and we can't afford to give it away to anyone who can't pull his own weight. Don't worry though, you're off to a good start. We got very lucky the other night. Oh by the way, this little bottle is for you as well. No charge."

"What is it?"

"Metal dye for that golden wonder of yours. This stuff will make the barrel a deep, rich brown in color. I thought you'd like that rather than blue or black. Red was out, of course, and I thought green would look too much like corrosion."

"Thanks. How's it work?"

"Just rub it on with a piece of clean cloth or a cotton ball."

The rest of the day was spent catching an enforced afternoon nap and they left as soon as it was dark that evening.

They followed Route 13 north in order to avoid the elf-held cities of Nashua and Manchester. Route 13 was little more than a collection of two-lane country roads that had only the number designation in common. Like other older roads in New England it may have once been a single road with towns along the way, but newer roads had chopped it up over the years forcing the convoy in a twisting route on which they managed to miss their turn more than once.

One benefit of this round-about route was that being entirely within human territory the radios were

functional until they finally reached the city limits of Concord, New Hampshire an hour before dawn. Out of sheer survival instinct, Shelby had jammed an old wire coat hanger into the antenna socket of the truck she and Jared were driving and ran a wire down to the radio. The resulting reception was improved only for range but not selection. They finally settled on an all talk and news station operating on a clear band from out of Portland, Oregon, one of the few large cities with high-tech industries left in human hands.

"Just can't beat the joys of AM radio," Jared noted cheerfully, for which he earned a scowl from Shelby. "Hey, it beats the Conway Twitty retrospective we listened to on the first leg of this trip."

"Not by much," she griped from behind the steering wheel.

"At least we get some world news twice an hour."

"And in between we get to listen to all the world-class insomniacs phoning in their two-cents worth. If I have to listen to one more caller say how horrible the war is followed by another one telling us how misunderstood the dirty little Point-ears are I'll scream. I swear as you are my witness I'll scream." Jared cocked an eyebrow and waited for a moment, while yet another caller said the predictable. Shelby looked at him and flatly intoned, "Arrgh." Then they both dissolved in laughter.

"Well it keeps us awake anyway." Jared was interrupted by the sound of the radio rapidly dissolving into static. "Back in Elfland," he shrugged. "Want me to take the final leg of the trip? You've been at the wheel for the last four hours."

"I don't know," Shelby replied. "I know the way to the in-town base. But you're fresher and I suppose we ought to give everyone else a chance to switch off as well." She pulled the rig over to the side of the all but deserted road and called a quick conference.

"What's up, boss?" Mark asked as he and Nate joined the group.

"Final instructions, Mark," she replied.

"Shelby," Jean asked, "do you think it's wise for us to drive in together? Mark and I both know the way."

"That's a good point," Shelby conceded easily, "and one I was about to bring up myself. Here's the situation; if we go in separately and one of us gets into trouble, anyone following might have a chance to take an alternate route. On the other hand, General Meisterhaus told me that his latest intelligence indicates that very few elf-friend trucks, as the regular military has taken to calling them, have been traveling alone lately so we might be less likely to attract attention if we stick together. Any comments?"

"You don't usually ask our opinions," Jean commented suspiciously.

"I don't usually ask you to stand at the wrong end of a practice range either," Shelby countered.

"Captain," Nate started, far more serious than he normally was, "we've trusted you this far and as long as I've fought with you, you've never steered us wrong yet. I say, take your best shot and let's get on with it." Everyone, even Jean, nodded at that.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, folks," Shelby replied, "but I was hoping you might have a better idea."

Nobody so much as breathed hard. One by one they looked at each other and finally back at Shelby .

"Looks like we're drawing a blank," Mark noted. "Shelby, is the usual route to the base still good?"

"As far as I know, yes."

"Good enough for me, let's ride."

Shelby shrugged and they were soon on their way again. Jared drove the lead truck with Shelby riding shotgun, literally. From there on, there was no conversation between them. In its place a tangible medium of tension filled the cab of the truck. Shelby spoke only when it became necessary to give Jared directions.

"All right so far," Shelby muttered as they neared their destination. "Slow down now. Keep the speed down to fifteen and turn right at the next light."

"No lights," Jared returned.

"You can see the dead overheads can't you?" Shelby snapped.

"Sorry. Wasn't thinking, I guess."

"No," she corrected him. "It's my fault. I really shouldn't let my nerves get to me. Oh shit."

"Oh shit, indeed," Jared agreed in the same flat tone Shelby had used.

Directly in front of them was a large armed party of men and women in the dark green uniforms of the Greenpeace elite forces. As soon as this party materialized Shelby and Jared became aware of dozens of similarly garbed and armed people all around them.

"We're dead," Shelby muttered as the truck continued slowly toward three rocket launchers and assorted other large weapons.

"Should I try to crash through?" Jared asked, not sure what answer he would prefer.

"Are you crazy?" Shelby retorted. "God, no! Stop the truck, maybe we can bluff our way through. We're all dead if we just try to drive on through."

"What ever you say," he replied uncertainly. The convoy ground to a halt before the grim-faced Greenpeace troops. As soon as they had stopped men with automatic rifles charged the truck doors.

"Out!" one shouted at Jared, who was sitting with his hands resting gently on the steering wheel. Shelby's door was opened from the outside at the same moment. Similar scenes were taking place at the cabs of the other two trucks. "Out of there, you elf-loving slime!" the man barked at Jared again.

"We're no..." Jared began as he opened the door.

"Shut up!" the man replied, dragging him roughly down to the ground. "Now, up against the truck and spread 'em." Dutifully Jared assumed the position as another man frisked him.

"Hold up, men!" a deep voice shouted from around the side of the truck. "They're on our side!"

"That's what I was trying to tell you," Jared said accusingly to the two men behind him.

"Sorry about that," the first one said, dropping the muzzle of his gun. "Can't be too careful, you know."

"You might have killed me." Jared lowered his arms and turned around.

"Only if you'd resisted. We'd have interrogated you first. You know that."

"I know no such thing when there's a gun at my head," Jared snapped.

"Ah," the second man said knowingly, "a rookie. This your first mission, rook?"

"First and a half," Jared admitted.

"All this is standard procedure," Shelby said as she and a large black-bearded man joined them.

"You knew?" Jared asked.

"I hoped. Bill, how long have you been using these uniforms?"

"About two weeks since one of our girls broke into a warehouse on the other side of town and carted off a few dozen in various sizes. They've come in pretty handy and give us a little more freedom of movement around town. Nobody wants to mess with the elite forces!" He laughed at that.

"Pretty clever," Shelby admitted, "but we'll have to spread the word to expect this sort of greeting until further notice. You'll never know how close I came to ordering Laker here to drive right over you."

"You'd have never made it," Bill replied indicating the assault weapons all around them.

"I know," she told him. "What difference would that make? If you were really the enemy we wouldn't have lived to tell the tale either, not with what we're carrying."

"What are you carrying?" Bill asked.

"Wait and see," Shelby replied mysteriously. "First, however, we'd better get off the streets before it gets too light. Sky's already too bright for my taste. You still have that warehouse with the enclosed garage?"

"Of course."

"Good. The trucks are part of the prize. Let's get under cover then I'll let you buy us breakfast while we fill you in. Mount up, folks!" she called out to the others.

Jared looked back and saw that Mark and Nate had already started swapping lies with old friends. Jim had been standing comfortably with a big grin while watching Jean berate the people who had dragged her out of her seat. At Shelby's call, however, they all immediately broke off and returned to their seats. Of Shelby's squad, only Jim had any real experience driving a semi, but there were several ex-truckers in Bill's cell and a few minutes later all three trucks had been backed up to a set of indoor loading docks and garage doors had been lowered concealing their presence.

"Brass guns?" Bill asked incredulously. "You brought me brass guns?"

"Bronze, we think. Guns is guns, mate," Nate told him with a smile.

"Maybe," Bill allowed.

"Brought you some brass ammunition too. Real pretty stuff. Fléchettes, of course."

"Fléchettes?" Bill griped. "I don't have anything that shoots them."

"You do now," Jared said with a smile, imitating Nate's jocular manner.

"God, two of them," Bill groaned. "What about those howitzers or whatever the big guns are. They're not brass or bronze too are they?"

"Brass coated," Jean supplied. Nate and Mark showed surprise at that. "While you boys were out at the firing range," she informed them, "I took the time to check these babies out. They've got steel barrels and working parts but the exposed parts have all been covered with brass. I think it was cast on of all things. The shells are various types, but the steel jacketed ones are labeled as being brass-plated. See what you miss when you don't ask the right questions?"

"We also brought an army's worth of food," Shelby added. "Here's the manifest, or at least what we think we gave you. We were in sort of a hurry to put this together. Your boys and girls can check it as they unload."

"So what am I supposed to do with all this and the trucks they came with?" Bill asked.

"Store and catalog it. General Grimes says to keep it here until further notice. We're to stay until you have an official count and then bring that back to HQ." She handed him both the manifest and the general's orders.

"This is a good haul," Bill admitted, looking at the list. "Must have taken a lot of raids to get it all."

"Just one," Shelby replied smugly.

"You're kidding," Shelby shook her head, smiling. "Okay you aren't kidding. "Who got the credit? You? I should have known. All right, heros, breakfast is on me and you can tell me all about it."

"Told you so," Shelby reminded him.

Six

"I don't know about you guys," Nate said near the end of their third night after leaving Concord, "but I, for one am sick to death of rabbit!"

"We're open to suggestion," Shelby informed him evenly, "but I'll warn you right now I won't eat squirrel

if I have a choice and it would be a waste to shoot a deer or one of the cattle we've been seeing."

"I agree," Nate replied, "That's why I came prepared, or didn't you notice how much my pack had grown."

"Just assumed it was eating better than we were," Mark told him dryly.

"In a manner of speaking, yes. Actually, we have Jared to thank for this fortuitous change of menu."

"All right, Laker," Jean demanded, "fess up! What in Hell is he talking about?"

"Damned if I know," Jared replied then added, "no pun intended."

"All right, Nate," Shelby nipped off the impending argument before it could start, "It's been a long night for all of us. Spill it."

"Literally!" he exclaimed, up-ending his pack. A number of metal cans spilled out on to the ground of the roadside rest area they had chosen to stay in for the day. "Jared allowed me to act as his agent in a number of lucrative transactions."

"Say what?" Shelby asked.

"He's been trading away Jared's stuff," Jim translated.

"At a considerable gain to the man, I'll have you know," Nate insisted.

"If he isn't crying, then neither is anyone else," Shelby replied, "except maybe the people you've been swindling."

"Caveat emptor, don't you know," Jean commented dryly.

"Right," Mark agreed. "Get on with the story so we can eat dinner before breakfast."

"Well," Nate continued, "I eventually converted almost everything into ammo credits."

"Good move," Shelby approved. "Ammo credits are the closest thing we have to legal tender."

"Thank you," Nate replied. "Anyway the way I figure it we ought to get back to HQ by this time tomorrow."

"We'd damned well better be," Jean griped. "My feet can't take much more of this. Shelby, why didn't we bring any tents with us?"

"Not thinking, I guess," Shelby replied. "We all knew we'd be walking back to HQ from Concord. Why didn't you think of it?"

Jean squelched a biting remark to consider that. "Nobody's perfect," she said quietly at last. "Good thing it hasn't been raining. We've been sleeping during the day and walking at night so it hasn't been a big issue, but a little privacy might have been nice."

"Girls," Nate interrupted, "I thought I was telling this story. Anyway, while in Concord I took a look at

their inventory list and found these little prizes. I don't know how they got here but what you see here is the very latest in Japanese packaging."

"Canned sushi?" Jim asked disgustedly. "I'd rather eat lizards."

Nate looked at Jim for a moment. "What a concept," he mused. "Jim, my friend, you're half right. This is a canned Japanese feast. No sushi. I'm not sure if I'd care to eat sushi that's been in a can for two years or so. What we have, however, are various meat and vegetable dishes in self-heating cans. We don't have to risk building a fire for a hot meal. Neat, huh?"

"How do they work?" Jared asked, inspecting a can of portion-controlled chicken teriaki.

"Well, you see that little button on the bottom?"

Jared turned the can upside down. There was a round aluminum button sticking up above the surface. "Yes. You push it in?" he asked.

"Yep. It's really a spring-loaded pin. When you press it in, it pierces the barrier between two chemical reservoirs. Shake it gently and the chemicals mix causing a mild reaction that gives off a fair amount of heat, which in turn warms up the contents to a perfect dining temperature. After all," Nate laughed, "you simply cannot expect your busy Japanese executive to drink his sake cold, can you?"

"And did you bring anything special for breakfast too?" Mark asked archly.

Nate paused to consider his answer. "Not really. Just a few granola bars."

"Better than nothing," Shelby commented. "Unless someone wants to go out foraging again today. Nathan, why didn't you mention these before when we realized we didn't bring enough rations to get us back to camp?"

"I always intended to share these," Nate admitted. "I just wanted to wait until I was sure it was our last night out. I did bring out the water testing kits right away didn't I? And I think we should do a bit of cautious foraging. It'll give us something to eat for lunch tomorrow night, but for now let's eat. Help yourselves, kiddies."

After breakfast, they moved a little farther back from the road and slept in shifts. Jared woke up just after Noon and found Shelby on guard duty, watching the road.

"I'll relieve you if you want," he said by way of greeting.

"I just got here myself," she told him. "Jean and Nate are off looking for edibles, and Mark and Jim just got off watch duty. Here, have a granola bar. It's a rather pathetic breakfast, but it's better than nothing."

"Thanks," Jared accepted the confection. "Chewy chocolate chip?"

"It's all Jim managed to get."

Jared nodded and turned toward Route 128. "Fair amount of traffic this morning," he commented. So far they had seen very little daytime traffic on the highway - maybe one small convoy or an isolated vehicle every two or three hours. Night brought out the main activity and even that was only once an hour. On this day, however, the traffic was coming in clumps three or four times an hour.

"Too much if you ask me," Shelby replied, looking through a pair of binoculars. "Something's going on."

"All elf-friends?" Jared asked.

"Who else could travel so freely on this road?" she countered. "That convoy we hijacked last week must have been the forerunner of all this - setting up food and munitions dumps. Something big is happening."

"Maybe they're just fortifying what they already hold," Jared suggested.

"I doubt it. I think they're getting ready for a new offensive. Most of those trucks are troop carriers, and look over there. See those cars? There are Point-ears inside. I saw some in the troop transports too. This isn't just a fortification, and if our armed forces were expecting something like this we would have seen signs of it at Fort Devens - preparations."

"I think that's it," Jared opined. "They're planning to attack the military bases in New England. There aren't a whole lot of them after all and with them out of the picture they can consolidate the rest of New England easily."

"Could be. In any case we have to get back to base and spread the word as fast as possible. As soon as Jean and Nate return we'll move out."

"Maybe I should see if I can find them," Jared suggested. "Which way did they go?"

"I'm not sure. Don't go too far. I don't want to have to wait for you too."

"Right, chief," Jared replied, turning toward the back of the rest area. On his way, he paused at the sleeping place to pick up his pack and rifle.

"Something up?" Mark asked sleepily from nearby.

"Sort of," Jared replied. "There's increased activity on the highway and Shelby wants to pull out as soon as possible to report it. You better catch a few zees, though. We won't be leaving until Jean and Nate get back from a foraging expedition."

"Okay," Mark nodded and promptly went back to sleep. Jared looked at him a moment and wondered how he could sleep so easily and decided that perhaps he hadn't been completely awake in the first place.

When the highway was built there had been a chain-link fence erected along its length at the boundary of the government-owned land, but decades of people wanting to travel the shortest distance between two points had worn numerous holes in the world's largest network of fences. Jared found one such hole at the northwest corner of the rest area where a generation of footprints had worn a path up to and away from the hole.

The wooded section of the rest area quickly gave way to an expanse of farmland gone fallow. Looking across the field of waist-high grass, Jared noticed an almost straight trail of bent and broken stalks where Jean and Nate had made their way through the field. There were half a dozen Gurnsey cattle about a quarter of a mile to the south. Jared wondered whether someone was keeping them or if they were one of a growing number of loose herds. With no one else in sight, Jared shrugged and started following the trail.

The trail led across the first field into a small copse of trees and then on into another smaller field in the middle of which stood a small, white farmhouse next to a fair-sized barn. Jared could see that Jean and Nate had headed for the house, but something seemed wrong to him, although he couldn't pin down what it might have been. Instead of following the trail, he walked along the edge of the woods until he was only one hundred feet from the house and barn, but approaching them from the north rather than the southeast.

"Just a quick look around in there," Jared told himself, "and I'll head on back."

Seven

Shelby sensed the approaching trucks subliminally before she actually heard or saw them. She knew there was something wrong, but was unable to put her finger on it. Then she finally became aware of the sound of their approach. They sounded wrong, not like the other vehicles she had seen all morning. As they appeared from around a corner, her conscious mind abruptly realized what was wrong as her subconscious mind said dryly, "I told you so!" The convoy was slowing down and about to enter the rest area.

"Oh shit!" she muttered, scrambling back to where Mark and Jim were still sleeping. "Wake up!" she shouted, shaking Jim awake. She turned then to Mark who was already in motion. "Company coming," she explained shortly. All three picked up their belongings and started down the path toward the back of the rest area.

"Not that way," Mark corrected them. "If they're stopping here for the reason I expect, that's the first place they'll go."

"Huh?" Shelby asked.

"Path of least resistance," Mark replied unhelpfully. "This way, deep into the brush. Hurry."

They crashed through the bushes disappearing from sight just as the convoy pulled into the rest area. There were a dozen assorted vehicles, three troop carriers, five closed and locked semis built for extra-heavy loads - thirty-six wheelers, and four jeeps, all painted dark green with a stylized globe emblazoned on them.

A tall man in a Greenpeace uniform jumped out of the lead jeep. The collar of his uniform shirt bore a brass pin in the shape of the Greenpeace globe between two bars on each side, the insignia of a major. "Fifteen minute rest stop," he informed his unit. The men got out of the trucks, a quick count told Shelby that there were over one hundred and fifty soldiers in this contingent. "Only one squad at a time in the woods," came the next command. The men from the first troop truck walked briskly into the woods down the path as Mark had predicted.

"And this is just one of the dozens of convoys I've seen all afternoon," Shelby told them as they cautiously edged closer to see who their visitors were.

"Too many to mess with," Mark whispered his reply, "but we could surely use one of those jeeps."

"Too dangerous," Shelby replied.

"Not necessarily," he replied pulling several pieces of light weight pipe out of his pack.

"How long have you been carrying a blow gun around with you?" Shelby asked him as he fitted the pieces together.

"Picked it up at the PX at Devens. Nate got a fancy sling shot." Next, he selected a long dart with a thin leaf-shaped blade for a tip.

"Wicked-looking," Shelby whispered. "But won't it be rather conspicuous sticking in someone?"

"Not someone," Mark corrected her. "Something - the tire of that jeep there."

"It'll still expose our presence when they see it."

"Trust me," Mark replied wickedly.

Jared made it to the side of the barn without incident. From outside he could hear something moving inside, but a quick peak through a crack in the wall showed him that it was being caused by a pair of old and poorly kept horses in their stalls. Since the elvish revolution the price of horses had gone way up. Jared estimated that the current value of the two nags before him would have bought a Triple Crown winner two years earlier. There were five horses suitable for riding at Resistance HQ and they were invaluable in forays into the city. This pair looked more suitable to hauling a wagon, but there was none in sight.

He risked entering the structure to discover that, aside from himself, the only living mammals visible within were the horses. There was, however, an old Jeep CJ-5 under a musty-smelling, canvas tarpaulin. Hope surged briefly when he thought they might be able to use it to get word back to HQ quickly, until he realized that it was up on blocks and had no tires. He didn't bother looking to see what else might be missing and turned his attention to the rest of the building. The hay loft appeared to be empty and Jared didn't take the time to climb up and find out for certain.

The horses were watching him interestedly and from the looks of their thin bodies, Jared suspected they wanted to be fed. "Later," he told them softly, reminding himself that his first responsibility was to find his comrades.

Next to the jeep was a rusty tool box. A quick inspection revealed that the tools inside were of high quality, but like everything else in the barn, they had been badly neglected. Spots of rust were prevalent over the exposed metal surfaces.

"No excuse for this," Jared said to himself, deciding to leave further investigation of the barn for later if

he had the chance. He carefully edged up to the large open barn door and glanced out at the nearby house. No signs of life could be detected, but someone had been caring, however poorly, for the horses so he kept up his guard as he quickly moved to the side of the house.

The windows were over his head so he was unable to look inside but he thought he heard somebody walking around inside. Behind the house there was an open bulkhead leading down into a dirt-floored basement.

Before inspecting the basement, Jared noticed how trampled the grass was around the house. He looked for and found the trail Jean and Nate had made. A careful look around showed that if they had left the immediate area, it would have been via the road. That didn't seem very likely to Jared. Nate would have tried to trade for a meal. It seemed most likely that they were still in the house somewhere.

The basement was dark and Jared walked quickly down the concrete and stone stairs. Even after his eyes had adjusted to the light in the basement, he didn't see anything of value. Above him he heard footsteps, muffled conversation, and the occasional sound of what he thought might be chopping, like a cleaver against a cutting board.

He climbed the basement stairs at a snail's pace. They were old and gave slightly under his weight. He did his best statue imitation for well over a minute in between each step. Every so often, one stair would creak loudly as he stepped on it, but the people upstairs did not seem to notice.

The stairway ended at the head of a short hall that linked the kitchen with the living room. The door at the top was slightly ajar and Jared could see that someone was working with a large knife in the kitchen. From the other direction, he could hear an almost musical voice twisted to ugliness by unadulterated hate.

"Worthless human slime," the voice snapped. A heavy slap accompanied the insult followed quickly by a grunt of pain. "Now talk! Where is the rest of your unit? Where?" There was another slap.

"Slow down, Spike," Jared heard an unpleasant baritone saying. "They're both out of it. You're hitting them too hard."

It may have been circumstantial evidence, but Jared figured he had enough proof. He had found Nate and Jean and not a moment too soon.

"You humans have no stamina," Spike replied. "Never mind I'll bring them around and start in again. They'll break eventually."

"And when you're through we can have them. Right, Spike? Right?" the man sounded unwholesomely eager.

"When I'm through," Spike replied, "you can have what ever's left as usual."

Jared stood at the top of the stairs. Whoever was in the kitchen started to sing softly to herself. This was going to be tricky. In the living room he heard a low murmur and then Nate's voice asked, "What happened? Who?" A moment later he had obviously remembered. "Point-ear!" he snarled. Jared heard someone spit. A few seconds later Jean could be heard coming around as well.

Oh well, Jared thought to himself. It's now or never. He gently opened the cellar door with the muzzle of his M-26. To his surprise the door did not creak. Taking a big chance, he looked toward the kitchen but could not see the singer. Two steps brought him to the living room door.

The first thing he noticed as he came through the doorway with his rifle at the ready was Jean and Nate, sitting back to back in the middle of the floor. They had been tied up with a silver-grey rope of some sort. Two people were standing over them.

One was a tall man with disheveled, long black hair and a ruddy complexion. He was wearing a ragged, green work shirt and ancient blue jeans. His open mouth revealed the absence of several teeth and the imminent demise of several others. He was wearing a gun belt and held a baseball bat in his hands.

The other stood about four and a half feet tall and was of slender build. He also wore jeans, but his shirt was a loose-fitting, dark green silk tunic, belted with a long silver-grey length of rope that circled his waist seven times and was tied on one side. His long, neatly-combed, light brown hair was sparsely dusted with golden sparkles and a delicately-formed slightly pointed ear presented itself where that hair was brushed back. He had a finely-formed, triangular face with pronounced upswept eyebrows. In short, he was an elf. A fairly young elf, in fact - somewhere in the latter half of his first century - just barely old enough to be considered an adult. His hands were empty and he was about to slap Nate again, but he had a slim, white wooden rod tucked in his wide, tooled leather belt.

Elves continued to grow throughout their long lives, although far more slowly than during their formative years. An elf of three centuries would average over six feet tall and it was not uncommon for one to be over seven feet tall when he died of old age. Very few elves, however, had died of old age recently.

Both the man and the elf turned to face Jared as he entered the room. For a moment nobody moved - five statues in an eerie panoramic display.

Then the man let out a yelp, "Watch out, Spike!" and threw the baseball bat at Jared. Jared squeezed the trigger of the M-26 and sent a quick burst of fléchettes into the man's body. The man fell to the floor, already dead, but the gunfire did nothing to halt the progress of the bat which hit Jared on his upper left arm and shoulder, knocking him off balance for a moment.

Taking the opportunity that was offered him, Spike the Elf, dropped to the floor, using Nate and Jean as a shield. Pulling the wooden rod from his belt, Spike hit the floor and rolled. As he came back up behind his captives, he pointed the rod at Jared and spoke an inhuman word.

A bolt of lightning sizzled out at Jared, barely missing him. He wanted to duck back into the hall, but his adrenaline-soaked mind knew that whoever was in the kitchen was likely to be coming at him from behind. So instead he dived into the living room. When he next brought his gun to bear on the elf, Spike was standing with the lethal wand pointed at Jared.

Before Jared could shoot Spike down, a bright amber beam erupted from the rod and enveloped Jared. Jared's vision became monochrome in amber tones and he was unable to move in the deep orange light. He was dimly aware of a feral scream a moment later from somewhere off to his left.

Abruptly, the amber bubble that held him fast burst. The force of that sudden release threw him roughly across the room. Jared crashed into the wall and collapsed.

"You fool!" Spike roared. Jared looked up to see an emaciated woman with scraggly dark brown hair on the floor in the doorway. Her large kitchen knife was sticking point first into the wooden floor near her. "Your damned iron knife broke the spell!"

Jared knew he should be doing something right now, but hanging on to his consciousness was taking all

his concentration.

"He killed Jethie," the woman said plaintively, reaching for her knife.

"I was already punishing him for that, you stupid slut," Spike replied nastily.

"No!" the woman screamed. "Mine!" She picked up the knife and started for Jared, who was still winded.

"No!" Spike commanded.

"Yes!" she insisted, still heading toward the dazed Jared with the knife raised high over her head.

"No!" Spike repeated, pointing his rod at her.

The amber beam burst forth once more and this time entrapped the woman. However, the knife hindered the operation of the spell and with a strength born of madness, she was able to turn slowly to face the elf. Then she made a small slashing motion with the knife and the spell was abated. The released force stunned her for a moment and threw Spike against the far wall.

The woman recovered first and started toward Spike, having forgotten Jared for the moment. The elf brought his magical weapon up almost instinctively and spoke a harsh, guttural word, that Jared was sure was different than the one Spike had used to produce lightning. There was no flash of light nor did a beam come forth. However, as the elf cast his spell the woman instantaneously dissolved into an avalanche of monatomic dust. The blade of her knife clattered to the floor - the handle having joined her in oblivion.

Spike dusted himself off and pointed the rod at Jared again. Jared tried to bring his rifle up, but was too slow as a bright crimson beam from the wand struck him and blotted out his awareness for a while.

Eight

"What are you going to do?" Shelby insisted on knowing.

Mark looked at her with a crooked smile and replied, "Simple mathematics in the imaginary realm."

"Speak plain," Shelby ordered him brusklly.

"All right. One dart plus one tire equals a singular loss of air. See," he grinned, "two positives do equal a negative."

"I'd already gotten that far, but the dart will just stick in the hole won't it?"

"Well the leaf blade will cut a fairly large hole so it should be fairly loose, but it's retrieving the dart that's the real trick."

"Mark, this is no time to get clever," Jim interrupted his comrade's lecture. "Cut to the chase."

"Hmm? Oh yeah." Mark reached once more into his pack and drew out a spool of pale yellow thread. He held it before Shelby and Jim and announced, "Kevlar thread - stronger than steel and a hell of a lot more flexible." He found the loose end and tied it carefully to the dart before inserting it into the blow gun. Then aiming carefully, he blew into the gun.

The dart flew straight and true, tracing a shallow arc toward the tire. With unerring accuracy, the point struck its target and bounced off. Mark pulled it back before anyone noticed.

"So much for that idea," Shelby smirked.

"Oh thee of little faith," Mark replied. He inspected the dart. "The point is sharp enough."

"Maybe you didn't blow hard enough," Jim suggested.

"Maybe, but I think the dart wasn't tight enough in the blow gun."

"Too tight and you won't be able to blow it out," Jim remarked.

"No problem," Mark replied. The dart had a small cork gasket at the back. He put the cork to his tongue and gave it a lick then fitted it back into the tube.

"Might work," Jim conceded.

Mark winked and then put the blow gun to his lips again, inhaled deeply, and blew with everything he had. This time the dart stuck firmly in the wall of the rear tire of the next to last jeep in the convoy. Jim picked up the thread and was about to tug on it when Mark stopped him.

"Don't jerk it, Jim. Pull it out gently."

"I thought this stuff was supposed to be stronger than steel," Jim replied, following instructions.

"In tensile strength, yes," Mark agreed, "but it's also thinner than most steel wire. Easy does it. There you go."

"Did it work?" Shelby asked as they recovered the dart. "I don't hear any air leaking out."

"It's windy," Mark replied, "and there's a lot of road noise. Watch the tire."

After a minute it became clear that the tire was losing pressure and that in another few minutes would be completely flat.

"When they discover it, they'll just change the tire and be off won't they?" Shelby asked.

"Yes," Mark informed her, "but if I know my convoys they'll leave that jeep and its occupants behind with orders to catch up at the next rendezvous site. When the rest of the trucks leave they'll be easy pickings."

Mark was proven correct when, eight minutes later, the convoy drove off leaving three men behind to change the flat tire on their jeep.

Jim was ready to go into action, but Shelby held him back. "Hold on," she told him. "Let them do most of the work with that tire." He nodded.

When Jared next gained consciousness, he was tied up with Jean and Nate. Spike was looking smugly down at them.

"I suppose I ought to thank you," Spike said nastily to Jared. "Those two had become quite tiresome. Now, what to do with the three of you? Perhaps you would make a fine gift to the High Council. Yes, we could use some fresh blood at our next ceremony." He left the room laughing wickedly.

Jared doubted that the elf was speaking figuratively. Elves had changed since their disappearance from the world. There were all sorts of horror stories about their new sanguinary practices. The human sacrifice this one was implying seemed mild compared to some of the rumors.

"Nice try, Laker," Jean told him as they heard Spike leave the house. "When you shot down that cannibal, I actually dared to hope we might get out of this. What are you doing here anyway?"

"Shelby sent me to find you" Jared replied, "She's a bit worried about an increase of traffic on the highway and wants to get moving before dark. Whew! That damned Point-ear is one mean bastard."

"It's that magic wand of his," Nate commented hoarsely. "Until today I always thought things like that never existed outside of fantasy role-playing games."

"Why are you two so down?" Jared asked. "He hasn't tied us up very securely. One loop of rope around us, and we can still move our arms and legs. What side is the knot on?"

"Over here," Nate replied, "but it won't do any good. It's enchanted or something. The more we try to loosen it, the tighter it gets. Just try straining against it from your side. You'll see."

Jared did and the rope became noticeably tighter. "Oof! Would cold iron break the spell, do you think?"

"Maybe," Jean replied, "but the Point-ears don't seem to be affected by it anymore."

"They have some spells," Jared told her, "that give them temporary immunization to the effects of cold iron but they can still be caught by surprise and you saw how that woman's knife broke the elf's spells."

"Really?" Jean asked. "I didn't know that. How come you do?" she added suspiciously.

"Colonel Holmes told me he found that out while imprisoned at Camp Goodfellow," Jared explained. "Say, where's that woman's knife now?"

"Spike picked up the blade as easy as you please," Nate told him, "and carried it into the other room. Now that you mention it, though, he did pause briefly as he reached out for it. That must have been when he immunized himself."

"Sounds likely," Jared replied. "Let's see. If I can reach the heel of my boot without causing this rope to squeeze us to death, I might be able to get us free." He had been sitting with his legs stretched out in front of him so it was no difficult task to move his left leg across his lap and bring the heel within his reach. The hidden bar of iron was wedged in tighter than he remembered and the movements he made in order to gain sufficient leverage to slide it out tightened their bonds to an almost unbearable degree.

Finally, when it was all they could do to draw breath, Jared got the small piece of iron out of its sheath and touched it to the silver-grey cord. The rope instantly untied itself and fell away.

"Woof!" Jean coughed as she tried to make up for all the breathing she'd missed while the rope constrained them. "I wouldn't have thought a single loop of rope could have stopped our breathing like that."

"Felt more like a wide belt to me," Nate replied. Jared replaced the iron bar. "It was as if it was pressing down all over my rib cage. Jared, what did you do?" Jared told him. "Good thinking! Quick, though, let's find our weapons before Spike returns."

"Right. I'll just keep this rope though," Jared replied. "You never know when it might come in handy."

"Probably not magical anymore," Jean pointed out as they left the living room."

"Rope is still rope," Jared pointed out, "and this feels like silk."

"It's yours by rights, if you want it," Jean shrugged.

"How's that?"

"Spoils of war," she replied. "It was by your actions that it came into our hands, so to speak, therefore you get first dibs." They made their way into the kitchen and started looking around.

"Damn!" Nate swore. "I was hoping our guns would be in here."

"Our pal Spike must have taken them outside," Jared guessed.

"That's probably why he went out," Jean agreed

"The barn!" Jared concluded. "I wonder why I didn't see your weapons while I was in there."

"They're probably hidden under the floor," Nate told him. "Looks like these are the best we can do," he said, gesturing toward a rack of kitchen knives. "Wish we had Mark here. He's the knife man on this team."

"Great choice," Jean gripped, drawing a paring knife. "The best knife was the one Spike disposed of already."

"Well you'd better choose quickly," Jared replied, "because Spike's on his way back right now."

"It's just not right, Jack," one of the Greenpeace soldiers said while they changed the flat tire. "Killing people and all this war. This isn't what I joined Greenpeace for."

"Watch that kind of talk, Ben," Jack replied. "If one of the brass hears you, you'll be on the wrong side of a court martial."

"Yeah," the third soldier agreed, "as in firing squad. Ben, we're your friends, but there are plenty in the barracks who would turn you in for the brown-nose points alone and that doesn't count the fanatics."

"I know, Erik," Ben nodded, "but tell me how this war is helping the environment. This world's in worse shape than ever. Pollution is at an all time high because of the destruction."

"You got that right," Erik agreed. The only clean air is in Elf-held territory, but once you get outside... I'm surprised mankind isn't dying from the poisons in the air."

"It's not that bad out there," Jack corrected him. "Just seems that way after you've been inside a while. No, the elves are the best thing that ever happened to us. They came back to save the world, and just in time too. Soon the regions of clean air and ecological balance will merge and become one."

Ben and Erik glanced at each other, realizing that they had better say no more or they'd be dead as soon as they rejoined their company. "Perhaps you're right," Erik told Jack. Ben nodded his nervous and equally bogus agreement.

They were nearly finished, having to tighten only one more nut, when they heard an abrupt noise behind them. Turning, they found themselves facing three automatic rifles and the people behind them.

"Stand easy," Shelby told them tightly. "Keep your hands up and move away from the jeep."

"Resistance!" Jack spat at them.

"Right on the first guess," Mark laughed mirthlessly. "Keep moving, Greenie."

Ben and Erik allowed themselves to be herded away from the jeep, but Jack tried edging away from the indicated direction.

"Uh uh, Greenie," Jim drawled, admonitorily. "This way."

Jack started to obey Jim's directions but, without warning, suddenly dived into the bushes. Jim squeezed the trigger of his M-25e, sending a burst of gunfire after the fleeing Jack. That burst was answered by three quick shots from Jack's handgun. One bullet struck Jim's left arm, but he was able to ignore it for the time it took to empty the magazine of his rifle in Jack's direction. After that there was silence from the brush.

"Got him," Jim gasped, "I think."

"Jim," Shelby asked, not taking her eyes off the other two prisoners, "are you all right?"

"Arm hurts like hell," Jim replied, checking the wound, "but it just knicked me. I'm bleeding a bit, but the bullet didn't hit a major vein."

"We'll have Jean look at it when she gets back, but we'd better fix you up as best we can for now. Mark, go make sure of the one in the bushes. You two," she directed her speech to the two surviving captives, "I want you to drop your gun belts. Do it slowly, because I don't have to tell you what'll happen if you make me nervous."

"Are you really with the Resistance?" Ben asked, following orders meticulously. "Because if you are, I want to join you."

"You'll get your chance later," Shelby told him flatly. "Both of you will, but until we know you're safe, we'll have to treat you like the enemy."

"Of course," Ben replied.

"Ben," Erik said, looking at his comrade in shock, "what are you saying? The brass will shoot you for sure for that!"

"Erik, this is our chance to get out. The brass can't touch us now. Come on, we've both spoken of this."

"It's not safe," Erik insisted.

"Quiet, both of you," Shelby commanded. "Move over there away from your weapons!" They went where she pointed and sat down quietly at a picnic table keeping their hands in plain sight on the table top.

"All clear," Mark reported a moment later, "Jim put several shots into the other one." He carried Jack's gun and ammunition and gave it to Jim - spoils of war.

"Sorry about your friend," Shelby told Ben and Eric. "We don't normally kill prisoners, not without a trial anyway."

"He was no friend," Ben replied. "A comrade, maybe, a barracks-mate, but a friend? No, he was too much a fanatic and would have turned us into the brass in an instant if he had proof we wanted out."

Shelby nodded. "Mark, tie these two to the table for now." When that was done she was able to put down her weapon and see to cleaning and dressing Jim's wound. "It's nasty," she told him, "and it'll require stitches, but this should hold until We get back to HQ. Now where the hell are the others?"

"Quick," Jean told them more as a command than a suggestion, "back into the living room. We'll take him as he walks through the door."

Jared looked at the seven-inch boning knife he held and shrugged. At least it was better than the small paring implement Jean was stuck with.

From the living room they could hear the kitchen door open and the light footsteps of the elf as he

entered the house. Spike was whistling an odd modal tune as he walked toward the living room. It reminded Jared of certain bits of Renaissance music he had heard back in college.

Jean and Nate stood on either side of the door, waiting for the elf. They waved Jared away so he would be out of sight when Spike came through the doorway. He took half a step into the room, but elves have excellent peripheral vision and with a slight grunt he turned left to face Jean and Jared. With a casual slapping gesture he sent Jean flying into Jared and both fell painfully to the oaken floorboards.

That move, however, was his downfall for as soon as he turned, Nate went into action, bringing his knife to the elf's throat. It had been his intention to take Spike captive, or failing that to slice his throat, but when the knife touched Spike's skin a great shower of sparks exploded outward from the contact. Spike went down, great gushes of bright green blood spewing out of what was left of his throat. His body shook with a great spasm just once and then he died.

Nate looked at his knife and discovered that most of the blade was gone and what was left looked as though it had been melted. He tossed the useless tool away.

"What a mess," Jared commented.

"Yes," Jean agreed. "Well, now we know what happens when they touch cold iron. No wonder they needed those immunization spells."

"I thought he was immune," Nate commented. "He picked up that knife blade only fifteen minutes ago or less."

"Must have been a very short-term spell," Jean replied. "Hey! Is he smoking? Quick, turn him over." Nate and Jared did and immediately saw Spike's lifeblood-soaked shirt burst into flame. They backed up and watched as the elf's body was quickly engulfed and consumed by the intense blaze.

"Oh hell!" Nate muttered. "The whole house is going up." He and Jared stood transfixed as the fire quickly spread up the wall and across the floor. Jean alone had the presence of mind to react. She ran to the kitchen and although the water wasn't running, she found a pot full of water with a few raw vegetables in it. She threw the unmade soup on the fire, but the heat of the elf's self-immolation had already burned through the floor boards under him and the still-burning remains fell through into the basement. They managed to use the ratty curtains to damp out the fire on the first floor, but the smoke coming up from the basement was too thick to see what was going on down there.

"Let's go, team," Nate choked out, no longer entranced by the sight of the burning elf, "before the smoke does us in."

Heavy plumes of smoke were billowing out of the cellar door as they exited the house. A few minutes later the smoke became thinner and it soon became apparent that the fire wouldn't spread.

"Damn! I never knew they did that!" Jean exclaimed.

"It's new to me too," Jared agreed. "Do you think that's why we've never found archaeological evidence of elves?"

"Could be. Let's check out the barn."

"Horses!" Nate exclaimed delightedly as they entered. "This is a great haul."

"Some really high quality tools too," Jared pointed out, "although they do need a lot of cleaning and oiling to recondition them."

"Found our weapons!" Jean called from the hay loft. "And a few more besides - knives and pistols mostly."

"They must have been out here waylaying passers-by for months," Nate commented as he and Jared climbed up to the loft.

"Why not since the coup?" Jared asked.

"Something one of them said before you got there. I got the impression that the man and woman had killed and eaten the original owners of this farm. Spike came along soon after. I'm not sure what their arrangement was, but evidently he showed up from time to time to bring them some supplies in return for which they did something for him."

"Sounds like the usual sort of arrangement. What did they do and were they as crazy as they seemed?" Jared asked.

"Haven't the foggiest," Nate replied, "and crazier. I think they were sick. Lack of dietary supplements maybe. What do you think, Jean?"

"I'm a paramedic, not a doctor," she answered, "but there was something unhealthy about them. There would have to be anyway. Nobody's so short of food that they'd be forced to turn to cannibalism." She shivered.

"This is some haul," Nate changed the subject, "There must be two dozen weapons here and ammo to match. How are we going to get it back?"

"Use the horses," Jared shrugged.

"They look rather hungry," Jean observed, looking down into the stables. "Hope they're healthy."

Together, they reclaimed their own weapons and moved the rest down from the loft. When they were back down on main floor Nate checked out the CJ-5 while Jean fed the horses and Jared looked around for anything else of possible value.

"The jeep might be salvageable," Nate declared. "We'll have to send back an expedition to check it out."

"Hey look what I found!" Jared exclaimed picking up the white wooden magic wand they'd seen Spike use. "He must have dropped it."

"Careful where you point that thing," Nate warned him. "You don't know how that thing works, if it still does."

"I can try it outside," Jared shrugged.

"Well, don't point it at anything nearby. We got pretty lucky that the house didn't go up with Spike. If you start a fire in all this grass land we'll have one hell of a disaster."

"He's right," Jean agreed. "Magic is dangerous stuff. Don't play with it."

"How do we know it's dangerous?" Jared countered. "Have you ever cast a spell?"

"No, and I don't know anyone who has, but I've seen what the Point-ears can do and I've seen what that rod can do. If you want to play with that kind of power, make sure you don't take the rest of us out with you."

Jared considered that and nodded. Then he walked outside and, pointing the wand away from both the barn and the house, tried to repeat the word Spike had used.

There was a mild pop and then the air in front of him was filled with a large double handful of confetti which was picked up by the wind and blown for hundreds of feet before falling to the ground.

"That was pretty," Jean commented dryly from the barn door. "Maybe we can use you for parties." Jared looked sheepish as he tucked the wand into his belt. "We're done here," Jean continued. "Let's load up the horses and get moving. Shelby's probably ready to skin us alive by now."

Nine

"Horses?" Shelby asked in amazement as Jared, Nate and Jean walked into view. "This had better not be your idea of a meal."

"Not hardly," Jean replied, "we didn't find any food, but we did make a pretty good haul after all. Who're the elf-friends?" A quick explanation of two long stories later, everyone joined the ranks of the informed.

"Captain," Ben suggested from where he and Jack were tied to the table, "I think it's only fair to warn you that it's been almost an hour since our convoy left here. Since we're not likely to be catching up, someone is bound to come back looking for us."

"That's a good point. Jean, how is Jim's arm?"

"You seem to have patched him up fairly well. It should hold until Doc can sew him up."

"Good, but he won't be heading back to HQ directly. Nate, I want you to go with Mark and Jim in the jeep to Fort Devens. I've prepared a quick report on the increased traffic we've observed today. You can tell them about what you found. Jim, have their medics patch you up as soon as you get there. Now get going."

"They might do better if they wear our uniforms," Ben pointed out."

"They might," Shelby agreed, "but they can take the next exit and stick to the back roads until they're out of Point-ears territory. The risk isn't too great that way."

"You've done this before?" Ben asked. Nobody answered. "All right, security. I understand that. We get that story thrown at us all the time too."

Shelby ignored that and told the three men to move out. Jim and Mark were already loaded up and Nate merely had to throw his pack in the back and climb on in. A minute later they were out of sight.

When they were gone Shelby asked to see the wand Jared had found. "Interesting," she commented, handling the artifact as though it were highly explosive. "Do you know how to use it?"

"He can make a shower of confetti," Jean laughed. "Show her." Jared shrugged and pointing the wand off into the woods, once more spoke the inhuman word that activated the inherent spell.

This time, however, instead of a harmless shower of shredded paper, a bright yellow-white cone of energy sizzled out of the wand and burned its way through the trees. There was also an incredibly loud roar of thunder. When the image of that horribly bright light and the sound of rolling thunder faded, it became obvious that everything that had been in the path of the energy cone was no longer there. The horses panicked and tried to break the ropes that tied them to the nearby trees, but the ropes were strong and they soon quieted down.

"My god!" Shelby gasped. "Disintegration?"

"No," Jared disagreed, "That would have left dust or something. This left absolutely nothing, not even the air. That's where the thunder came from; air rushed in to fill that instant vacuum."

"Where did it go?" Shelby asked. Nobody had an answer. "Well, that decides it. Somebody must have heard all that noise even if they didn't see the light. We had better get moving before we have more company."

The rest of the trip went by without incident. They traveled cross-country parallel to the highway at a slow rate, but at least they were able to keep moving. They crossed under the highway at dusk and found that the heavy traffic seemed to have increased.

"Any idea of what's going on?" Shelby asked Ben and Erik while they waited under a bridge for a lull in the traffic.

"The brass doesn't consult the likes of us, Captain," Ben replied.

"Yeah," Erik agreed, "It's do as you're told or face the firing squad as a traitor. Why do you think we're cooperating with you so freely? Our own captain would have us shot or worse for failing to kill you or be killed ourselves the moment you appeared, like Jack did."

"That's a stupid attitude," Shelby replied. "We had you dead to rights."

"That's the major reason for defections these days," Ben told her. "That and the fact that a lot of us joined up to save the world. Haven't seen much of that lately."

They arrived at HQ an hour after dark. Ben and Erik were quickly escorted to a detention area. Interrogation would begin the next day. Shelby, Jean, and Jared reported directly to General Grimes.

"It's good to see you back at last," the general greeted them. "I've taken the liberty of ordering your dinner to be brought here. Now, where's the rest of your team and what took you so long?"

The debriefing lasted hours. Shelby told the story in reverse, answering the general's questions first and then working her way backward to the beginning of their latest mission. When she was done, the general wanted to hear the story in chronological order from Jean and Jared. After that he just kept asking questions about various facets of the tale.

"Let me see that wand and the magic rope," he ordered Jared at one point. Jared put the smooth rod down on Grime's desk. The general studied the object without actually touching it. "Looks harmless enough, but then from what you tell me it might be our most powerful weapon if we can learn to use it. I'm sorry, Laker. Our normal custom would allow this to be yours, but I'm going to have to make an exception. This sort of weapon is just too useful to leave in the hands of any single operative. We can't afford to rely on any one person. You may keep the rope for now I want as many qualified personnel capable of using this wand as we can get. I'll see that you and your group get a year's supply of ammo credits for this weapon alone, but I'll decide on which missions this gets used when we learn to handle it reliably."

"I understand, sir," Jared replied reluctantly.

"Good man!" Grimes approved. "Tomorrow I want you to demonstrate it for all my officers and weapons experts. Now tell me more about the traffic on Route 128."

The debriefing ended shortly before dawn. The eastern sky was already well-lit and artificial lights were unnecessary to see where they were going. General Grimes told Jared to hold on to the wand until the demonstration.

"Breakfast?" Shelby yawned at Jean and Jared.

"Not for me," Jean returned. "I'm going to find a nice quiet place to curl up comfortably and sleep for the next few days."

"See you after the hibernation," Shelby laughed. "How about you, Laker? Grime's light snack can't possibly have satisfied you."

"Why not," Jared shrugged.

The mess tent was just beginning to fill up with the usual morning crowd as Jared and Shelby entered. Several people waved to them and after passing through the cafeteria-style line they joined one of the groups of wavers. The only person at the table that Jared knew by name was Otis Smith, the weapons expert who had helped him with the .22 caliber pistol before that first mission two weeks earlier.

"Well, Jared Laker," Otis said by way of greeting, "do you have a real weapon now or are you still getting by with the toy?"

"The mouse gun is history," Jared replied with a laugh. "I managed to snag an M-26 on my first mission. I'd have stopped by for advice, but we had to go right back out again."

"You've had a chance to use it?" Otis asked. Jared nodded. "Then you must let me examine it. Later today, perhaps? The only other ones we have are unused so far, and I have a few ideas of how certain parts of the automatic mechanism will wear. I hope I'm wrong."

"Why's that?" Shelby asked before Jared could.

"Bronze, no matter how well hardened it is, isn't likely to be as hard as steel. Parts will wear more quickly and fail sooner than steel. The only steel in an M-26 is the firing pin."

"The ancient Egyptians used to make very hard bronze," one of the women at the table commented. "There are writers that said their bronze swords could cut through the Romans' steel swords."

"The Roman gladius was more often made of iron, not true steel," Otis rebutted. "A good bronze is much harder than uncarbonized iron."

"Then why didn't they use bronze too?" a blond man next to Otis asked.

"Economics," Otis replied. "Iron ore is as common as dirt. Copper ore is less so and the tin necessary for bronze even less plentiful. Consequently it was cheaper to arm several Roman legionnaires with iron blades than it was to give one bronze. That was the whole reason for the iron age, in fact. Bronze weapons were relatively scarce; a warrior might own only one throughout his life and that only if he could afford it. With the discovery of how to smelt iron, however, metal weapons became available to everyone at considerably lower cost."

"Just like modern computers!" Jared commented.

"Quite. So what have you two been up to that kept you out of HQ for so long?"

Jared let Shelby tell the tale, noticing which few parts she edited out - mostly just the speculation about the reasons for increase military traffic. When conversation at the table turned to that subject on its own, she deftly deflected attention away from it by pointing out Jared's magic weapons.

"I can't demonstrate the wand just now," he told everyone after describing what it had done so far, "because there's no telling what it will do, but the rope seems safe enough. I'm not sure it will still work, though." he put the coil of rope on the table. It was now only a little over three feet long.

"That tiny piece of rope held three of you?" Otis asked disbelievingly.

"It did," Jared confirmed. "However, I could swear it was longer when I coiled it up."

"Try stretching it," Shelby suggested.

Jared did and the rope lengthened easily, while not appearing to become any thinner or breaking. He stopped when it was over twelve feet long. Next he looped it around Otis and the blond man next to him and tied it loosely behind their backs.

"Try to get out of that now," Jared said with a disarming smile.

"Nothing to it," Otis laughed. The smile on his face rapidly turned into a frown as he tried to pick the rope up over his head. Before it had contracted too much, he thought to pull on the rope so that the knot slid around until it was in front of him, but the harder he tried to loosen the knot, the tighter it became. Finally, when he and his fellow captive had been forced to stand back to back just to have breathing room, he admitted defeat. "So how do we get out of it?"

"I used a piece of iron to break the spell. Your knife would probably do the trick, but before we resort to that I'd like to try something." Jared reached out and took hold of the rope. As he did, it immediately

untied itself and shrunk back down to its one-meter length. "That's what I thought. Only the person who ties the rope can untie it as long as the spell remains unbroken."

"Cute," Shelby observed, "but you'll have to make sure no one you want to tie up is carrying any ferrous metal."

"I wasn't really considering that use," Jared replied, "although it's the most obvious one. But think about how easy it would be to use this in climbing down a wall or a cliff. And when I got to the bottom the rope would untie itself for me and shrink down to belt-length for easy carrying."

"You can also use it to tie something up securely, knowing there's no chance it will fall down or get loose," Otis pointed out. "I can't wait to see the wand in action. Any chance I can get to the demo this afternoon?"

"I'm sure Grimes had you in mind, Otis," Shelby told him. "Anyone else who's interested should talk to his captain."

Sleep was hard coming to Jared, but he managed five hours before Shelby shook him awake.

"Rise and shine, Laker," She told him. "It's show time!"

"Already?"

"It's sixteen hundred," she informed him.

"What's that in real time?" he asked, sleepily stalling for time.

"Four PM," she replied, pulling the blanket off the bed.

"Hey!" Jared protested. "I was getting up."

"Yes, but the general wants you now, and there's quite a crowd forming out there. Let's go on out and give it our best."

"I guess," Jared replied, pulling on his pants when it became obvious that Shelby wasn't going to leave until he did. A few minutes later they both arrived at the large back yard which also served as an archery practice range.

Most of the camp showed up to watch Jared demonstrate the wand late that afternoon. The archery targets had been removed from the range and in their place a single stake had been pounded into the ground. Three brightly-colored, helium-filled balloons were tied to the stake and swayed slightly in the wind.

"What's with the balloons?" Jared asked lightly as he and Shelby walked up to the firing line. "Somebody's birthday?"

General Grimes answered him. "It occurred to me that since you have as yet only accomplished random results with the device, you might do something with it that requires an object to act upon in order to be detectable. The balloons are your target. Now if you are ready, soldier, turn and fire."

Jared shrugged and turned his mind toward the balloons that were floating some thirty feet away from

him. He drew the wand from his belt and pointed it at the balloons. He took a deep breath and paused as a sudden thought crossed his mind.

"General?" he asked, relaxing his stance.

"What is it now, Laker?" Grimes countered roughly.

"I was wondering if there was anything specific you wanted me to do to the balloons?"

"What?"

"Well, maybe I've only had random results because I wasn't really concentrating on any one objective."

"Good point. Make the balloons burst if you can."

"Yes, sir," Jared replied and once more pointed the wand. He pictured the balloons expanding until they burst and then spoke the odd monosyllable that activated the wand.

A three-foot spear of sparkling light appeared midway between Jared and the balloons. The sound of lightly tinkling bells could be heard as the entire crowd held their breath waiting to see what would happen next. Then the glittering sphere began to move back toward Jared. he threw himself to the ground just as it passed overhead and it went on to hit Jean who had been standing directly behind him. The sparkles covered Jean quickly and just as quickly disappeared as though she had absorbed them.

"Jean," Shelby asked, "are you all right?"

"It felt strange," Jean replied. "Kind of tingly, you know? Why? What's wrong?"

"Wrong? That all depends. How do you feel about being a blond?" It was true. Somehow the spell had changed her dark brown hair to very pale, almost platinum blond.

"Blond? Really? Anybody got a mirror?" Jean asked. Nobody did. "Oh well, if I don't like it, I can always let it grow out, or dye it back if it's going to grow that way from now on."

"Want me to try again, sir?" Jared asked as he got up from the ground.

"No, Laker. I can see that you don't have any control over the device. Let someone else try it. Any volunteers?" he asked the assembled crowd. Everyone had been talking at once, commenting on Jean's sudden change of hair color and other possible things the wand might do. But when Grimes called for volunteers they shut up instantly. Many of those present would have loved to try the magic wand out, but they also knew the old adage about volunteering for a potentially dangerous assignment. In short, nobody spoke up. "Very well, I'll try it."

"Sir," Shelby stopped him, "with all due respect, I don't think you should put yourself at risk. Please allow me to try."

"Very well," General Grimes agreed, perhaps a bit too readily for Shelby's comfort. "Try it out, captain."

Shelby accepted the pale, smooth rod from Jared, running her hands up and down the artifact to get the feel of it. "What is that word you used?" she asked Jared.

He told her, pronouncing it slowly and clearly. "At least that's the way it sounded when Spike said it. He was also able to use the wand without saying anything."

"Maybe he made some sort of hand gesture," Grimes suggested.

"Not that anyone noticed," Jean told him, belatedly adding, "sir."

"That's true, sir," Jared confirmed. "He might have hidden a gesture somehow, but as far as I could tell he just stretched his arm out toward his target."

"Have you tried it?" Grimes asked.

"No, sir. I've only used the wand three times now. It seemed too dangerous to play with."

"Good thinking," Grimes commended him, then turned to Shelby. "Carry on, captain."

Shelby aimed the wand and spoke the word but nothing happened. She tried again and once more there were no discernable results. After that she gave the wand to General Grimes who, likewise, was unable to make it function. After that, everyone in the camp was required to try, but one by one it became apparent that it would only work for Jared.

"It appears you get to keep the wand, Laker," Grimes conceded after everyone else had failed. "Your orders are to practice with it at least an hour every day while you are in camp. There are several abandoned houses, a quarter of a mile to the east. Do you know the area? Good. You will practice there and no closer. Bring someone with you to take notes. I want a full report of everything that it can do on my desk each and every evening. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir." The general turned and walked back to his office. By that time everyone except Shelby, Jean, and Otis had wandered off to dinner.

"So tell me," Otis said, suggestively sidling up to Jean. "Is it true blonds have more fun?"

To Jared's surprise, the usually frosty ex-brunette gave Otis a smile that could have turned Antarctica into a tropical paradise and replied, "Let's find out."

Ten

Shelby volunteered to act as observer when Jared went out for "firing practice" with the wand the next morning.

"I don't mind having you along," Jared said as they walked through the woods, "but as one of only three captains at HQ don't you have more important things to do?"

"Strangely enough," she replied with a lightness Jared had not yet observed in her, "no. At the moment this is the most important thing happening related to my responsibilities. All part of the job, don't you

know. Besides, it gives me a chance to get out of camp, without being on yet another death-defying mission against the vicious killer elves."

"You make what we're doing sound like a bad movie," Jared observed.

"Think about it a moment. If I'd told you what the world would be like today just two and a half years ago, would you have believed it?"

"No. I might have suggested an intensive course of therapy though."

"Exactly. We're living in interesting times, our own worst nightmare, enjoying the sort of adventures that are always wonderful in the third person or the past tense, preferably both. In a situation like this you have to maintain a certain sense of humor. It's that or you'll burn out after a few missions. Why else do you think there was so much banter between the members of the team last mission? It's a way of dealing with the pressure. You'll notice that the jokes almost never get personal and very few of us take them very seriously."

"What about Jean?" Jared asked. "You and she seem to be at odds as often as not."

"I doubt she and I will ever be close friends," Shelby admitted. "She'll never forgive me for my promotion to captain. She joined up a month before I did and feels she should have been promoted instead of me. She's a good team player, though, and one of the most dedicated fighters we've got. She does what she's told and does it well, showing the initiative that will probably get her that promotion one of these days. God knows the Resistance needs more officer material."

"But then you don't like her any more than she does you," Jared guessed correctly.

"It's true. Both of us are just too competitive in the same areas. We'll always be rivals. I'd probably be the jealous one if I were in her position."

"Fair enough. I've been meaning to ask - just what is your job? Captain Watney is in charge of the HQ office and Captain Rymut coordinates all foray teams stationed at HQ, but your job description isn't even in the files."

"Really? I wonder why not. It's no big secret. I'm in charge of special missions. Rymut sends people out on the usual foraging parties, intelligence gathering and guerilla raids, but Grimes has me doing the odd jobs. That usually translates as 'most dangerous', although I also get assigned to the occasional routine raid, like your first mission. That magic toy of yours is unusual too, so you've been permanently assigned to me."

"I wasn't already?"

"Of course not. As a matter of fact nobody else is. I pick and choose my teams from the best Rymut has available. Admittedly that usually includes the same cast of characters, but it all depends on the mission. The raid on Hojo's was a nonspecialized mission, so I took the three best jacks, as in 'Jack of all trades', plus two novices - you and Dennis. The night we found you, on the other hand, we were on our way to raid a suspected temporary prison. Point-ears don't take good care of their prisoners so I requisitioned Doc and two paramedics in addition to Jean. Otis was there that night too along with his squad of sharpshooters. Well, we were right about the function of the house in Brookline, but were too late. We saw you and the others being loaded on the truck and followed along for a while until we were in a good position to run you off the road."

"Run us off the road? What were you driving? All I've seen around here are jeeps."

"This development you're to practice in has a lot of houses and garages," Shelby told him, smiling. "Most of the garages hold a vehicle or two, and three of the houses have been gutted and their floors reinforced so they can hold somewhat larger vehicles. We used one of the trucks that night."

"So why are most missions accomplished on foot?" Jared asked.

"See many gas stations around here? We don't have a steady supply, so we use only what we must and keep a reserve for what we hope will be the final push for liberation."

"But gasoline can get too old, you know"

"We rotate what we have. Actually from what the general tells me, we've had a superfluity of fuel since we drained the tanks at that rest area and its opposite number up the road. I suspect we'll be using the jeeps a bit more for the next month or so until we use up everything over Grimes' optimum reserve level."

"How many extra gallons do we have?"

"Enough to make one hell of a lot of Molotov cocktails. Well, here we are."

They had come to the edge of the short expanse of woods and stood where their path intersected an ancient stone wall where generations of exploring children had eroded a break in the mortarless structure. Beyond the wall the path emptied out into the foot of a dead-end street that had somehow never evolved into a full-fledged cul-de-sac.

The development was one of the hundreds of middle-class clusters that typified residential areas of the latter decades of the twentieth century. The one and two-story houses had been carefully laid out by their developer in order to reap the greatest possible profit. Jared's opinion of such developments was that they were just a bit too closely clustered for the money they cost.

"With so many houses nearby," Jared asked, "why are we living in tents?"

"We use this area for practice and training in urban and suburban assault missions - I'll make sure you know when that's going on so you can avoid it - but we'd be too visible if we were always here. The trees hide a lot especially from aerial observation. The elves may not fly, but some of their friends do."

He accepted that answer with a nod and a shrug before launching into his next question. "Which houses and garages are hiding motor vehicles?"

"Sorry, Laker, but that info is on a 'need to know' basis only."

"I think I do need to know, Shelby. You've already seen what this thing can do." He brandished the wooden rod meaningfully. "I wouldn't want to destroy any of our valuable resources."

"Good point. Well, one of the trucks is in that house at the end of the street. The others I'll point out as we go. Cars, jeeps, pick-ups and the like, get moved around from time to time and can be anywhere. Bob Watney keeps tabs on all our inventory, but he won't tell you, or me either, where anything is unless we have the authorization to check them out. Even then he'll only tell you where the specific item you're taking is."

"Anyone can look it up in the files," Jared pointed out, remembering just how easy it had been for him to scan them, looking for information about how the Resistance was run.

"True," Shelby agreed, "but only Bob and one or two of the people under him knows where to find that info in the files. Besides, he isn't particularly sticky about giving that information. Believe me, if you have a legitimate reason to take out a car, he'll have the keys in your hands before you can get around to asking for them."

"So I'll have to assume that every garage has a vehicle of some sort," Jared concluded. Shelby nodded. "Let's find a backyard spot on the edge of the development where I won't be pointing directly at a house or HQ."

They spent the better part of the next hour until they found the perfect spot on the south side of the small development where there were a trio of tennis courts and an open field with a baseball diamond that had turned feral.

"This seems appropriate," Jared mused as they waded through the tall grass to home plate. He held the eighteen-inch wand and gave it a loose swing it as though it were a baseball bat. As he did so a set of soft, rising, bell-like tones could be heard and a scattering of what could only be described as fairy dust in sparkling multi-colored profusion emanated from the tip of the wand.

"Watch it, Casey!" Shelby warned. "I think we can consider that a strike, and don't think, even for a second, that you're going to get me to go out and shag a few."

Jared laughed. "Just take notes. Shall I try to duplicate that?"

"It would be a useless accomplishment," Shelby pointed out, pulling a large blue notebook from her pack, "but it seems harmless enough. Go ahead."

This time the field became decidedly misty and a loud foghorn echoed throughout the development. Shelby described the results in her notebook and then told him to try again. The morning progressed through a myriad of colored lights and sounds, some of which might have been effective as defensive or offensive spells, but without someone to act as a subject, it was impossible to tell. The one obvious result of all this, was that the spells still appeared to be at random. Jared and Shelby decided to call it a day after his last pair of spells.

Jared stood, still at home plate, wand in hand and, with a flourish, whipped the wand around overhead and shouted, "Play ball!" Immediately the weeds disappeared from the dilapidated diamond and the jungle of grass in the infield and outfield was replaced by a neat expanse of bright green. The pitcher's mound, which had been little more than a circle of dirt only sparsely covered with weeds, was now of regulation height and slope, and perfectly laid chalk lines marked off the baselines and batters' boxes. There were also lights erected for night play.

Jared discovered that he was now wearing a baseball uniform. Shelby was now sitting on the home team player's bench wearing a baseball cap, a camouflage-colored halter-top, and shorts and eating a hot dog. Her pen had been transformed into a bright red pennant that said, "GO TEAM!" At least her notebook had remained the same.

"Cubs?" she asked suspiciously, eyeing his uniform.

"I'd have preferred the Red Sox," he admitted, "but at least it's not a Yankees uniform. Hey! How about a bite of that hot dog?"

"Indian giver!" Shelby refused. "Make your own." She took another bite and a drop of golden brown mustard fell on to the open page of the notebook. "I'm surprised that wand didn't turn itself into a bat."

"At least we know it's not a metamorph," Jared shrugged. Then he noticed what was wrong with the field. "Damn!" he screamed. "I hate astroturf!" With that he shook the wand in the general direction of the pitcher's mound. The entire field shimmered and the sound of a major chord played on a pipe organ filled the air. When the side effects cleared up the astroturf had been replaced by freshly cut grass. "That's better," Jared decided, doing his best to mask his surprise.

"Your dog is getting cold," Shelby pointed out, trying not to act as awed as she felt. Sure enough, next to her on the bench was another ball-park frank with mustard, onions, and relish.

Eleven

"I swear it looks like a scene out of Field of Dreams," Shelby told Mark and Nate that night, "without the corn. Even the lights work."

"That's not possible," Mark replied, forgetting his dinner. "We haven't had an electrical hook-up in over a year."

"Who says they're electrical?" Shelby countered, taking another sip of the fresh coffee Nate had procured at Fort Devens. "Grimes has Jean and her choice of team looking into it right now. A shielded power source for our currently useless computers would be a big step forward."

"Forget it," Jean said, approaching the table. "I don't know how those lights work. They sure as hell shouldn't. There are no wires. The switch is neatly mounted in the box and the lights are in their sockets, but behind the switch is an empty box and the sockets don't connect to anything, not even each other."

"Bad night, Jean?" Nate asked without looking up.

"Don't ask," she replied. "How was Fort Devens?"

"Busy, or it was after we brought them the news. So busy, in fact, that they never noticed just how much I took them for. Help yourself to the fresh coffee."

"Real coffee? Not the instant mud or burnt roots we usually get?"

"The real thing, vacuum packed and good for a year. Cookie say it's a good eight month supply too. Have you done something with your hair?"

"You just noticed?" Jean asked with a light laugh as she poured herself a cup of the hot black liquid.

"You're blond. Why'd you bleach your hair?"

"I didn't," Jean replied smugly, remembering a thoroughly enjoyable night with Otis and looking forward to another.

"Just another interesting side effect of Jared's magic," Shelby explained. "Any idea if it's permanent, Jean?"

"Too soon to tell," she replied, "but I'll tell you this much, all my hair is blond now, not just on my head. I think I'll keep it this way, I just hope that if it isn't permanent I can duplicate this shade. It's very nice."

"Maybe Jared will learn how to control the wand," Mark told her. "Then you can ask him to touch up the color from time to time."

"Did I hear my name being taken in vain?" Jared asked as he walked up still wearing the Chicago Cubs uniform shirt. He poured himself some of Nate's coffee. "I wouldn't hold my breath waiting for me to control that thing. I could just have likely produced a Cricket pitch."

"You did change the astroturf to grass when you wanted to," Jean pointed out.

"And got lunch besides," Jared agreed, "but was that because I wanted it or by accident? I'll find out tomorrow, I suppose. At least this rope works easily enough and it can be used by anyone." Mark and Nate hadn't heard about what Jared had discovered about the rope yet so he demonstrated it for them and then let them try it for themselves.

"That's pretty neat," Mark admitted. "Too bad we don't have more of them. Do you think it would still work that way if it was cut in half?"

"That might just ruin it," Jared pointed out. "I wouldn't want to take the chance. It's too useful the way it is."

"All right, but I got dibs on the next one we find. Too bad the one the Point-ear wore was incinerated with his body. When do we go out next?" Mark asked Shelby.

"You just got back," she replied. "Don't you want a day or two off? You usually do."

"I want a full sabbatical after which I can retire from the role of freedom fighter and open up a small sporting goods shop, but the opportunity doesn't seem likely to present itself at the moment."

"What he means," Nate translated, "is that there's just too much going on out there for us to sit back and relax now. We talked about it on the way in tonight and decided that until the current activity dies down, we ought to be ready to start working continuously if necessary."

"What is going on out there?" Jean asked.

"There are major troop movements going on right now in Point-ear territories all over the continent. This evidently follows elvish victories in Germany and Ireland, which puts almost half of Europe under their control. The good news here, however, is that they apparently have very few APC's - armored personnel carriers. Most of the transports, on this continent at least, are the canvas covered trucks - modern Conestoga wagons - like we saw the other day. There have been similar losses in Africa, but no new governments have fallen recently. Asia continues to hold its own since the loss of India last month, but

there's been no word from Australia for over two weeks."

"Have any Point-ear forces attempted to expand their territory in America yet?" Jean asked.

"Not yet," Mark replied, "but when we left the orders had gone out to move all our troops and weapons to counter anything the elves and their friends might try."

"I'd have thought they would have been doing that all along," Jared commented. "Why haven't they attempted to pen the elves into those territories they currently control?"

"The front is too big and segmented," Nate told him. "There aren't enough people to cover every place at once."

"Maybe, but there haven't been many human victories. What the elves get they tend to hold," Mark added.

"They're an unknown quantity to the armed forces, we have trouble handling them short of nuclear weapons and the last thing we want to do is nuke our own country," Nate replied, "but just wait. One of these days, they'll stretch their resources too far or we'll find an exploitable weakness and then we'll have them. So, Shelby, when are we going out again?"

"If you really feel up to it, probably tomorrow night. I have an appointment in a few minutes with the general. We'll see if he has anything in mind for us." Shelby got up and left the mess tent.

"If you boys don't mind," Jean said getting to her feet a moment later, "I think I'll be turning in early too. Oh, Otis!" she waved at the gunnery expert and they went out together as well.

"Otis?" Nate asked. Jared smiled crookedly and nodded. "I'd have never suspected it. Otis."

"Why?" Mark countered slyly. "Because the fair damsel failed to fall for your dubious charms? Maybe you're just not her type."

"I guess not," Nate laughed. "Jared, I'd really like to see that baseball field of yours. Mind if I go along when you go out for practice tomorrow?"

"Not at all. Grimes' orders are that I take someone along to record the results I get. As long as you're willing to do that..." Jared trailed off, implying the obvious.

As it happened, Nate wasn't the only observer the next morning. Shelby had Mark and Jean accompany her as well.

"So," Jared asked Nate as the quintet stood together around home plate, "what do you think?"

"It's very nice," he replied. "Shelby, you were right, I'd almost expect to see Shoeless Joe Jackson come strolling out of the weeds, but it's not a baseball diamond."

"What do you mean?" Shelby and Jared asked together.

"The dimensions are all wrong. It's too small. I'll bet you any number of ammo creds, and at high odds too, that if you were to measure the distance between the bases, you would find them to be precisely sixty feet apart."

"No takers," Mark commented dryly. "Laker, my friend, what you have here is a softball field."

Jared looked out over the diamond. "What about the pitcher's mound? I thought softball was pitched without a mound."

"Well, maybe it's a Little League diamond. I haven't the slightest what dimensions they use."

"Well, then," Shelby interrupted them, "that will be your goal for today, Laker. See if you can turn this into a regulation-sized baseball field."

Jared shrugged and went to work while they all cleared back. So far no one had come to harm because of the wild magic that spewed out of the wooden rod and no one present cared to be the first subject of a cautionary tale concerning it.

Jared proceeded to produce a long series of visual, auditory, and olfactory effects, but except for one which turned the grass a slightly darker shade of green, none of them had any effect on the field.

"You say everyone else in the camp tried the wand but Mark and me?" Nate asked.

"And Jim as well," Shelby confirmed. "You want a shot?"

"Why not?" Nate shrugged. Jared tossed him the wand and he strolled out to home plate, struck a dramatic pose, pointed the wand and clearly exclaimed, "Zotz!"

Nothing happened.

"Oh well, it was worth a shot," he laughed. Mark was likewise unable to use the wand. Jared went back to casting random spells. He finally called it quits when he thought he had turned the sun green. The effect, they learned, was actually caused by the sudden appearance of a large transparent green cloud, which quickly dissipated in the wind.

"Sure hope it wasn't poisonous," Jared commented. "I think that's enough for today."

"You couldn't even produce lunch?" Shelby teased him with a smile to show she didn't really mean it. "Sorry, guys. You should have been here yesterday. Jared makes one hell of a hot dog."

"Hell, Laker!" Nate feigned indignation. "Couldn't you have waited for us before you conjured up a nitrite feast?"

"You wouldn't have appreciated the dress code," Jared replied and went on to describe what had happened to Shelby's uniform.

"You boys would have looked cute in halter-tops," Jean snickered.

"I'm sure we would have been much more fashionable," Nate replied grinning. "Hey, Jared, we're about the same size. How much would you like for that Cubs uniform?"

"I don't know, Nate. I've always been rather partial to the Cubs," Jared replied. Actually he was more than willing to trade it, but he had already learned a few valuable lessons in haggling from Nate.

"Lunchtime?" Mark asked hopefully, trying to change the subject.

"In a few minutes," Shelby agreed looking at her watch. "But first we have some talking to do, which is why I wanted you all here this morning. You wanted another mission, well we've got it. As you know, our intelligence shows that there are very few humans left in the Greater Boston area aside from the elf-friends."

"What happened to all the people?" Jared asked.

"About seven hundred thousand can be accounted for in the concentration camp-cities of Methuen, Haverhill, Lowell, and of course Camp Goodfellow outside Exeter, New Hampshire."

"And the rest? The millions unaccounted for?" Jared demanded.

"About two million managed to escape during the initial coups," Shelby told him. "The rest? We don't know anything for certain."

"They're dead." Jean said flatly.

"There's no proof of that, Jean," Shelby corrected her sharply.

"Then where are they? The damned Point-ears have been killing them or subjecting them to various tortures, maybe eating them."

"Cannibalism!" Jared translated, horrified. "I've heard the rumors."

"Strictly speaking," Mark commented, "it isn't cannibalism. We're not the same species, but I'm all for redefining the term to include the eating of any intelligent species."

"We're getting off the subject," Shelby said, putting the brakes on that line of conversation. The Point-ears' magical shield disrupts the guidance systems of any in-coming missiles. However, there was recent success in Seattle where Resistance fighters managed to poke a hole or a window in the elvish shield by turning on a sufficient number of electrical devices in a relatively compact area. Missiles were then able to detect a safe path through that window and proceed on to their targets.

"General Meisterhaus at Devens wants to start a missile attack on certain locations thought to be elvish command centers. He'll be coordinating with the base commanders at Otis, Westover, and Quonset Point."

"Whew!" Nate exclaimed. "That pretty much sums up the military force in New England, doesn't it?"

"Well, it leaves off Bangor, Loring, New London and Plattsburg too, for that matter and that one's a SAC base. Face it, New England doesn't have the highest military concentrations in the country, even though the mothballed bases have been reopened in the past two years. It's going to be up to us to provide them their window. Jean, Mark, and Nathan, I want each of you to assemble a three-man team. I'll be taking Jim Bass and Laker here on my team. Also get Captain Watney to issue each of you a jeep. I don't care to walk all the way to where we're heading."

"Shelby," Mark asked, "where are we heading?"

"Brookline," she replied. "Not far from Boston proper."

Jared shivered at the sound of the name "Brookline" and strange thoughts flickered across the back of his mind, just out of the reach of his consciousness. Abruptly he knew there was unfinished business in Brookline. However, just what it was eluded him.

Twelve

"We can't go straight down Route 9," Shelby told Jared as she led the four-jeep caravan. "There's a major check point in the way."

"That's true," Jared agreed, "but unless this map is totally inaccurate it's about mid-way between Cypress and High Streets. I think we can cut over to Walnut for a few blocks and avoid it."

"Hey, you're really getting the hang of navigating with a night scope," Jim complemented him from the back of the jeep.

"I'm cheating a bit," Jared admitted. "Some cousins of mine used to live on Walnut Street. I've been this way before, but yes, I think I am getting the hang of seeing everything in green. Too bad I hate green. Anyway, we can park at the foot of Walnut since our targets are all within a few blocks of that corner."

"No," Shelby countered. "I want to get as close as possible to the targets, we'll take High over to Route 9. It'll be a quicker job that way and less running if we get into trouble."

"You're the boss. May I suggest, however, that we turn the jeeps around so we face back toward Walnut?"

"You may, but I'd already decided to. It'll make for a quick get-away. Good thinking, by the way. A few more missions worth of experience and I might just try you out as a team leader."

Shelby followed Jared's direction, turning to avoid the known elvish check-point, and finally bringing the line of jeeps to rest just in from the corner as they had discussed.

All conversation was kept to a minimum and that at a whisper. Shelby had taken care to brief her teams before they had left, so there was little to discuss now. Shelby checked her watch while each team unloaded a five-gallon can of gasoline. Everything was on schedule so she merely nodded to her team leaders before they started out toward their targets.

This was Jared's first walk through the central war zone. Last time there was neither time nor opportunity to check out the damage. Now he could see that over half the buildings in the area had been burned out and glass and charred wood littered the sidewalks and gutters. The streets were clear only because someone had run a snowplow through them. The sour, unwholesome smell of burned buildings permeated the air even two years after the damage.

"Ever notice how different burnt wood smells when it's from a building rather than a camp fire?" Jared whispered to Shelby. She nodded grimly, putting a finger to her lips.

"I've been here before," Jim told him softly. "A lot of this glass came from people throwing rocks as they left the city. There's not a single pane left below the fourth floor."

"That's a lot of rocks," Jared commented.

"Rocks, bullets, other people. You name it. If it wasn't nailed, bolted or welded down, they threw it."

"Sh!" Shelby admonished them.

At the corner, Jean leaned carefully forward to check for signs of life. Seeing none, she waved everyone forward.

"Here's where we split up," Shelby said sotto voce. "Keep an eye on your watches, timing is essential. Good hunting."

"Good hunting!" they responded.

Jean led her group up the street toward the check-point. She had chosen to include Otis in her group so Shelby assigned her the target most likely to come under fire - an intact elementary school with an emergency Civil Defense generator in the basement.

Mark got the other school and was leading his squad diagonally across the street. They were soon out of sight. Nate and his little band had the nearest assignment, the fire station at this same corner. Like the two schools, the building was known to be intact and a designated bomb shelter with an emergency generator.

Shelby had chosen the least likely target for her group; a nearby hardware store, where they hoped to find one or more small generators into which they could plug as many electrical devices as they had outlets. Intelligence indicated that this target, which had been looted very early on in the war, might still have a portable generator or two in a stockroom in the back. The room was locked behind a reinforced steel door and nobody had bothered to see what was on the other side yet.

Jared and Shelby together were carrying their five-gallon cans full of fuel while Jim lugged several heavy metal tools designed to assist fire-fighters open locked doors. They stepped into the looted store through the remains of a plate-glass window.

The front room had been fairly well picked clean by looters and later by Resistance agents looking for any thing of value. Tools were always useful. There was an open door leading into the back of the store where they found a small room, equally empty, and three doors. One led to a small bathroom, another into the basement, and the other was the steel door they had come to investigate.

"You can pick locks, Jim?" Jared asked as Jim settled down to study his objective.

"It's no big deal," Jim shrugged. "I could probably pick my way through this one in a few minutes, but we're not going to find out tonight." He picked up a large tool that looked like a hyperthyroid pair of pliers with a twist, fitted it on one side of the door and with a short, jerking motion caused the locked door to fly open. "Ah modern technology," he laughed. "This causes a bit of damage to the frame, but I didn't put down a deposit before moving in, did you?"

"Let's check it out," Shelby cut off the banter and led the way inside. "Oh hell, everything is still in crates."

"No windows in here," Jared noted. "If we close the door behind us, we can use our flashlights." Shelby agreed and they started rummaging through the crates.

"Here they are," Jim reported. "Three five thousand-watt generators."

"And there are enough lamps and other devices here to do the job," Shelby added, "I hope."

"It's a shame to lose all this other inventory," Jared commented, looking at a bolt cutter. "There's some really valuable stuff here."

"Casualties of war," Shelby replied.

"What if we set these up next door?" Jared suggested. "The Point-ears are going to come and shut these things down. That's almost a given."

"Maybe not," Jim disagreed. "Hopefully they'll be too busy ducking missiles, to worry about these. By the time the smoke clears, these generators may be out of fuel."

"I wouldn't bet on it," Jared countered. "If we put these next door, however, there's a chance we can come back for the rest some other night."

Shelby checked her watch. "We have forty-five minutes. That ought to be enough time to move and set up. All right, let's try that."

The store next door was once a dress shop. Scavengers had left the place in disarray, but there were still a lot of garments thrown about around the store.

"Looters were being practical, I see," Shelby observed as she and Jared poured fuel into one of the generators. "They left the fancy clothes behind, but I'll bet they took all the underwear and other basics."

"No takers here," Jim replied, plugging a portable paint spraying system into one of the outlets of the generator he was working on. "I noticed a CB base station on one of the shelves next door. That should create more useful radio noise than any mere light bulb." They finished setting up just in time to meet their schedule.

"Good!" Shelby approved, stepping back to admire their handiwork. "Let's get out of here. The noise from these things alone will attract attention."

They quickly made their way back to the rendezvous point and found Nate and his team waiting for them.

"Success?" Nate asked hopefully.

"Not bad," Shelby replied and gave him an abbreviated version of what they had done. "How about you?"

"Piece of cake," Nate chortled. His team members groaned as he said that. "Well actually we found gas in the generator, but it had spoiled so we had to drain it out and put some fresh stuff in. It was a messy job, but we managed it in time. Here's Mark."

Mark and his team ran up. "All set!" he reported out of breath. "Ready to evacuate. Where's Jean?"

"I don't know," Shelby replied, "but you're right about evacuating. The Point-ears or their friends are bound to investigate any time now. Take your teams back to camp. Laker, Bass, take our jeep back too. I'll hitch a ride with Jean when she gets back."

"No," Jared disagreed, "I'll stay too. If you have to go looking for Jean's team, you're going to need someone to back you up."

"The hell I am!" she snapped, then changed her mind. "Very well. You stay. Jim, hitch a ride with Nate. Now go!" A minute later only two jeeps were left at the darkened Brookline corner.

"Now we wait?" Jared asked.

"Not at all. You had a good idea. Let's go looking for them. We do know where they went after all."

Jean's target was some three blocks away and on the far side of Boylston Street. Shelby and Jared had to dive into alleys or behind various objects several times to avoid being spotted by roving Greenpeace soldiers.

"Things are heating up," Jared commented. "Think they're on to the generators?"

"Probably," Shelby replied as an approaching sound began to make itself heard. A few seconds later a pair of missiles appeared high in the sky and then suddenly dropped down to rooftop level and started following streets eastward into Boston. Another missile followed close behind and then another. "On the other hand, it looks as though our work is reaping a few benefits."

There were flashes of light on the eastern horizon, but the sounds of explosions were delayed for almost a quarter of a minute, and still more missiles came flying in through the window that had been opened in the elvish anti-technological shield.

"Coming in fast and heavy," Jared observed.

"Of course," Shelby replied. "There's no telling how long the window will be open nor when we'll be able to give them another chance to bombard the High Command in Boston."

"Who gets to go in and check out the damage?"

"There's already a cell inside the city. Tenth floor of the Hancock Tower, at least that's the office floor."

"The tenth?" Jared asked. "Why not in the penthouse?"

"No power. You want to climb up sixty flights of stairs? No one else does either, although they do keep a small party on look-out duty up there. Ten flights is bad enough. I was stationed there for a few months before my promotion to captain."

"Look!" Jared pointed across the street. "Over there in that alley. Do you see anyone?"

"Behind the dumpster? Yes, I think you're right. The street's clear, let's check it out." They ran across the street and stood carefully to the side of the alley. "Damn!" Shelby swore softly. "We should have worked out a set of passwords. Oh well, there's no help for that now. Jean!" she called softly. "It's Shelby."

"We're here," came the reply. "Come on in."

"Voice sounds right," Shelby muttered. "Let's take a chance, but keep your gun ready." Together they slipped into the alley and turning around the corner of the dumpster, faced the rifle barrels of Jean and her team, returning threat for threat. "Luck is with us tonight," Shelby breathed with relief, lowering her rifle. "What's wrong? Why didn't you get back on schedule?"

"We made a little discovery on the way back," Jean replied. "Come on up to the other end of the alley. I've something to show you two. Otis, Ben, stay here. We'll be right back."

"Right," Otis agreed, sitting back to relax as though he were in his own living room. Ben looked uncertain for a moment, then sat down facing Otis.

Jean led Shelby and Jared to the other end of the alley and then through a hole in a picket fence and across a house's back yard.

"We were running late," Jean told them quietly on the way, "so I decided that it would be best to cut over a block and take the side street back. I figured we'd make better time that way 'cause we wouldn't have to avoid as many patrols, especially those who had already detected the activation of our other targets."

"Sound thinking," Shelby admitted. "So what went wrong?"

"Not wrong," Jean corrected her. "Unexpected. Check out that white house with the two walnut trees in front. No, with your night-scopes. Be careful, though. They have night-scopes too, probably better than ours."

"I see what you mean," Shelby acknowledged. Standing on the porch were two uniformed men with automatic rifles. As Shelby and Jared watched another two armed men walked slowly around the house in opposites directions, meeting in front, turning and returning to the back yard.

"Two more," Jared pointed out, "in the porches of the houses on each side."

"I see them," Shelby replied, then asked Jean, "Any others we don't see?"

"Oh yes. There are at least two armed elves just inside the door."

"Elves?"

"I saw them when a car drove up. A Rolls-Royce of all things. Five people got out of the car, but driver stayed inside - so much for etiquette. Three of the five were elves and two were human - bodyguards, I think. The elves went to the two guards at the door and showed them some sort of ID or authorization - couldn't tell from here - and then the two Point-ear guards inside came out and checked it again before letting the elves inside. The two humans stayed on the porch. A few minutes later the elves came out and they drove off."

"How long ago was this?"

"Just a few minutes before you found us. Here comes another car."

As they watched from their place of concealment, a red Toyota minivan drove up and several people got out.

"Can't see them from here," Shelby complained.

"Let's go inside," Jean suggested and they backed up and then entered the house they had been crouching next to through the back door. "We watched from the second floor last time," Jean explained.

"Good thing this isn't one of the burned houses," Jared noted.

"This block seems to have been left pretty much untouched," Jean told him. "Including the gardens and lawns which are rather overgrown."

"I'd noticed."

From the second floor they were able to see that another five people - four humans and an elf - were showing some sort of paper to the elf guards from inside the house. One of the humans was arguing with the guards.

"I'd like to hear what they're saying," Shelby commented.

"No problem," Jean told her. "We had this window open before." She slid the window silently up.

"You're lucky it's so quiet," Shelby told her. "It could have given us away."

"I wouldn't have taken the chance, but Otis assured me this one would be quiet. He used to install windows and said he knew this model."

"Whatever, just don't surprise me like that again."

"Sorry."

"God damn it!" one of the men swore across the street, "I'm a major general and one of your damned allies. What's so high security that I can't see it?"

"Please, general," the elf he had come with replied soothingly, "it's not a matter of importance to you. It's only a matter of personal privacy among elves. Think of it as a religious quirk if you like."

"I don't like," the general replied.

"I will just be a minute or two," the elf replied and then entered the house.

"One hell of a way to treat an ally," the general grumped. As promised, the elf reappeared a minute later and then they drove away.

"Now what is that all about," Shelby wondered as Jean closed the window again and they started back toward the alley.

"That's what I wanted to know," Jean agreed. "Shelby, I think we have enough of us to raid that house."

"Unfortunately not," Shelby disagreed. "I sent everyone else home as a safety precaution."

"I was afraid you'd say that. Damn! I'd have done the same thing in your position."

"On the other hand," Shelby continued, "we could come back tomorrow night if General Grimes approves."

"If they're still there," Jean pointed out. "Shelby, let me stay and keep an eye on that house. I can get a better count of the guards so there'll be less chance of being surprised."

Shelby thought about that. "We can't leave your jeep behind, you know. I just hope it hasn't been discovered yet. If Grimes doesn't approve, you'll have to walk back and that's better than ten miles."

"I'll do it," Jean insisted. "Face it, we need the advance surveillance."

"You're right. Okay, keep Otis with you though, and try to get a peak into their back yard. We've seen the sentries walking the perimeter, but for all we know there could be another twenty taking tea in the back yard."

"Will do," Jean replied with a smile.

"Oh, one more thing. Grimes may still not go along with this. If we don't show up by midnight tomorrow, you'd better start walking home."

"Agreed."

"All right. If all goes well, we'll meet you in the look-out house."

Thirteen

"So how many missiles got through last night?" Jared asked as HQ's largest troop carrier - an Iveco truck with a twelve-foot box on which the logo "South Shore Coffee, Inc." had been only partially scrubbed off - rolled down Route 9. Jim Bass was at the wheel and Shelby sat between him and Jared in the cab. Twenty men and women sat in the back waiting for the chance to go into action.

"Ninety-two," Shelby replied triumphantly, "before the window was closed, and we think that may have happened when the generators ran out of fuel."

"No word on the damage reports, I assume."

"Not a chance," Shelby laughed. "They ought to arrive sometime tonight, but our own reconnaissance shows that all those troop movements suddenly stopped when the missiles started flying. What ever's left of the Point-ears High Command must be changing plans like crazy."

"How would they have gotten the word out?" Jim asked.

"How would I know?" Shelby replied, "Elfin magic, I suppose. All I've been told is that the convoys stopped moving for several hours before starting up again, except that many of them reversed their direction. Just between you and me, given the changes in traffic our scouts reported, I suspect that Fort Devens is going to be under siege soon, but don't spread that. It's only my own guess."

"Can they hold out?" Jared asked.

"Who knows? Obviously the elves don't think so, or they'd be trying something else."

"Mind if I ask you a question about tonight's mission?" Jared asked.

"You've been in on the planning from the start, Laker," she replied. "What don't you know?"

"I was curious about how you chose this team. Specifically, why did you leave Nate behind?"

"Nate's good, very good. I wanted to bring him along but General Grimes talked me out of it. We need someone to drive copies of the damage reports out to Fort Devens tonight, and Nate's one of the best when it comes to getting through siege and battle lines. So we're giving him a few hours off until the Downtown cell gets their reports back to HQ. Grimes wanted Mark to go with him, but Mark's our best commando. We need him more with us tonight. Satisfied?"

"I'd have been satisfied with anything besides an evasion. Thank you. Uh, Jim, our turn is coming up in two blocks."

"Got you, navigator. Shelby, This heap makes a lot of noise and there's not a lot of traffic noise at night these days."

"You want to take a wider detour?" Shelby inquired.

"No, Walnut Street, as I remember, is a long slow hill downward in the direction we're going. I propose to turn off the motor and coast down the hill. That should be quiet enough, but actually it's the escape I'm worried about. If something goes wrong, we could have trouble on the getaway."

"We have several choices," Jared said before Shelby could think her reply through. "Turn here by the way. If we're in the clear we can take our time and turn around, but if we're being chased we can either try to break through the Route 9 check-point or cut over to Jamaica Way and go out Route 1."

"Boss," Jim asked Shelby, "what do you think?"

"I think Laker's thought this out pretty well, except that our map is only partially updated. I made sure of the Route 9 status, but I didn't check Route 1. There's probably a check-point somewhere on Jamaica Way. There usually is." Jim made the turn at the head of Walnut Street and turned off the truck's motor.

"Oops," Jared said abashed into the sudden silence.

"It's not your fault," Shelby told him apologetically, "I should have checked out all the routes. Plan for every contingency; that's rule number one."

"Then why didn't you?"

"I'm only human. Route 1 goes a good deal out of our way and makes a lot of twists and turns as well so

it never occurred to me that it might be a viable escape route. Beacon Street and Comm Ave are accurate though. Do you have a good reason for not taking one of them if pressed?"

"No," Jared replied. "I'm only human too, after all. I've never driven the lengths of either of those streets, so I just didn't think of them. Sorry."

"Don't apologize," Shelby told him warmly. "We all make mistakes. The mark of a good team, though, is that they all cover for each other."

"Here we are," Jim announced. "All ashore who's going ashore!"

The back of the truck quickly emptied out and Shelby surveyed her team.

"Gather round," she commanded softly. They formed a loose semicircle around her. "Okay, this is it. Laker and I will go first. Then, thirty seconds later, I want three of you to follow and meet at the house. The rest of you will remain here until I send back the time to commence your attack on the back yard and the elf-friend guards in the surrounding houses. Mark will be in charge. Now are there any questions? No? Good. Let's do it just like I told it in the briefing." Without another word she and Jared began walking briskly toward the house where they'd left Jean and Otis.

Before walking in through the back door, however, Shelby quietly whistled the first two measures of "Yankee Doodle" and was soon answered by the next two.

"Jean?" she asked softly, gun still at the ready.

"She's upstairs," Otis replied, "Want to go up there or bring her down here?"

"We'll go up. There should be another three people behind us in a few seconds. Here," she handed him one of two brown paper bags, "I brought you dinner. It's not much, just a few sandwiches, but it's better than the emergency rations we left you last night." The second group made their way to the back door. "No problems?" Shelby asked them. They shook their heads. "Good. Stay here in the kitchen. I'll be right back." She quietly made her way upstairs and found Jean by the window.

"Thanks," Jean told her, accepting the other brown bag lunch, "I'm sick to death of beef jerky. I'd kill for a fluffernutter."

"Sorry about that," Shelby told her. "I brought turkey and rolled beef."

"And a can of Coke!" Jean was delighted. "Real Coke! Where did it come from?"

"Another one of Nate's acquisitions. Thank him for it when you see him."

"That man ought to be promoted to quartermaster," Jean said around a sip of the sweet brown liquid.

"I've recommended that before," Shelby replied. "Grimes might agree this time. It'll carry the rank of captain, though. Will you feel you've been passed over again?"

"No," Jean replied after a moment. "We need a good quartermaster and I'm sure not qualified for the job. Nate is. To tell you the truth, I've had a chance to think over my reaction to your promotion these past few days and decided you deserved it. It was Otis who pointed out that we can't all be in charge. Someone has to make the tough decisions. It was my decision to check out that farm house. I had to talk

Nate into it. If it weren't for Jared, Nate and I would be dead and eaten." She shivered and had second thoughts about the sandwich in her hand. The she shrugged and continued eating.

"I assume our friends are still across the street?" Shelby asked nodding toward the house..

"Oh yeah," Jean agreed. "There's been a steady stream of traffic like we saw last night. Once or twice each hour a car with one or more Point-ears drives up. The elves go inside and the humans stay out. A minute or two later the Point-ears come back out and they drive off. How did the missiles do last night?"

Shelby told her the same thing she had told Jared, then asked, "Have you spotted any other defenses?"

"No. Every eight hours or so a green minivan shows up with fresh guards - eight humans and two Point-ears - and there's a changing of the guard, then the old guards drive away. So far there's been no sign of who or whatever is inside. Anyone who goes in, comes out one to five minutes later."

"Any repeaters?"

"Maybe, I have trouble telling some elves apart. They don't all look alike but it's close."

"It's true," Shelby agreed. "There does seem to be less difference in their gene pool than we have in ours, or at least that's the current theory."

"Whatever," Jean shrugged, finishing off her Coke. "We checked out the backyard last night. There's nobody back there; just the guards walking the perimeter as they pass through."

"Good," Shelby replied, "When did the guards change last?"

"Three hours ago."

"Okay. I'll go give the orders to start the attack."

"Care to clue me in?" Jean asked.

"I will as soon as I've sent the word back to Mark," Shelby assured her. "You can stop watching from the window though. From now on we'll watch from the bushes. The hedges on either side of the house should be sufficient cover."

Twenty minutes later Shelby and Jared were crouched behind the hedge on one side of the house, while Jean and Otis were on the other side. The three others had been sent back individually and by different routes to Mark. Now it was time to wait and watch.

"Here comes one now," Shelby whispered, pointing up the street. An old Ford Mustang convertible with its top down and lights off came rolling down the street. "It's about time."

"They don't usually leave their lights out, do they?" Jared asked.

"Maybe they're not working," Shelby replied.

They watched as the car drove up. A human was at the wheel but the three passengers were all elves. The elves got out of the car and walked up to the two human guards.

"A bit long in the tooth, don't you think?" Shelby commented.

"What do you mean?" Jared asked.

"The Point-ears. They're nearly as tall as the humans. From what we know they keep growing all their lives, but I doubt I've ever seen elves that tall."

"Must be elders," Jared opined.

"That would be my guess. Too bad it's too late to change plans now. I'd love to capture a trio of elders."

"Probably too dangerous," Jared disagreed. "For all we know they're probably the major spell casters and could blow us apart with a wish."

"You might be right."

They continued to watch as the elves entered the house. The driver, still in the car, lit up a cigarette. The sentries passed by then.

"Hey, Mac!" one of the sentries asked. "Got an extra smoke?"

"Yeah. Sure," the driver replied and tossed him the pack.

"Thanks," the guard said, catching the pack. "The bosses don't let us smoke these things when they're around."

"Yeah, I know," the driver agreed. "Need a light?"

"No thanks," the sentry replied tossing back the pack. "I got a few matches left. Thanks again." He lit up and then continued on his rounds.

A little later, Shelby thought the elves inside the house seemed to be taking an unusually long time. She checked her watch and found they had been there for over six minutes. There was something else wrong with the picture.

"Jared," she asked, "Did I blink and miss the sentries or have they really been out of sight too long?"

"Maybe they stopped to enjoy that cigarette," Jared suggested. "Here they come now."

"Those aren't the sentries," Shelby corrected him. "Take a closer look at the one on the right."

"It's Ben, isn't it? I don't know the name of the other one."

"Michael, I think."

"So Mark has already started," Jared concluded.

"Looks that way. Just as well. It'll be two less guards to worry about when they work on the ones in the front porches."

"I think I saw someone on the far side of the house next door," Jared whispered.

"You probably did. Stand firm, they shouldn't go into action until these latest visitors leave. Damn! They've been in there for almost ten minutes."

It was another minute and a half before the three elves left the house and drove away. As soon as they were out of sight, Mark and his charges went into action.

The guards on the neighboring porches were taken out quickly but one of them gurgled as he died, attracting the attention of the remaining two human guards. They turned and fired their rifles at the Resistance fighters on the next porch.

Shelby and Jared immediately returned fire, their own weapons echoed by those of Jean and Otis. As the last two human guards fell, Jean and Jared burst forth through the hedge to rush the two elvish guards just inside. They were joined by the remainder of the fighters in a mad scramble to get on the porch.

The front door was suddenly blown off of its hinges and the Resistance found two very mean-looking elves in front of them. With a snarl, they waved their hands and almost everyone was stopped in his tracks. Jared, however, kept moving, and promptly crashed into Shelby's unyielding back. It was like running headlong into a statue. He lost his balance and fell spinning to the ground.

The two elves either didn't notice that Jared was not affected by their spell or didn't care. Ignoring him, they started making what looked like magical gestures. As they did the Resistance fighters were thrown roughly through the air crashing into nearby trees, street lights, and houses. Jared rolled onto his stomach, feeling too dizzy to stand up, and brought his M-26 to bear.

He squeezed the trigger and the gun went, "Click, click, click, click, click, click," very rapidly, spitting out the spent shells as it did. He looked at the shells and discovered that the fléchettes were still attached.

Duds? he wondered. He pulled back the trigger again and got the same results. Disgusted, he, dropped the gun, got to his feet, and drew the wand. The elves finally noticed him and tried to cast him across the street head first.

The only effect of their spells, however, was a mild buzz that Jared felt as he pointed the wooden rod at his assailants. He didn't use the elvish word he'd learned by listening to Spike. The sound that came out of his throat was something akin to a primal scream, except that it had several syllables to it. As it emerged, so did a violet beam that spread conically to embrace both elves.

The elves screamed in terror and started beating on the air in front of them in the same way that a mime does the classic routine with the ever-shrinking box. As the beam faded away, however, so did the elves.

As they finally flickered out, everything came back to life, including the twelve cartridges that Jared had fired previously. The spell released its captives without the momentum they possessed at the time they were ensnared, so nearly everyone was off balance. To that the sound of the whizzing fléchettes added further impetus to their actions and everyone threw themselves down to the ground even as the silence of the night began to once more blanket the scene.

"What happened?" Shelby asked almost immediately.

"I'll tell you later," Jared replied, helping her back to her feet. "First, we have to secure this site."

"Right! Otis, Ahmed, Lucy, and Mather, follow us. Jean, see to the wounded. Mark set up whatever

security precautions you think best. Oh, and send someone to have Jim bring the truck up here. Let's go!"

In spite of the energy she put into her orders, they approached the open doorway cautiously. Two by two they crept up the stairs on to the creaking porch. Behind them they could hear Mark and Jean giving orders and the sounds of people moving about quickly to obey them.

Jared and Shelby listened closely at the door. Jared thought he heard something from inside and off to the left and Shelby nodded agreement. They entered carefully. There was a hallway that went straight back from the door and there were rooms to the left and right. Shelby indicated that they should split up - two going each way through the house.

As Shelby and Jared moved quietly toward the dimly lit room to the left they heard a clear voice say, "Hello? Is anybody there? What's going on?"

Shelby and Jared jumped into the room and brought their guns to bear on a tall, thin elf. If an elf's height was really an indication of his age, this one was truly ancient, standing nearly seven feet tall in long powder-blue robes. The elf studied Shelby and Jared calmly.

"Hmm," he said slowly and thoughtfully, "you are not Greenpeace? No, I didn't think so. The Resistance then? Are you the Resistance."

"We are," Shelby admitted cautiously.

"Bloody well about time!" the elf said at last. "I thought you'd never get here."

Fourteen

Shelby and Jared looked at each other and then back at the aged elf. The elf smiled slightly in return.

"Mind if I sit?" he asked. Not waiting for an answer he dropped gracefully into a leather, reclining arm chair. "You humans make wonderfully comfortable furniture, but I fear I've grown a little too tall to fit in most chairs with ease. Perhaps I can have something custom-built for me when all this nonsense is over. Please make yourselves at home. I assume you're here to rescue me?"

Shelby was flabbergasted. While she had absolutely no idea of what to expect, a friendly elf elder who expected her aid was definitely tops on her list of the unexpected. She was saved when Otis called from the doorway.

"Captain? The rest of the house appears to be empty."

"Of course it's empty!" the elf snapped. "If there was another elf of my stature here, we would have been able to walk out of here on our own. I fear, however that I will need some assistance to break this bond." He lifted the hem of his robe to reveal a length of silver-gray rope similar to the one that doubled as Jared's belt. "The magical strength of two elf masters," the elder explained, "would be sufficient to break

this spell, but aside from that nothing but cold iron will suffice. I assume you come equipped."

Jared laughed, thinking about the two iron bars in his boot heels. "Yes," He replied dryly at last. "You could say we're fairly bristling with the stuff."

"It's in our very blood but I doubt that would help," Otis added from the doorway."

"Your blood is mildly corrosive to magic," the elder told them, "but no more so than a midsummer's night full of stiff drinks is to my digestive tract. However, you are correct, the iron in your blood is of insufficient quantity? density? There's not enough of it anyway. Those guns and knives of yours should do the trick though."

"I'll handle it," Jared said suddenly. "I've undone one of these before." He started to reach for his boot heel and then thought better of it. "Shelby, mind if I borrow that whip of yours?"

"Hold it, Laker. I'm not so sure we can trust this one."

"Dear Lady Shelby," the elf said all smiles, "Do you really think this mere rope is any protection to you? If I wanted to harm you I could have already." He made a lifting gesture with his left hand and Shelby was raised several inches off the floor. "See? The rope is no impediment to my spells."

"Sure," Shelby replied. "Right now you're friendly because you need our help to get out of here. How nice will you be when we release you?"

"That's a good point," the elf agreed equably. "I must admit that I was known as a bit of a trickster in my youth, if you count a mere three and a half centuries of age as youth."

"We could tie you up," Shelby suggested.

"I'd rather you didn't," the elf replied. "This rope starts to chafe terribly after a while."

"You mean it keeps shrinking whenever you strain against it," Jared interpreted.

"You're acquainted with this spell?" the elf asked interestedly. "Oh yes. I see your belt. That's a cleverly unobtrusive way to carry it. I do the same thing myself. Anyway, then you'll understand why I'd rather not be tied up again. If you tie me properly, I might be having trouble breathing by the time we get to where ever you plan to take me. I nearly suffocated on the trip here."

"I would love to accommodate you," Shelby told the ancient, "but can't you just prove what you say is true?"

The elf thought about that. "No. Now that I think about it," he replied, "there's nothing I can do to prove my case. Either you take my word of honor or you don't." He chuckled a bit and then slouched a bit lower in the chair he was in.

"Jared, what do you think?" Shelby asked.

"I say we trust him," Jared said instantly.

"Just like that?"

"Um, yes. The way I see it, we're about to take him back to, well uh," he hesitated to actually mention their destination by name, "where we're going."

"Good evasion, lad!" the elf approved.

"Anyway, once we're there he can do us great harm whether he's tied up or not."

"So maybe we should just kill him here and now."

"You know," the elf commented. "I just love the military mind. So straight-forward, so predictable, so... so... My dear, how did such a fair damsel ever acquire such a bloody-minded way of thinking?"

"It runs in the genes," Jean commented from the doorway. "Shelby, the truck is here. Want us to start loading up?"

"Good idea," Shelby told her. "We'll be right out. All right, Point-ear, I'll take a chance on you." She handed her whip to Jared. He held one of the wicked iron blades and carefully reached toward the short rope that bound the elf's leg to the chair.

"Don't worry about me, lad," the elf said. "I can withstand the effects of cold iron if I concentrate." Jared touched the iron blade to the rope and it fell free. "Ah! Thank you!" the elf exclaimed, flexing his ankle. "I was starting to lose circulation in that foot." He reached down and took the magic rope from Jared's hand and tied it around his waist. "The final indignity was when they tied me up with my own belt rope. Well, let's be off!"

"All right," Shelby agreed. "Jared, Otis, get the chair."

"The chair?" the elf asked, bewildered.

"Well, you said you liked it, didn't you?" she replied. "We don't have any chairs like that in camp. Since it appears you are going to be our guest, I suppose we ought to treat you as such."

"You are a true lady after all!" the elder proclaimed, removing a ring from one of his fingers. It was made of gold and had a single deep blue star sapphire set in the top. He closed his hand around it and a moment later he opened it to reveal two identical rings. He put one back on his finger and presented the other to Shelby. "Here. Take this as a token of my respect and thanks."

"Is it magical?" she asked, awed by the present.

"It was created by magic and is therefore magical," the elf replied, "but if you mean 'can it be used to cast a spell?' Alas, no. The magic is either in you or it is not and there is nothing I can do to change that. The gift of magic is most passing rare among your kind." Outside, the truck's horn sounded. Otis and Jared picked up the chair and brought it outside followed by Shelby and the elf.

"Jean," Shelby called. "Any casualties?"

"Unfortunately," Jean replied grimly. "Two dead and seven wounded. One of the seven took a fléchette in the leg." Jared cringed when he heard that. Next time he would know better. "Two have broken ribs another sprained her ankle. The others were only battered a bit, a few contusions, no concussions." Shelby nodded and asked who died. Jared, listening as he and Otis carried the recliner, didn't know them.

The chair was on the truck when the lights of another car could be seen coming down the street.

"Stand ready!" Shelby shouted! The sound of a dozen safeties being turned off filled the air. The approaching car was another convertible with the top down to enjoy the pleasant summer evening.

"Please," the elf said grimly, stepping forward, "allow me."

"Hold your fire," Shelby told her team.

When the approaching car got to within fifty feet the driver brought it to an abrupt halt and slammed the gear shift into reverse.

The elder elf would have none of that, however. He reached one arm outward toward the Chrysler and made a "Come hither" gesture with his index finger. The car lifted a few inches off the ground and then floated forward until it came to rest in front of the Resistance fighters' waiting guns. Inside the car were three elves and two humans counting the drive.

"Elder Rondel," one of the elves pleaded, "don't leave us. Your benevolent wisdom is a model to us all."

"Stuff it, clown!" the elder replied. "A model to you all. Fah! As what? An example of what you do to dissenters? No, Vitriol Mankill, I told you at the start that I would have no part of your conquest of Earth. Two years of captivity haven't exactly sweetened my disposition."

"But," another elf tried, "you have but to join us and we would declare you king as is your rightful place among us."

"King? King! I am not of the Blood Royal and you know it. Oberon and his line died out years ago. There are no kings of Faerie and I'll not be the presumptuous father of a new dynasty! No, I believe, instead, that I shall visit with my new friends here for a while."

"Elder Rondel, please reconsider."

"I've already given you my advice," Rondel replied. "Start listening and maybe I'll return."

"No!" all three of the pleading elves shouted at once, casting a spell in unison.

Once more everyone except Jared was frozen in place. He wasn't running this time so the tingle as the spell passed through or around him warned him to stay still. Slowly, trying not to attract attention he reached for his wand.

"Get the Elder," Vitriol ordered while his compatriots maintained the stasis spell, "and then kill the Resistance scum."

Jared snapped the wand up and tried to repeat his earlier performance. This time however the effects were not as dramatic. A mild cool breeze blew across the scene, gradually gaining intensity.

"A wizard!" Vitriol exclaimed in surprise. "Get him first!"

Jared repeated the quick ritual with the wand and the cool breeze rapidly turned into a howling blizzard wind. Snow beat down on his attackers like bullets of ice. The counter-assault disrupted the

concentration of the spell-casting elves, allowing Rondel to break free of his constraints.

Rondel wiped his hands through the air and all spells, both Jared's and that of the elves in the car were squelched. He glanced over at Jared briefly and said dryly, "You and I are going to have to have a long talk, lad." Then he turned toward the elves. He muttered a few words under his breath and the people in the car were enveloped in a soft red light while a deep, loud hum could be heard. As the red aura and the sound faded, the five in the car sat unmoving. They were not frozen, but nevertheless did not seem to have the volition to move.

"There!" Rondel said at last, "I believe we may go now."

"Elder Rondel," Shelby asked. "What did you do to them?"

"Please don't call me that," Rondel replied. "I've never liked that name. I did several things actually. For starters, they won't remember anything that happened here this evening, the two men that is. The elves won't remember anything at all. I've never approved of the militant attitude of this younger generation, so I've wiped their minds completely, aside from the necessary automatic functions, of course. They can start their lives over now with a tabula rasa, a clean slate. We'll see what they make of it. In any case we won't have to worry about these three magic users, since it will be another decade or two before they can redevelop that facility. Finally, I put them on hold as you might say. They'll wake up in about fifteen minutes, which should allow us a clean get-away. Shall we?"

"One more question," Shelby told him. "If you don't like the name 'Rondel', what should we call you, elder?"

"I've always preferred my youth-name, and this is a new start for me. Yes, that should serve. Call me Puck."

Fifteen

"Puck?" Jared blurted out his question. "You mean as in Robin Goodfellow?"

"Why, yes," Puck agreed. "That was my adulthood name."

"But I thought you were dead."

"Dead? Not hardly, but exaggerated reports and all that. On the death of Oberon's grandson, it was requested that I ascend to the throne of Faerie. I refused, of course. Most of us had retreated to Faerie at the onset of what you call the Industrial Revolution, but I still popped in on Earth from time to time to have a look-see. I thought you Americans had an interesting system of government; so vital and new. Elvish society has a strong tendency toward stagnation. Can't help it really. We live so damned long."

"Excuse me, Puck," Shelby broke in sarcastically. "Might we continue this discussion later?"

"Oh, of course," Puck replied, abashed. "Later." He climbed up into the back of the truck and sat down

comfortably in the reclining chair. "Onward!" he exclaimed with a laugh echoed lightly by the men and women around him.

Shelbysighed as she and Jared closed the back doors. "I get the feeling he could go on like that for hours," she muttered.

"That seems to fit the literature," Jared replied.

"God help us all!"Shelby swore fervently.

The trip back to HQ went smoothly and without further incident. Jim brought the truck directly to the front door of the infirmary, where they were met by Doc and a small team of nurses and paramedics. Doc had been expecting heavy casualties and wanted to go along, but the general vetoed that idea, pointing out that there were too many other missions extant that night and his best location was here where he could be found when needed. Puck caused a major sensation when the truck's doors were opened.

"We are the little folk we," he sang accompanied by most everyone in the truck. "Too little to love or to hate... Ah! We've arrived have we?"

"What the hell!" Doc exclaimed.

"Doc,"Shelby handled the introduction, "this is Puck. Puck, Doctor Thomas Holloway."

"Please to meet you, Thomas Holloway," Puck said sticking out his long, slender hand. "Are you a doctor a doctor or a doctor a dentist?"

"Puck?" Doc asked, weakly shaking the elder elf's hand. "I thought you were dead."

"Not yet," Puck assured him.

"Sorry, I always thought of you as being somewhat shorter and sort of cherubic."

"Well, I was a bit shorter back when I was out making a name for myself," Puck replied, "but most descriptions have always been pretty far off the mark."

"What about you being 'that merry wanderer of the night'?" Doc inquired archly.

"That was a direct quote," Puck admitted, "but I was a full five and a half feet tall when I met him. Put a coat of dirt on me and a cap to cover my ears and no one would have given me a second glance back then. Oh," he continued, "I hope you won't mind but I applied a bit of first aid to your wounded on the way. Most only needed a mild pain suppression spell, but I set and healed the broken bones and sprained ankle. There's a gunshot wound you'd better look at, there's some sort of iron dart inside that my efforts were incapable of affecting."

"You didn't raise the dead?"Shelby asked dryly.

"There are limits," Puck insisted, not catching the sarcasm.

"If you don't mind," Doc told both of them, "we'll check all the wounded for ourselves."

"Of course," Puck replied. "So what now, dear lady?" he asked Shelby. There was a puff of smoke that covered Puck. When it cleared he had changed his appearance so that now he was about five feet tall and had green skin and antennae. "Going to take me to your leader?"

"Stop that," Shelby said, flustered and trying to cover it. Another puff of smoke and he regained his normal appearance, standing literally head and shoulders above the crowd that was gathering around him.

"What's going on here?" Harry Lee Grimes' voice cut through from the back of the crowd. "Let me through." The crowd parted as he approached.

"You're about to get your wish," Shelby told the elf. She introduced him to the general and then stepped back as though worried about getting caught in the cross fire. Puck and the general said nothing at first but paused to size each other up.

"This should be interesting," Jared whispered to Shelby.

"Careful, Laker" she replied. "Remember what the ancient Chinese said about interesting times."

"You're supposed to be dead," Grimes told Puck at last.

"Why does everyone keep saying that?" Puck returned. "I am most obviously alive. I live. I breathe. I practice magic. Therefore I am." He made a mocking bow and smiled.

"An interesting philosophy," Jared commented.

"Indeed, young wizard," Puck replied, overhearing Jared's whisper. "Since my escape I feel positively young again. Well, no more than four centuries, give or take a decade."

"You are alive," Grimes affirmed, bringing Puck's attention back to him, "but what proof do we have that you are 'that merry wanderer of the night', as you claim?"

"Proof again," Puck muttered. "Always proof. No, general, I cannot prove definitively who I am. Elves have never bothered with such inanities as Social Security numbers or photo-IDs. For that matter those can be faked as well, and as you can see," he offered his hand to General Grimes, palm up, "I have no fingerprints. If you don't care to call me Puck or Robin Goodfellow, call me anything you want - Horace, Mortimer, Fred, Gwendolyn perhaps. Take your pick!"

"Gwendolyn?" Jared muttered.

"She was a bit before my time," Puck replied with a wink.

"All right!" Grimes shouted. "You want to be Puck, you're Puck. It's only a name."

"Ah!" Puck breathed, "but a rose by any other name would probably be a horseradish." That earned him several groans and a glare from the general. "At least that's what I told Bill."

The general sputtered a bit before getting himself back under control. "You!" he said to the elf tightly. "I will talk to you in my office. Now! Captain Shelby, you too!"

"And the young wizard," Puck added easily.

"Who?" Grimes asked ominously.

"That one," Puck said, pointing at Jared. "I think his name is Laker. Lad," he addressed Jared, "We're going to have to do something about that name of yours. Laker. Now I ask you; what sort of name is that for a wizard? Not suitable at all."

"Is Jared better?" Jared asked.

"Yuck!"

"My office!" Grimes said forcefully. "Now!"

"Whatever," Puck shrugged.

"Uh, Puck," Shelby said to him out of one side of her mouth, "I would really appreciate it if you could see yourself clear to go to the general's office."

"Fair Lady Shelby," Puck replied with a bow, "for thee, I would scale Niagara Falls or go over Mount Everest in a barrel."

"Don't you mean that the other way around?" Jared asked as they walked toward the house.

"Not really."

"I've been meaning to ask you about your speech patterns," Jared continued.

"Why don't I talk like something out of a bad Elizabethan-era play? 'Prithee, an it please thee, my lord' and all that sort of thing?"

"Well you are... Just how old are you?"

"It's not polite to ask a lady's age," Puck replied.

"You aren't a lady," Jared countered.

"What's that got to do with simple etiquette?"

"Like giving a civil answer to a civil question?" Jared asked archly.

"Touché. Seven hundred and sixty-eight years next October, but who's counting?"

"Anyway," Jared continued, "You're almost eight hundred years old, but you seem to be well acquainted with the modern idiom."

"Languages are a hobby of mine. I like to keep up in all the modern tongues. I'd hate to get caught in some country where I couldn't order a decent meal. Also modern English seems to be such a relaxed mode of speech. Very much my style. Not much of an office for the general of an army," Puck opined as he sat down in front of Grimes' desk.

"It serves its purpose," Grimes grated out. "Now, Point-ear, can you give me a good reason why I shouldn't kill you right here and now?" He waited and Puck seemed to be in deep thought. "Well?"

"I'm thinking!" Puck replied. Grimes picked up his Uzi. "I have it!" Puck announced happily.

"Why?" the general repeated.

"Because you cannot kill me, at least not if I'm on guard," Puck replied. He made no noticeable gesture nor did he incant a spell, but the general's gun suddenly yanked itself out of his hand and flew up to the ceiling. "See? I can temporarily neutralize the primer cap too, but that would have been too dangerous as a demonstration."

"Yeah," Jared agreed. "The cartridges would have still gone off when the spell abated." Grimes looked at Jared inquiringly. "It happened to me just a few hours ago," he explained.

"General," Puck continued, "I don't care to be on guard at all times while I am among you, so why don't we call a truce?" The Uzi floated back down and settled softly on the general's desk. Grimes recovered it, turned the safety back on, and nodded his acceptance of a truce as he replaced the weapon in its holster.

"I still want to know what you are doing here," Grimes told the elder elf.

"Why - escaping the evil tyranny of the elves," Puck replied. "What else?"

"Can't you be serious for even a minute?"

"General," Puck replied without any trace of humor, "I am being serious. A bit satirical perhaps, but very, very serious. Let me start at the beginning. No, that's too controversial and you'd never believe me anyway. Let me start with recorded history."

"Human or elvish?" Shelby asked.

"Both. Strangely enough our two species have a long inter-relationship. Humans are mostly technological-minded with only a very few capable of using magic, while elvish thought is predominantly along magical lines. Some elves are capable of comprehending human technology; our equivalent of a wizard. I am one of very few such elves.

"Elves became civilized at the same time humans did, although our civilizations did not exist on Earth but in a parallel universe of sorts on a world you call Faerie.

We have the natural ability to cross back and forth freely between our world and yours so it is not surprising that nearly every human culture has some mention of us in their folk tales. We are the fairies, the leprechauns, the djinn. Some people have mistaken us for gods, demons, and angels, but we're just people, the same as you. We just live longer. Our life expectancy is one thousand years.

There is one limitation on our ability to move between both universes, however. Earth and Faerie occupy equivalent coextant sets of points in the two universes..."

"What?" Grimes asked.

"I think he means that Faerie exists in another dimension and that each location on Earth corresponds to one in Faerie," Jared attempted to translate.

"Rough and a little inaccurate, my friend," Puck commented dryly, "but then so was my description. Actually Faerie is not in another dimension. You can't live in a dimension. A dimension, in this context, is a single spatio-temporal coordinate of which you need three or four just to plot a single point in time and space. Look it up. It is most certainly not some quiet little locale into which you can tuck a whole world full of people.

"On the other hand, I suppose there can only be one universe by definition and if there really is more than one then they must be totally distinct and separate with no contact between them.

"So to be as accurate as possible I suppose that Earth and Faerie exist in two different but intimately connected aspects of the same universe. Do you follow me, general?"

"Not really, no," Grimes admitted, "but I'll stipulate that you come from somewhere else. Please get back on to the subject."

"Oh, sorry. I always did get distracted easily. Anyway all I was trying to say was that while our two worlds exist together at coextant points..." Grimes scowled. "Uh, that is any given place on Earth corresponds to one on Faerie, so that where you leave one world determines where you enter the other."

"Why didn't you just say so?" the general growled.

"I wanted you to understand that while the geometry of our two worlds correspond, the locations of our oceans and land masses do not. There are a limited number of places where we can travel between worlds without the risk of drowning."

"Don't Point-ears know about navies?" Grimes asked interestedly.

"Oh most definitely. Our knowledge of naval matters is equal to your own, but until the last few decades our magic had not become sufficiently advanced to transfer much more, besides ourselves, than clothing and small hand-held objects. But let's not stray into that fascinating, but diverting, subject. I was giving you a history lesson.

"Anyway, the histories of our two worlds correspond most closely, almost perfectly. While humans were living the life of hunter-gatherers, so were we. When you learned how to grow your own crops and started building the first cities, we did likewise. Because there was some contact between us, I'm sure that some things were invented first on Earth and then brought to Faerie and vice versa. I'm fairly certain that you invented the art of fire production, for example. It is an amazingly mechanical bit of technology. So human, but something most of us were able to duplicate once we saw it done. Of course only a few of us understood the principal behind it and then were able to adapt that knowledge into spells that did the same thing, but which our people could understand and use. Writing, on the other hand, may well have been invented on Faerie, although there seems to be evidence that it developed independently in both worlds. Magic is most definitely our invention and those rare magicians or wizards of your history were either taught by elves or by those who were our students.

"Our two people seemed to have gotten along moderately well with only a few major misunderstandings throughout our common ancient period, but that began to change over the course of the Middle Ages in Europe and the Middle East .

"Some of our scholars say it began way back in the Iron Age, but iron is a technological point. It was changes in human outlook that really made the difference. We should have seen it coming with the rise of Christianity and Islam. We'd had some problems with the Jews too, back in Solomon's day, but we just

learned to avoid Judea when we could. Judaism didn't spread to the imperialistic levels that Christianity and Islam did. It was that stuff about not suffering a witch to live."

"The pre-Christian Romans weren't too fond of witches either," Shelby pointed out.

"To the Romans and many of the ancients," Puck replied, "a witch was a poisoner or someone who used their magic to kill people. The death penalty for murderers has always been a common enough punishment and that's all there was to it for most of the early Medieval period as well. There were even approved wizards in the Catholic Church, and several royal courts kept wizards as official retainers, but somewhere along the line the definitions changed. Witches became anyone suspected of using magic often regardless of proof and intention, and then the witch trials began. We had always been shy and careful to whom we revealed ourselves, but by the Renaissance there were only a few places we were welcome, mostly among the common people who would leave bowls of milk and other treats out for us, although this was as often a bribe to keep us from causing trouble. But that wasn't what drove us away from Earth.

"The logical consequence of ancient and medieval human history was the Industrial Revolution. I found it quite curious that it was in Britain, where we had for the most part established a relationship of mutual tolerance, that our exile began.

"The air became toxic to us. What I'm breathing right now isn't exactly healthy in the long run, but we've learned a few magical techniques that allow us to clean the toxins out of our bodies so we can tolerate it to an extent, but back then we had no defense and the first great killer smogs caught us completely unaware of the danger.

"However, not only the air became poisonous, but so did the water and the land. I really don't understand how you can live like this. It may not be as immediately fatal to you as it is to us, but it can't be all that pleasant. It was the invention of the blast furnace or rather the products of the blast furnace that really sent us into exile.

"Iron naturally became the metal of choice for tools and weapons on Earth. It's the most common suitable material available, and the idea of alloying it with a nonmetal like carbon, I must admit, was pure creative genius. Iron is rare on Faerie, in about the same quantities as tin is on Earth. We have a superfluity of copper, tin, and zinc, so bronze is our metal of choice.

"But iron has a greater effect on Earth's electromagnetic field than bronze does and the running of train tracks set up unnatural vibrations that we found painful until they naturalized. After a while new magnetic patterns stabilize, become more comfortable to us, but there was nothing we could do against the onslaught of the engines. Steam, internal combustion, electro-magnetic turbines - any means you humans came up with to generate more power - caused disturbances that we just could not tolerate."

"What about solar and wind power?" Jared asked.

"Good question. We can tolerate those means of generation. They are still painful to us, but the pain obviously fluctuates with the natural cycles of weather, much the same as the human Pain Index does. Hydro-electric, and geo-thermal power generation is also preferable because it has an almost natural rhythm, but that's just the generation of the power. The uses of it are what really hurts. I'm getting ahead of myself.

"Anyway, once Earth's environment began to become unbearable to us, toward the end of the Eighteenth Century, we started our migration. Some of us retreated to Faerie, but others moved to other

parts of Earth. The technological scourge, however, followed us unceasingly and in less than a hundred years we had either died or returned to Faerie.

"This was not a great hardship. After all Faerie is our natural environment and where most of our species lived anyway. So we settled back to raise our families in the safety and security of Faerie, and left the humans to their own devices. But that was not the end of it.

"Earth and Faerie are far more intimately connected than we ever believed. The disturbances in Earth's magnetic fields caused by the manipulation of electricity as minor as they may seem to you, began to affect the world-wide environment of Faerie as well.

"It began slowly, completely undetected until ten years ago, when the entire magnetic field of Faerie destabilized. I think it was the proliferation of the computer industry that sent it over the edge. Elves were dying and there was very little we could do about it. There had always been a few spells to protect us from the disruptive effects of cold iron, but they were useable by only the most advanced practitioners of the science of magic. That's how I've been able to keep an eye on your world.

"Now we scrambled for any defense we could find. We tried master spells on our entire world to shield off the effects from Earth, but in a series of disasters we only accelerated the process. Finally, a new spell, a simple one anyone could use, was invented and at last we were protected, but at far too great a cost. Faerie is now an uninhabitable desert, a poisoned land that won't begin to be clean for generations, and we have very long generations.

"Oberon, was our king in Shakespeare's day, but he was quite old even then and died quietly of old age in the Nineteenth Century. He was succeeded by his son, my half-brother, Orlando."

"Your half-brother?" Jared asked. "On which side?"

"We shared a common father," Puck replied.

"But you said you were not of the Blood Royal."

"Lad, Oberon was my father, but my mother was a common serving wench in Faerie. I am a bastard and was never recognized officially by Oberon, which was just peachy with me. Instead, I took a job at the palace as a jester for a while. Making fun of the king was preferable to being one. Trust me. And Oberon was an easy target, although my talents did get me banished from the court more often than not.

"So Orlando, a century younger than me, ascended to the throne of Faerie in your year of 1871. He was a bold elf, wiser than his years and in the prime of his life. It was a tragedy to both our worlds, however, when he died of what we call technological pollution thirty years ago, because that put his son, who chose the name Moloch Mansbane when he became an adult. That ought to say it all.

"As for me, well, I was married in 1774, but my wife was murdered a few years later during the French Revolution. When I recovered from the depression that was brought on by the severing of that bond, I started devoting myself to the study of higher magics. Sometime around 1900, I'd lost track for a while, I attained the ultimate distinction for any non-royal elf. I was ranked as an elder.

"Meanwhile, Orlando was wasting away. The royal family doesn't have the time for magical study and the old protections against cold iron could only be applied to oneself. Moloch, or rather Weathervane, for that was his youth name, was always a sickly child as well and began to blame human technology for his plight.

Finally, Orlando died and Moloch ascended the throne and almost immediately declared war on all mankind. I was part of the vocal minority against the war, but that didn't exactly make any friends at court. It was almost like old times, banned from the royal court because of things I said. Unfortunately this was far more serious than my verbal sparring with stuffy old Oberon.

"Moloch managed to raise public opinion against humanity and then died himself. There were no legitimate heirs to the throne left by that time, not due to technological pollution, but because Moloch was more than a little paranoid. He killed off entire noble families and then blamed the humans and the common elves believed him. Only my own refusal to be recognized as a royal bastard kept me alive while Moloch was king.

"On his death, the council of elders met to decide the future course of Faerie. Gratifyingly, they went along with my notion of a democratic republic, but we failed to take into account the weaknesses of such a system. A popular election was held and the winner, Camberon Quenchthirst, was an anti-war activist.

"Old Camberon died two years later in a military coup and the new military junta, which calls itself the High Command, started preparing for war. Soon after they returned to Earth, in the guise of ecological activists you may remember, I was arrested. The High Command was very unpopular and there were many guerilla units trying to topple it. So they decided that they needed a figurehead king who would have popular support. I was fairly popular with the common elf and a son of Oberon to boot. As the closest thing to a legitimate heir to the throne it was the perfect solution, except I don't want to be king and my own personal honor won't allow it in any case.

"So since then I've been in custody and dragged about from one place to the next while they tried to change my mind. They tried torture, but you can't really torture an elder. Our mastery of the power is sufficient to block any pain and to instantly heal ourselves. They tried to starve me, but it was no great deal to conjure up a meal while they weren't watching, although there was a one month period during which I found it necessary to conjure the food directly into my stomach. Now that was painful the first time until I learned to conjure it up pre-chewed.

"For the last year I've been in that house where your people found me, and that pretty much brings us here."

Sixteen

"And are you now prepared to join our struggle to drive the elves off the face of the Earth and back to Faerie?" Harry Lee Grimes asked.

"General," Puck replied, "those round ears of yours stand out clearly from that military crew-cut of yours. What's the matter? Don't they work? Or were you just not listening? There is no Faerie any more except in the minds and hearts of the elves. And if we keep up this war, Earth isn't going to be a high-rent district either. We have no place to go and I will certainly not take part in genocide, especially when it involves my own people."

"What the hell do you expect from us?" Grimes shouted. "This is the Resistance. If you're not a friend then you're the enemy."

"Oh, I'm most definitely a friend," Puck assured him, "but I will not help you kill people, not humans and not elves."

"Then what good are you?"

"General, I think you have forgotten the basic purpose of any resistance movement. To resist, to put every impediment you can in the way of conquering invaders. I'll help you resist conquest, but you're going to have to understand that my ultimate goal is to negotiate some sort of equitable settlement between humans and elves, because if we keep fighting we're only going to destroy each other."

"You're evading the question," Grimes accused.

"Truth," Puck admitted. "I will aid you in any way I can which will lead toward a permanent treaty between humans and elves."

"And how do you define that?"

"Haven't the foggiest. I think we're going to have to take this on a case-by-case basis. I will give you my word, however, that I will not seek to harm the Resistance or any other human agency in this or any other nation. Will that do for now?"

"And how am I to trust you?"

"General I just gave you my word!" Puck replied indignantly.

"Puck," Shelby said gently, "you aren't the first elf to give your word of honor. You were incarcerated when the elves returned to Earth, weren't you? I thought so. There were numerous treaties signed and words of honor given, then a year later all promises were conveniently forgotten as the elves began their conquest of Earth."

"What?" Puck was shocked. "We're a devious lot, I'll admit that with pride. Many of your own stories concerning deals with the devil are based on experiences concerning elvish merchants. But until now, I have never heard of an elf going back on his stated word. We might talk our way around something if we don't want to tell you about it, but aside from a polite untruth, mostly to keep from insulting a host or a friend, we never lie."

"Puck," Jared added, "it's true. The initial treaties were in all the papers. Non-aggression and obedience to the law were two of the prime tenets. The agreement to work toward citizenship as provided by law was another."

Puck was silent for a moment, shocked to the core. "The bloody younger generation!" he snarled. "General, I revise what I told you. I still won't help you kill most elves, but as for the current leadership, well they're just not worthy of the title any longer. I want you to promise me one thing, however."

"I don't have to promise you anything, but what do you want?"

"When you send out a mission to target an elvish leader, I want in. There are traditional ways to kill a traitor that haven't been used in two thousand years, but I think it is time to resurrect them."

"All right," Grimes conceded. "We haven't been trying to target individuals, they're too hard to hit." Puck nodded his understanding. "Most missions are to inhibit the delivery of supplies, to steal or destroy the weapons of the elves and their allies, or create as much mayhem as we can. We learned early on that straight forward assaults don't tend to work against magical defenses. We need to be hit-and-run artists."

"Suits me," Puck replied. "But why not hit the command offices?"

"Tell me where they are, and I'll hit 'em." Puck shrugged. "That's what I thought," Grimes concluded. "I'll tell you what. Captain Shelby, from now on this pain in the posterior is your responsibility. You found him, you feed him. Besides, I might as well put all the magic users under your wing while I'm at it."

"That's the thing I wanted to talk about. That's why I brought the wizard here." Puck pointed at Jared.

"Why do you keep calling me a wizard?" Jared asked, confused.

"Made any deals with the devil lately?" Puck countered. "Attended a black mass or laughed during a prayer service?"

"No."

"Then you're a wizard, a white magician. If you were in some way dedicated to evil, you'd be a witch, a black magician, or a warlock."

"But I'm just this guy with a magic wand that I can't even control."

"I had wondered about the thinking behind that impromptu blizzard. Simply killing them would have been more effective. We'll discuss that tomorrow. General, what you have here is one of the most precious resources you could possibly imagine. Properly trained, his magic can work where all your cold iron will fail, because the one thing the High Command will never expect is a wizard. We stopped training them three centuries ago, and high magic isn't the sort of thing you learn by accident. If there were any other wizards on Earth they'd have been in action by now."

"Are you saying that Laker here is the only man on Earth capable of casting a spell?" Grimes asked.

"I doubt that," Puck disagreed, "but the others have either not discovered their powers or have only progressed so far as to perform minor, and unreliable, feats. Ever wonder why nobody has been able to definitively prove the existence of ESP? Most of it is fraudulent, I'll admit, but there are a few genuine examples. However the people who have it have no proper training so they can't always duplicate their feats."

"And you propose to give Laker that training?"

"You got it," Puck nodded.

"Do it," Grimes said dismissively. "Shelby, they're all yours. Take them away."

The next morning didn't begin until five past Noon. Jared woke up and found that he had already fallen out of his cot sometime earlier and found, like he had twice before, that the ground in his tent was just as comfortable. He spit out a few grains of sand and mummified blades of grass and got dressed.

Stumbling into the mess tent he found Puck working on his fifth cup of coffee while surrounded by a small throng of fascinated Resistance agents, mostly women.

"Aren't you afraid that stuff will stunt your growth?" Jared sourly asked the seven-foot elf.

"No," Puck replied cheerfully, "but if you think it might help, you may bring me another cup."

"I'll get it," one of the girls breathed excitedly before Jared could tell the elf what he could do with the cup. Instead, he grumbled a bit and wandered over to the serving queue. Canned spaghetti and eggs and a hamburger on the side, was standard breakfast fare at HQ, but it left Jared wishing for pancakes or a bowl full of granola. He took his "Resistance Gourmet" meal, completed it with a cup of burnt chickory water - he refused to call it coffee, and looked around for a place to sit.

"Over here, lad!" he heard Puck call him. "Girls, please make room for my apprentice."

"Your apprentice!" Jared demanded. "Since when? And will you stop calling me 'lad'? I'm twenty-six, for God's sake!"

"Compared to me you are a lad," Puck replied.

"Compared to you, I'll still be a lad when I die of old age."

"Maybe," the elf told him enigmatically, "Well sit on down, Methuselah. Hmm, did you ever wonder why a guy who supposedly lived nine hundred sixty-nine years had a diminutive name? Methu Junior? Little Methu? Why? His father's name was Enoch."

"Are you particularly worried about it?" Jared asked.

"No. Just a passing thought."

"Actually," one of the women clustered around them pointed out, "'Methu' means 'Man of'. There's no clear consensus on what the rest of the name means."

"Really?" Puck asked. She nodded. "Let's see, the name is Hebrew isn't it? Or is it Aramaic? Something more ancient? Probably. Maybe it means 'little man'. Yeah, probably something his mother called him when he misbehaved and it stuck." Puck laughed. "And speaking of names, I will most definitely not have an apprentice with the wizard-name of Jared Laker. It just won't do."

"What's wrong with my name?" Jared demanded. It had always seemed sort old-fashioned to him, but he wasn't about to give it up without a fight. A name was more to him than just a convenient handle to hang his hat on, it was part of his identity - the way he thought of himself. If it was going to be forcibly changed, it wasn't going to be without a fight.

"No style or class, man!" Puck replied. "Think about it. Merlin! Moses! Gandalf! The Amazing Randy!"

"The Amazing Randy isn't a wizard," Jared replied.

"My point exactly. The great wizard Jared. It just doesn't have the right flair. Who's going to take you seriously with a name like that?"

"Anyone I've recently turned into a pumpkin, I'll bet."

"Bad attitude," Puck reprimanded him. "You need a name that means something."

"Jared means something!" Laker asserted.

"Yes it does," Puck agreed too easily. "It means 'rose'. Want me to call you Rose? That's a female name even among my people." Some of the girls at the table giggled. Jared's answering growl only earned him more laughter. "I think you need a name that conveys both your great magical potential and the basic association with nature that a wizard needs. Something like "Bogdan", it means 'might of the world'."

"It sounds like I'm up to my hips in peat," Jared replied.

"Well, maybe you'd like something in English. It's very common to choose a word in your native tongue and use it for a wizard name."

"Why do I have to choose a wizard name at all?" Jared protested.

"It's tradition. You think Merlin's mother gave him that name?" Puck paused, waiting for a reaction.

"All right, I'll bite. What did she name him?"

"Ambrose. Now I ask you, what kind of a name is that for a wizard?"

"It means 'immortal'," pointed out the same woman who had translated the name of Methuselah.

"Sh!" Puck hushed her and winked charmingly. "Besides were you there?"

"Were you?" Jared countered.

"Before my time actually, but that's the way I heard it, Now I won't hear another word against it. Either join in or have whatever name I choose thrust upon you. Well, girls, any suggestions?"

"How about 'Oakleaf'?" one of the women suggested.

"Why?" Puck asked, bewildered.

"It sounds good," she replied sheepishly.

"Well, that is one criterion," Puck allowed, "but don't you think it also ought to have some sort of meaning in connection with the wizard?"

"Ashwand?" another suggested pointing at the wooden rod tucked in Jared's belt. Puck nodded noncommittally.

"Bootblack," yet another put in. Then several others started chiming in with anything they could think of. "Grasshopper!" "Diamond!" "Ballfield!" "Batman!" "Robin!"

"No," Puck disagreed, "Robin is one of my names."

"Meadowmuffin!" came the final suggestion. They all broke up laughing.

"Girls!" Puck reproached them. "We should leave him some dignity. Hmm?"

"This is ridiculous!" Jared scoffed.

"Not at all," Puck disagreed. "The choosing of a name is a very serious matter. My parents named me 'Puck' because I was cute and it sounded like a cute name to them. Besides, it was only my youth name, so it didn't really matter."

"Youth name?" one of the women asked.

"Elves," Puck explained, "have different names to mark different stages of their lives. When I reached the age of majority among my kind, I chose the name 'Robin' because I fancied that I sang like a bird. Oberon added the name 'Goodfellow' to that because he felt it alluded in an obscure way to my relationship to him, which I never agreed to let him recognize. Later, when I became an elder, I was accorded the name Rondel because the other elders acknowledged that I could talk circles around them, or at least thought I could. I never liked that name."

"Why do the other elves claim you are dead?"

"Dead?" several of the girls asked.

"That's what they tell the prisoners at Camp Goodfellow, that he died as a martyr to the cause," Jared explained.

"I imagine that it suits their purpose to do so. I am, after all, one of the few lovable elvish characters, at least in your literature, that most people in your country have heard of. They probably think that by listing me among the dead, they will garner the sympathy of most humans."

"They did at first," Jared told him, "and their propaganda about strict environmental control and repair brought Greenpeace - a worldwide group of environmental activists - into their camp."

"Greenpeace has changed a lot since then, though," the only other man who was sitting at the table pointed out. "From activists to army, and I haven't heard them talking about baby seals or the whales in the past two years. I wonder how devoted to the environment they still are."

"The rank and file may still be pro-ecology," one woman opined, "but I think their leaders are just in it for a piece of the pie."

"People!" Puck stopped the impending debate. "We're still working on a name for a neophyte wizard. Any further suggestions?" There were none. "Jared Laker?" Jared just rolled his eyes in exasperation. "Very well, then I shall choose one for you. Acorn!"

"What?" Jared asked flatly.

"Acorn. A small nut with the potential to become something far greater."

"I don't like it."

"Too late. You had your chance. Now finish up and we'll start your first lesson."

Seventeen

The lesson had to be delayed until they found Shelby. The red-haired captain had been up late. After Puck and Jared had gone to bed, she found she was too keyed up to sleep, so she found some random desk space and put together her official report on that evening's mission. It was well past dawn when she finished and stumbled off to her tent.

When Jared and Puck came looking for her, she was at the stage of light sleep when dreams were most plentiful, when you woke up just before they got pleasantly interesting.

"Go away," she grumbled, trying desperately to get back to her dream.

"Shelby," Jared called from outside the tent, "Grimes says we need you to supervise while Puck teaches me magic."

"When did he do that?" she asked.

"A few minutes ago when we asked him where you were."

"Damn! All right give me a few minutes to pull myself together and have the mess tent put together a walking breakfast for me."

Fifteen minutes brought them out to the designated practice field.

"Softball?" Puck asked.

"Would you rather it be a basketball court?" Jared countered.

"You've got the height," Shelby commented.

"I was just wondering what the Resistance needed with a softball field. I'd have thought it was a terribly conspicuous luxury considering you're trying to lay low. This one looks like you've been keeping it up."

"That's because Jared's our grounds-keeper," Shelby laughed and told him about Jared's first day of practice.

"Really, Acorn? You did this?" Puck asked.

"Acorn?" Shelby asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Don't ask," Jared muttered sourly. Puck laughed maliciously.

"Theory is as important as practice," Puck told Jared when he settled down to teach, "so we'll start with a bit of that. I don't believe you've told me where you acquired that wand." Jared told him about the encounter with Spike and the cannibals. "Spike?" Puck asked, concerned. "Do you mean Spike Mankill?"

"I never caught his last name," Jared replied. "You knew him?"

"May I examine the wand?" Jared handed it over to him. "Yes," Puck said sadly, "this was his wand and yes, I knew him. He was my apprentice a few decades ago, when his name was Greenleaf. He was also the son of Vitriol Mankill. You remember Vitriol, don't you?"

"Seems like just yesterday," Jared said dryly.

"Right. Vitriol is on the High Command - second only to Victory Earthwin. If I knew last night what I know today, the High Command would be short one leader and his two top flunkies. Although with total amnesia that ought to be the case anyway."

"You don't sound too sure," Shelby pointed out.

Puck shrugged. "Anything done by magic can be undone by magic, at least so I believe. Anyway, Spike was sent to me for basic magical instruction and I made this wand for him."

"I'm sorry, Puck," Jared apologized. "I don't know what to say."

"Don't worry, lad. I know most of the high-born elves. Spike always was a wild one. That he fell in with cannibals is no surprise to me, but I'm still saddened by his death. I cannot blame you, though. He brought it on himself."

"Puck," Shelby asked, "there are rumors that elves have taken to vampirism and possibly cannibalism - if you're willing to stretch the definition of that word. Is it true?"

"I don't know for sure, but it's possible. Human blood is a highly addictive drug to us. The iron in your hemoglobin is in just high enough quantity to have an hallucinogenic effect coupled with an incredible rush, or so I am told. No elf in his right mind would try it. The drinking of the blood of a sentient being is even more morally reprehensible than murder, but there have been cases in the past."

"Obviously, since you're aware of how human blood affects you."

"As a survival measure," Puck assured her, "we have always made a practice of hunting down and destroying any blood addicts we become aware of. What makes you bring it up now?"

"Spike was associating with cannibals, we were wondering whether he had similar tastes."

Puck seemed pained for a moment. Then he straightened up and replied, "I think so. If he was using this wand to cast his spells, then I am certain he's been suffering from some sort of brain damage. Human blood kills elvish brain cells quicker than alcohol does in either of us. That leads me into my first lecture in magic theory."

He handed the wooden shaft back to Jared. "That wand you have, Acorn, is a learning tool only. It's a power amplifier for a novice magic user. Think of it as training wheels. Within a year you should be able to cast perfectly serviceable spells without it. In fact, two years from now you ought to not need it at all. The wand has definite limits and as your mastery of the power grows and develops you will eventually get to the point where your own abilities out-strip this child's toy."

"Toy?" Jared asked.

"I exaggerate," Puck admitted, "but not by very much. The powers you have released with this wand

may seem incredible now, but one day you will find that they are minute compared to what you can do on your own. The fact that Spike was using it again, only shows just what depths he had descended to. If he was that far gone, he would probably have been dead of blood addiction within the year. There's no cure for vampirism, your legends have that much right, and the craving for blood only grows with each dose. Eventually the addict loses enough brain cells to lose all his motor skills and unable to feed himself, starves to death. It is rare that such a case ever progresses to that point, of course. This is depressing. Back to the lesson.

"That wand will not work, by the way, for just any magic user. It is attuned to you, the first person able to use magic to touch it after its previous owner died. It will continue to work for only you until either you die, or you decide to re-align it to someone else - an apprentice of your own perhaps.

"Now the first thing to realize is that the wand has no power of its own, but it does focus and amplify your powers. On the other hand, the ropes you and I both use as belts do have one inherent set of powers; to stretch to any desired limit and once tied to hold on to an object, to not come undone until acted upon by the one who tied it including shrinking in order to get a tighter hold on its object. They can be used by anyone, so be careful not to lose yours.

"I'll tell you another secret," Puck continued, "your rope and mine are the same rope. I cut mine to give Spike a piece when I apprenticed him. It's customary to do that when taking on a new apprentice. Since you already have one, I will endeavor to find some other acceptable token. In a way I find it pleasing that you have both Spike's wand and belt rope. I didn't approve of the way his attitudes developed as he grew up, and the fact that my new apprentice now has them makes me feel like I've been given a second chance. Does that make sense to you?"

"It does," Jared agreed, no longer feeling quite so hostile toward the old elf for forcing him into this apprenticeship. Privately he wondered whether he would ever get used to being called Acorn. "I think I follow what you were telling me about the wand, but why am I getting such random results?"

"I've never taken a human apprentice before, but I have been led to understand that this is not uncommon among new wizards who become aware of their powers as adults. The problem, you see, is that you don't truly believe in magic."

"Puck, old boy," Jared disagreed, "that just isn't true. I believe in magic. I can't deny the evidence of my own eyes, ears and nose."

"Not to mention tongue and fingers," Shelby added. "Through that wand alone you've experienced magic with all your senses."

"Acorn," Puck said, towering over his apprentice, "you believe in magic here in your head," he tapped Jared's forehead for emphasis, "but not here," Puck moved his hand lower until it rested on Jared's chest, "in your heart. A human psychologist - amazingly, as elvish as that discipline might seem, it was a purely human invention - would tell you that your subconscious is not convinced.

"This is hardly surprising, especially given your cultural background. Modern Americans just don't use magic, real or imagined."

"Clark said that any technology sufficiently advanced would seem like magic to the observer," Jared pointed out.

"A fallacy!" Puck scoffed "It would be true of someone in whose culture magic was a crucial part - elves

and even many human cultures - but a member of a technologically-based culture will see everything as a form of technology.

"I can't tell you how many times, even back in the Middle Ages that some human asked me how I did my tricks, thinking them to be sleight-of-hand. Illusion is an art-form, but it is technological in nature. My magic isn't, but it has often been seen as such by the uninformed.

"On the other hand to the average pre-cataclysm elf who didn't travel between Earth and Faerie, all technology would seem like magic. Further, that elf would be highly disappointed when he couldn't perform the same feat with his magic."

"All right, that sounds sensible to me," Jared conceded.

"Don't be so quick to agree just because I said that," Puck flip-flopped. "I've gotten into hundreds of debates over whether you can define technology as a form of magic if the person using it doesn't truly understand how and why it works, so therefore it would just be magic by another name."

"Can it be defined that way?"

"You can define it anyway you want. That's what word games are all about. Me? I've gotten a bit pragmatic about these things in my old age. It's a good argument for college sophomores on a cold winter's night. They still think this sort of thing is for real. By the time they become juniors, however, they realize that there are far more important things to do than arguing over philosophical points that don't really matter anyway."

"You don't think much of philosophy do you?" Jared asked.

"What makes you say that? Philosophy is the product of some of the greatest minds of both our peoples. What I can't abide are meaningless word games. It doesn't matter whether the egg or the chicken came first. Had I been there at the time, I'd have gladly scrambled the egg for breakfast and fried the chicken for dinner, and that would have put an end to that stupid argument!"

"So instead we'd have had the same debate over some other creature," Jared told him.

"Now that, Acorn, is a truly depressing thought. Time to show me what you can do."

Jared shrugged and walked up to home plate. He pointed the wand out toward left field and Puck said, "Hold it! What are you going to do?"

"Huh?"

"What type of spell do you want to cast? What are you planning to conjure up or change? You can't just cast a spell with no objective in mind."

"Maybe that's why I've been getting random results," Jared noted.

"It's a possibility," Puck conceded, "but it's just a part of your disbelief. If you don't believe, you don't expect anything to happen, so you don't really try to make anything happen. Random results. Get this down before you do anything else. Magic doesn't care whether or not you believe in it. Magic doesn't care whether or not you have any particular task in mind when you use it. If you have the ability to use it, it'll come out whenever you summon it, and if you don't keep it firmly in hand it'll follow the path of least

resistance. Think of it like a river or, better yet, like electricity. It's an impersonal force that when given the opportunity to flow, it'll flow. To make it work for you, however, you have to apply the power in a specific manner. You can't make a transistor radio work until you plug the batteries in right, can you?"

"Well, no, but..."

"But what?"

"This is magic. There's no rhyme or reason to it. It just makes things happen."

"Really?" Puck asked with deceptive sweetness. "Tell me more, oh Master of the Mystic Arts!"

"You stepped into it this time, Laker," Shelby smirked.

"You did, indeed," Puck agreed, smiling maliciously. "Magic is bound by laws just like any form of power is, and it all comes down to Newton's First Law of Thermodynamics. You can't create magical energy out of nothing. It just seems that way. Our scientists have determined that a magic user is capable of converting minute amounts of mass, a hydrogen atom or two, and then use the released energy to power his spell, which usually involves still more matter/energy conversion. Magic is extremely efficient at converting mass to energy and back again."

"Whoa there, Puck!" Shelby stopped him. "I may not have graduated college - the war got in the way - but I got past Intro. Physics 101. I've seen Jared create objects out of thin air. That takes one hell of a lot of energy. If Einstein's equation $E=mc^2$ is correct..."

"And it is," Puck informed her.

"Thank you. Then the formula for mass would be similarly determined. It would take at least as much energy to create a mass of one gram as you could potentially extract from that gram of matter, wouldn't it?"

"That is true," Puck agreed.

"Then where is all the energy coming from?"

"From the conversion of other matter, of course. Sometimes it is obvious. Think about the conversion of astroturf to real grass. The mass was here all along, and excess mass, however, is gathered in from or distributed out, at random, through the entire universe. Likewise, so is excess energy. That's why you won't suffer from an instant overdose of radiation, which I suppose was your next concern."

Shelby nodded. "But how can it do that? The universe is... well, big, isn't it?"

Puck laughed kindly. "Very big. But magic teleports, you might say. It moves, not only faster than light, but nearly instantaneously. We haven't yet measured its speed because it's just too fast to do so on anything less than a universal scale, and we don't really know how big the universe is."

"How long have you known all this?" Jared asked.

"This is fairly new stuff - within the last century and less. Why?"

"I was just wondering how anyone was able to use magic effectively without understanding the theory

behind it."

"People have used fire for almost a million years or more without fully understanding how it works, haven't they?"

"Yes," Jared agreed reluctantly, trying to find a hole in Puck's logic.

"Well it's the same thing. For that matter, how many humans understand how electronic devices work? Even if they don't, it doesn't stop them from using the remote control to turn on the TV. Now it's time you got down to work. Produce a ball of red light."

The practice session lasted another two hours, during which Jared failed to produce anything on demand. Instead he got the usual assortment of lights, noises, and smells combined with occasional obscure objects.

"Whoa!" Puck shouted at one point, throwing his arms out and causing a pink and blue globe of light to dissipate. "Good thing I'm here to run damage control."

"Why? What did I do?"

"You don't want to know."

"Oh, come on!"

"All right. You nearly changed sex on all of us there, and I, for one, am quite comfortable as I am." Soon after that Puck decided that Jared had enough instruction for one day and they went back to camp.

"Why am I so tired?" Jared asked Puck. "I've never been this tired after a practice before."

"That's because this time you were trying to control what you did. It doesn't take much energy to release uncontrolled magic. Your tiredness is a good sign, it means you were doing something right. Go take a nap, now. You'll feel much better in an hour."

Puck was half wrong. Jared did feel better but it was not until he woke up two hours later. Refreshed, but hungry, he joined the late crowd, such as it was, in the mess tent. The late crowd only included ten people, all others being out on specific missions. Puck was sitting with Shelby, Nate and General Grimes, so deep in conversation that Jared hoped he'd be able to eat this meal in peace.

"Acorn!" Puck called, beckoning to him as he carried his meal to another table. Jared was tempted to ignore him in favor of dinner, but decided at last that he was being childish. "Here, lad," Puck said, conjuring up a small glass full of a pale green liquid, "drink this first. It'll restore some vital nutrients to your body."

Jared tasted it. "Mint?" he asked.

"Among other things. Drink up and have a seat. We were just talking about you."

"Terrific," Jared grumbled. "What now?"

"I'm afraid your magic lessons are going to be on the run for a while," Grimes told him. "The news Hayes here brings us shows that now is the time to strike out at the members of the High Command in the

Greater Boston area."

"That's right," Nate agreed. "The missile attack the other night was enormously successful and the regular armed forces are already converging on the city."

"Your mission, under Captain Shelby's command," Grimes told him, "will be to root out whatever High Command members might still be in the area."

"Me?"

"You and Puck," Shelby told him. "The rest of the team - Jean, Jim, Mark, Nate, and Otis - will be running cover and assisting where we can. Puck assures us that we'll be of great help as long as we're equipped with M-26s."

"Too much steel will impede my effectiveness," Puck admitted. "They'll be using the iron fléchettes like you do, however."

"When are we leaving?"

"In an hour," Shelby replied smoothly. "Oh! And pack everything you plan to keep. If this mission goes well, we won't be coming back here, because there won't be any need for an underground base here anymore."

Eighteen

"Why are we coming in from the north?" Jared asked. They were cruising down I-93 in a battered blue minivan.

"To keep our targets from escaping," Shelby told him.

"Most of the Boston area corresponds to ocean on Faerie," Puck explained. "The nearest safe transfer place is just north of Manchester, New Hampshire. Any who are already there can just escape before we stop them, but we hope to head off any High Council members trapped in Boston."

"How are we going to find them?" Jared asked. "Some sort of magic detection?" Everyone but Jim who was driving the Minivan turned and looked at Jared. "What? What did I say?"

"See what you get for sleeping through the briefing?" Shelby smirked. "No. We've got a cellular phone. We'll just call up the army for elf sightings."

"I thought radio signals were being damped by the High Command."

"The anti-tech shield" Puck explained, "has been seriously weakened by the recent successful attacks on Boston. Your phone should work, although there may be a lot of interference." Just then the phone rang, lending truth to the elf's statement.

"Shelbyhere," she answered. "Right! Let me write that down. Uh huh. What was that address again? Got it! We're on our way." She pushed the "End" button and returned the handset to its holding bracket. "Malden, Jim. There's a small factory on the south side that our scouts suspect may be an emergency HQ for the High Command."

"Proof?" Jean asked, leaning forward to hear Shelby's answer.

"They followed a staff car from out of what's left of Boston. High probability that there was at least one HC member inside."

"That's good enough for me. Just wish I had more experience with these new rifles. Laker, how do they handle compared to the M-25e?"

"I wouldn't know," he replied. "I've never worked with anything else."

"That's right," Jean agreed. "I forgot. Otis?"

"I haven't used an M-26 before either," the gunnery expert began, "but the important thing to remember is that the cartridges are lighter loads so there's not as much kick to these guns. They should be easier to aim."

"That may well be why my people chose this design," Puck commented, looking dubiously at his own weapon, "although I doubt I'll have much use for this weapon and it won't be as devastating as yours." For safety reasons, Puck had been equipped with brass fléchette loads rather than the soft iron the rest of the team carried.

"You never know," Nate told him. "Even if you don't use it, you'll know you have a back-up defense, and added confidence never hurts."

"If it isn't misplaced," Puck replied. "I'm a bit set in my ways. Magic is my way of dealing with a problem, my primary defense, you might say, and I use it instinctively. By the time I stop to think about using this pretty golden toy here, I am likely to be dead."

"Then why bring it at all?" Mark asked.

"Like Nathan here said, 'You never know.'"

The Highway was being kept remarkably clear and a few minutes later they reached their exit. The bottom of the exit ramp, however, had been blocked by a humvee - the vehicle that had replaced the classic jeep some years earlier - and a truck, both painted in camouflage colors. Between the two vehicles a 6x6 wooden beam had been hastily placed and painted yellow with red diagonal stripes. Two military policemen stood at either side of the minivan as it came to a halt.

"ID?" the MP on the driver's side requested politely but firmly. Then he caught a glance of Puck in the back of the van and his expression hardened.

"Captain Aina Shelby, Resistance Special Forces," Shelby replied crisply. "Cleared by Harry Lee Grimes."

"Oh right." The MP relaxed. "We heard you were coming, ma'am. What about the Point-ear?"

"He's with us, corporal," Shelby told him in a no-nonsense tone of voice."

"Whatever you say, ma'am. Take this card." He handed a bright orange piece of cardboard to Jim who tossed it to Shelby. "You'll need it to get past the check points ahead."

"Get Out of Jail Free?" Shelby read.

"It was the best we could do at the spur of the moment, ma'am," the MP replied sheepishly. "Major Bunsen said that it was unlikely that anyone would expect it and they're difficult to duplicate quickly."

"May I?" Puck reached out and took the game card out of Shelby's hand. "Very interesting," he said handing back the original to Shelby and a dozen perfect duplicates to the corporal.

"Uh, we should have something a bit better by tomorrow," he replied looking at the cards Puck had handed him. Not only was the printing identical, but each one had the same nick in the lower left hand corner. Puck laughed gently. "You may pass," the MP told them, shaking his head in confusion.

When the barrier had been removed they finished their trip down the exit ramp and were dumped immediately into a wide rotary.

"Aina Shelby?" Jared asked.

"Problem?" Shelby asked.

"No, not really. I had just assumed that Shelby was your first name."

"Sorry to disappoint you," she replied dryly.

There was another check point at each of the six entrances and exits into the rotary. Jim drove the van three quarters of the way around the rotary and directly into another red and yellow barrier.

"Your pass?" the driver's side MP requested.

"Hey! Is that your brother we just spoke to on the other side of the rotary?" Jim asked mockingly as he passed him the game card that served as a pass. The soldier refused to respond to Jim's joke. He also kept the card and handed them a buff-colored \$100 bill from the same game the card had come from.

"Colorful money," Puck commented, looking over Shelby's shoulder. Thinking he was kidding, everybody smiled, but nobody thought to correct him.

They went through two more check points on the way to their destination during which they received a small green plastic model of a house and finally a tiny metal racing car. There were several army vehicles just outside the factory when Jim drove up in the minivan.

"Captain Shelby?" an Army major asked as Jim opened his door.

"Not quite, major," Jim replied. "That's the boss right there."

"Captain Aina Shelby," she introduced herself, walking around the van to offer her hand.

"Miguel Costa," the major replied. The man's eyes bugged a bit when he saw Puck step out around the van so perhaps he wasn't completely under control as he stuttered, "I wasn't expecting a woman to be in charge."

Shelby bristled at that and Otis had to hold Jean back, but it was Nate who told Major Costa, "The Resistance chooses its officers strictly by merit, major, not by sex." The rest of the squad stood both emotionally and physically behind their leader.

"My apologies, captain," Costa told her, quickly realizing his error. "I didn't mean..."

"That's all right, major," Shelby told him, making it perfectly clear that it wasn't. "Which building are they in?"

The factory actually consisted of two one-story buildings that stood side by side with a common parking lot. According to the signs, the red-brick building on the right was where most of the offices were, while the other building had served its previous owners as the manufacturing facility as well as shipping and receiving. The small complex was enclosed within a tall chain-link fence and a swinging gate, which was closed and locked, between the two buildings.

"They went in there," Costa pointed to the left. "The office building is barricaded. I have a few men just inside the factory building, but we were ordered to wait for you and not to pursue."

"Thank you, major," Shelby told him. "We'll take over now." As she said that, electrical power was suddenly restored to the area and a spontaneous cheer went up from the assembled troops. "Damn! I've forgotten how bright street lights could be."

"Been inside Point-ear territory long, captain?" the major asked.

"Two years. I see there were a few lights left on in these two buildings too. Let's go, team!" They started for the open door.

"Captain!" Major Costa called, "is there anything we can do to help?"

"Guard our backs!" Shelby called back from the doorway.

"Use the men inside," Costa replied. "I'll deploy more to fill in behind you." He turned to give some orders to a sergeant while Shelby's squad entered the building.

"I thought the offices were all in the other building," Mark commented as they walked through the small complex of rooms and halls.

"We think these were for the factory manager and the salesmen, sir," one of two soldiers supplied as they passed. "Uh, that just leads to an empty room. The factory floor is through this door. You'll be on your own from here on."

"Thank you, Private..." Shelby paused to read a name tag, "Jeffries. Any signs of movement in there?"

"No, ma'am," PFC Jeffries replied. "It was as quiet as a tomb in there until the power came on, then we heard some machinery running for a bit. It sounded like an air compressor to me."

"Probably built up pressure to its limit and shut off," Jim commented.

"Let's find out," Shelby said conclusively. "Come with us, Jeffries, and everyone else within earshot too."

They walked through the door and on to the factory floor, a cement slab with various production and packing machines on either side of a wide central aisle. Several ceiling lights were on in no discernable pattern so the party was forced to walk through alternating areas of light and shadow. When they were half-way, Shelby left two of the six men she had brought from the office and continued on. They reached the loading docks at the far end of the building without finding anyone.

"Outside doors are locked, Shelby," Jean reported. "They didn't go through here."

"Puck," Shelby asked, "is there any chance of a landmass at this point in Faerie?"

"A small island, maybe," Puck replied. "Nothing more than a large rock that sticks up above the waves at low tide, but I doubt it. I don't recall anything on a map."

"Then, they're probably still here. Spread out and look for hiding places or unlocked doors." Most of the party started back toward the main factory, but Puck held Jared back at the loading dock.

"There's something odd back here," the elf told his apprentice, "but I can't put my finger on it. Let's look a bit deeper."

"Under some of the pallets?" Jared suggested.

"It's a possibility," Puck conceded.

"That'll be a lot of work," Jared hesitated. "The electric fork-lifts won't be charged up for hours yet and moving them by hand will be difficult."

"Not really," Puck shrugged. A large stack of wooden pallets slowly lifted until they were a foot off the floor, then settled slowly back down again.

"Hey! There was something under there."

"Really? Lucky on the first attempt?" Puck asked smugly. He used his magic to move the pallets out of the way.

"See?" Jared pointed at the floor. "There's a steel plate on the floor."

"It's partially under the next stack," Puck pointed out. "Are you sure this is unusual?"

"This sort of textured steel plate is commonly used to cover the gap between a truck and the loading dock," Jared explained, "so that a forklift can be driven directly into the truck. Why would it be on the floor here under a stack of pallets?"

"Let's find out, shall we?" Puck smiled. "Your turn."

"Say what?"

"Which word do you need to look up? I moved the last stack. Now it's your turn."

"With this?" Jared asked holding his wand up.

"That is the general idea," Puck replied. "Unless you feel up to working without it. Surely you didn't think I was going to give you time off just because we were out on a mission."

"Yeah, right. You realize that I'm just as likely to turn them into several buckets full of Kentucky Fried penguin parts, don't you?"

"Then we'll have lunch," Puck countered smoothly.

"You'd eat a penguin?" Jared asked disgustedly.

"If you don't want to, then I suggest you keep your mind on the problem at hand."

Jared realized that he wouldn't be able to change the elf's mind and, briefly wondering whether there were any sayings regarding the stubbornness of elves, he took a deep breath and tried to concentrate on moving the pallets. When he was ready, he pointed the wand at the pallets and willed them to move.

At first nothing happened and Jared, disappointed, bent the full force of his concentration to the task at hand. Then, with a deeply disturbing noise that was a hybrid of a stairway creak and that sound that comes from scraping one's fingernails across a blackboard, the second stack of pallets began to move. The motion gave Jared new confidence and the stack lifted slightly off the ground, putting an end to the awful noise. When he had moved the pallets sufficiently, he let them drop back to the floor with a loud crash. The pile teeter-tottered, but remained standing.

"I did it!" Jared exclaimed. "I really did it!"

"Yes you did, lad," Puck agreed. "Was it really all that difficult."

"No," Jared said wonderingly. "It was really quite easy. Once they started to move, there was nothing to it."

"Tell me, though. Why did you just let them drop at the end there?"

"Why not?" Jared asked, still feeling jubilant.

"They might have fallen. We could have been hurt, and, worse, it was sloppy. You should always keep your mind on the job until its safe and successful conclusion. Just letting things go can get you killed."

"Oh," Jared replied, chagrined, "sorry."

"No matter," Puck shrugged it off. "Let's see what's under that plate." He paused just before touching it. "Reinforcing my protections," the elf explained. "It doesn't hurt to be certain." Together they lifted the plate, revealing a deep, uneven hole in the floor with a wooden ladder leading downward. "Curious," he murmured.

"We found something!" they heard Nate call from the next room.

"So did we!" Jared replied.

"Let's have a look at theirs," Puck suggested.

Nate and Mark had found another hole and ladder behind a packing machine. The rest of the party and the soldiers Shelby had co-opted were standing around it, pointing a flashlight down as Puck and Jared arrived.

"Looks just like the one we uncovered," Jared said.

"We'll check this one out first," Shelby decided. "Jeffries, take one of your comrades here and stand guard at the other hole. We'll descend here." She sat down on the edge of the hole and ease herself onto the ladder.

One by one they climbed down until they found the bottom some thirty feet below the floor at the start of a tunnel. After the first few feet, the sides of the hole had been lined with rough wooden supports. The tunnel, however, was paved with a deep blue substance that gave good traction and had a slight rubber-like spring to it and lined with a white, plastic-like material that glowed in sections with a cool light as they walked through it. The tunnel ran directly to the hole that Puck and Jared had found, with another tunnel running off at a right angle toward the office building about midway between the two entrances.

Shelby paused at the head of the new tunnel and wondered aloud, "Now why would a manufacturer put these tunnels in?"

"He wouldn't," Puck answered. "This is standard, pre-fabricated, elvish construction. Me thinks our spies have found an important command base."

"Me thinks?" Jared laughed.

"Old speech habits. They slip in from time to time."

"Where's the light coming from?" Jim asked Puck.

"The walls," Puck replied dryly.

"I could see that," Jim replied disgustedly. "I meant what is causing it?"

"Magic. It's a standard industrial spell. You'll notice that it only shines in the area you're in. That's the result of a clever limiting spell. If you run, you'll find that a greater area ahead of you will light up the faster you move."

"Why not just keep it lit all the time?" Mark asked.

"Conservation of energy. The spell uses power that is stored in the material of the walls and has to be recharged every so often. This way the spell can last far longer if the energy isn't being constantly depleted. On Faerie we had power generating plants to fuels such spells as needed, but here we need to recharge long-term spells manually."

"We're not getting anywhere, just standing around talking about it," Shelby told them. "Follow me." With weapons ready, they walked briskly down the tunnel.

After thirty feet they encountered an open portal in the tunnel that revealed a stairway heading down. The tunnel itself continued onward.

"Stay here," Shelby told the soldiers. "Puck, Jared, Jean, and Mark come with me."

"This probably just leads to the office building," Mark commented as they continued on.

"Then I want to make sure of that before risking the stairway."

The tunnel continued on another thirty feet, ending at another ladder. A quick inspection proved that the office building had been used as some sort of command post, but the rows of file cabinets were badly scorched and contained only ashes. The front door proved to be blocked off by several desks and they quickly removed the barricade to let more of Major Costa's men in. With that building explored, they returned to the tunnel stairway.

Shelby led the way down the stairs, leaving the soldiers behind. The stairway seemed to go down forever. Finally they ended at a brief platform before a large, gold-colored door.

"Bronze?" Nate guessed.

"Of one alloy or another," Puck replied. "Very heavy and tough."

"We must be over a hundred feet below ground level. Why so deep?" Jared asked.

"Sea level," Puck said grimly.

"What?"

"I've been stupid," Puck replied. "We have to get through that door quickly." He raised his hands and a searingly bright blue-white light issued forth and struck the door and was absorbed.

"Not even warm," Otis reported.

"I was afraid of that," Puck told them. "It's a security door, spelled to be magic-proof."

"Would touching it with cold iron help?" Shelby asked.

"Only if you're touching it very hard with a 'cold iron' battering ram, and in the case a tree trunk would be as effective. The magic is in the very substance of the door. Iron would only affect those few molecules it came in contact with - an essentially two-dimensional effect."

"Well, then," Mark replied, "Time for explosives." He removed his pack and pulled out a small electronic timing device and a large ball of putty.

"Isn't it dangerous walking around like that, man?" Jim asked Mark.

"Only if I get struck by lightning," Mark replied as he went to work. "This stuff needs an electric charge, and a healthy one at that, in order to detonate. Everyone up the stairs, I'm only going to give this a thirty second fuse."

The party moved way up the stairway. A minute later Mark came pelting up after them, shouting, "Cover your ears! This sucker'll be deafening!"

They barely had time to clap their hands over their ears when a massive vibration accompanied by an

incredible roar and blast of wind flowed around them. As the sound died, they picked themselves up and headed back down the stairs. The door had been blown off its hinges and they rushed through it at a full run, spreading out on the wide, semi-circular platform on the other side. In the dim light beyond the door it was obvious that they were in an artificial, subterranean cavern and that the platform ended some twenty feet into the room where a large boat was floating in a pool of water.

They were met, however, by ten of the toughest elves they had ever seen, and behind them stood Vitriol Mankill. As one, the ten cast a spell that trapped them all in an amber-colored light. This time even Jared felt as though he were trying to move through rapidly congealing gelatin. He could barely move and then only by exerting every ounce of muscle power he had in him. He was dimly aware that nobody else was capable of moving at all.

All movement slowed, but the words of Vitriol Mankill came to him at normal speed. "Drop the ceiling on them and we'll be off." Jared had only a moment to wonder how Vitriol had managed to keep his mind, then he heard the dreadful sound of the rock above his head shearing off from the rest of its formation and could see, through the corners of his eyes, a large slab of rock dropping straight down.

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The stone slab from the ceiling fell exactly three feet and then became subject to the same spell that held Shelby's squad in stasis.

"Idiots!" Vitriol screamed at his people. "You should have released the stasis spell first!" Jared continued to force his hand toward the wand.

"High Commander!" one of the elves called out, "Isn't that Elder Rondel?"

"Why, so it is," Vitriol smiled. "Hold the stasis field, while I move him out of there."

Jared nearly forgot to keep moving when he saw Puck's body rise and float past his nose, but he realized that once the elder elf was beyond the boundary of the spell's effect the rest of Shelby's team would be auditioning for the part of human pancake and they would probably all get the part; there was no shortage of openings.

Finally Jared's hand closed on the wooden rod just as normal motion was restored. He whipped the wand upward as the stone slab smashed down. There was no time to think it out. He just cast a random spell at the stone and then turned the wand at the elves and hoped something good would happen twice. He was half right.

The stone slab was transformed into a mass of water, which splashed down, soaking them all thoroughly, but the second application of the wand turned it into a hill of viscous mud, trapping them all hip deep, and covering them with thick black mud from there up.

"The wizard!" Vitriol screamed again. "He's here too!" Get him!"

Jared had mud in his eyes and had trouble seeing, but someone either could see clearly or just didn't give a damn for the odd hushed and whizzing sound of an M-26 in fully automatic mode could be heard from off to his left. The cries of falling elves could be heard by the edge of the water.

Still unable to see, Jared concentrated on Puck and used the wand again. Another gun harmonized with the first and then both were silent. Jared finally wiped the mud from his eyes and looked to see what had happened.

Puck was dizzy, but still standing behind a tall wall of something very hard and transparent. The wall had a line of iron fléchettes stuck in its surface, evidence that Jared had acted just in time.

Several elves were floating in the water. The rest were lying on the platform, either dead or dying, their bright green blood forming a pool around them. A few wisps of smoke began to rise from their clothing.

"Oh shit!" Jean swore. "They're starting to burn. We'll suffocate in here!"

The mud that held them had settled down and spread a bit, leaving them only knee deep in the morass but still unable to move very quickly or easily. Puck looked up and saw what was happening. A moment later, the bodies of the elves were all in the water.

"That won't stop the burning," he explained, "but it will put it on hold until they're pulled out of the water."

"Why pull them out?" Mark asked.

"We're not barbarians!" Puck protested. "It is our version of a proper burial."

"Why do your bodies burn, Puck?"

"It's just our way of decomposing, but traditionally the process needs a tear to make it begin - a tear added to our life-blood. Tears are the catalyst for the reaction, you see."

"Nobody's been crying over these elves," Jean replied coldly.

"I would," Puck replied. "It's the proper thing to do, even for an enemy. However, it isn't necessary. In times of war our soldiers wear specially treated shirts that already have the required catalyst in them. Once the reaction starts, nothing can completely stop it."

"Hey, the boat is moving!" Nate pointed. The large boat was indeed drifting out into the center of the artificial underground pond.

"It's Vitriol," Jared announced. "He must have made it into the boat while we were blinded by the mud." Before any of them could react the boat silently disappeared.

"Damn!" Puck shouted. Jared started concentrating on a spell.

"Shouldn't there have been some sort of thunderclap?" Nate asked.

"Hmm? No," Puck replied. "At least not if you do the transfer properly. At the same time a body transfers to Faerie an equal volume of water, earth, and/or air transfers to Earth and vice versa. On ground to ground transfers the result encourages what you call fairy rings of mushrooms."

Jared continued to silently concentrate on bringing Vitriol Mankill back to Earth.

"And to transfer to a sea level area," Shelby concluded, "you have to be at sea level."

"Or risk a fatal fall," Puck replied. "Same problem on land, but there we have a little leeway and can cut tunnels into the ground or build something to make up the difference."

Jared brought his wand up and invoked his spell. Puck's attention was jerked over to Jared as the rod was raised. "Acorn! Don't try it!" Too late. Jared fired the spell, intending to drag Vitriol back to Earth kicking and screaming.

Instead, the far half of the cavern was replaced by a bright blue sky and a rolling ocean with Vitriol's boat in the middle, heading right for the docking platform. Gale force winds blew in from the ocean of Faerie, knocking everyone except Puck, who was standing in the shelter of the transparent wall.

The wind slammed the boat roughly into the platform and waves began washing the mud away, trying to carry the Resistance fighters with it. Puck cast a spell and the back end of the cavern was restored. With that restoration the winds died abruptly. The sound of water could be heard rushing through a basketball-sized hole that had been punched through the bow of the boat.

"Help!" Vitriol cried.

"Of course," Puck replied, untying his belt rope. He stretched it, fashioned a quick lariat, and tossed it to Vitriol. The loop went unerringly over the member of the High Command, and quickly tightened up to bind him firmly. "Now," Puck continued, pulling Vitriol out of the water, "what shall I do to you."

"Elder Rondel," Vitriol pleaded, "I meant you no harm."

"No? You wanted to install me as king. If that isn't harm, I don't know what is. Sorry, mate, but I've been doing a bit of research since we last parted. Say, how did you recover from my mind-wipe spell?" Vitriol kept his mouth shut. "Oh, I see." Puck reached out and grabbed a small charm that hung from a leather thong around Vitriol's neck.

"No!" Vitriol screamed. Puck carefully lifted the charm up and over the other elf's head. "No!" he screamed again. The scream echoed through the cavern for an improbably long time and as the scream faded, Vitriol turned to dust. The dust kept a vaguely similar shape to the elf it was formed of, and then fell apart leaving an amorphous pile on the platform.

"That," Puck commented, kicking the pile into the water, "should put an end to that."

"What was that he was wearing?" Jared asked.

"This? An emergency life sustainer. Vitriol Mankill must have received a mortal blow some time back. This little device has been keeping him alive ever since. The problem is that the charm doesn't spare you any injury, just keeps it from manifesting openly, saves it all up until you either live out your natural span or someone takes it off."

"I thought you said you had something really nasty in mind for him and the rest of the High Command," Shelby accused.

"It was a spur of the moment decision," Puck replied. "Frankly I think it was the most frightening thing I could have done to him. Let's just drop it and get the hell out of here."

Just before leaving the cavern they pulled the dead elves out of the water. Their bodies were warm and they were nearly dry before they could reach the stairway.

"Briskly, children," Puck called, as they climbed the stairs. "It's going to get very smokey in a minute or so." There was a loud whooshing sound behind them as the elvish bodies burst into flame. The smoke was already starting to thin out again by the time they reached the top of the stairway.

"What happened down there?" Major Costa asked when they emerged from the office building a few minutes later, coughing violently. The smoke was still pouring out of the doors, although it was much less dense than it had been on the stairway.

"Just cleaning out a nest of elves, major," Shelby replied. "We'll clear out now. The place is all yours."

Leaving wasn't as easy as that. Costa insisted that Shelby and her team stay until he had personally inspected the premises. While they were waiting, another call came in.

"Captain Shelby?" the voice on the other side asked. "This is General Grimes."

"Yes, general. What's up?"

"Good news, captain. The Point-ears' shield is down and the army has just declared Boston secured. I've moved into the new headquarters in the Hancock Tower."

"Excellent!" Shelby replied. "We ought to be there in an hour or less."

"Very good, captain. I will see you then."

Traffic going into Boston as the sun rose over the liberated city was still minimal, but the out-going flow had picked up - mostly military vehicles, evidence that the city had been more or less cleared.

"I must say," Jim drawled as he drove the minivan south on I-93, "that this is the emptiest I have ever seen this road in daylight, on this side at least."

"Well, don't try to set any land speed records today," Shelby told him. "We did quite a number on the main bridge over the Charles, you'll have to cut over to Somerville Avenue to cross the river."

"And then take Storrow Drive? Sounds reasonable. Will you look at that?"

Barely visible through the early morning mist were the remains of a once majestic skyline. Nearly every tall building had been damaged. The only obvious exception was the Hancock Tower, which as a known Resistance holding was left virtually untouched. The Prudential was missing half of its floors and other tall buildings had been reduced to rubble-strewn steel skeletons.

"We really knocked the hell out of the city," Mark said disgustedly. "Are you sure the way is clear along Storrow Drive?"

"I never thought to check," Shelby replied, embarrassed by her oversight. She picked up the phone and called for the information they needed. "We'll have to go a bit out of the way," she told her team at last.

"Jim, the best route is down Memorial Drive to the Harvard Bridge. Mass Ave has been cleared as has Commonwealth and Boylston.

The road report proved to be inaccurate. Massachusetts Avenue may have been minimally passable, but cleared it was not. Twice between the river and Boylston Street, Jim had to drive around and partially over piles of rubble that covered the better part of both sides of the street. Boylston Street, however, was fairly clear, although the sidewalks were impassable most of the way.

The once gleaming Hancock building, however, had hardly escaped untouched. The sixty-story edifice once more resembled its one-time nickname "Plywood Tower" when the original window brackets proved inadequate to cope with the building's sway in high winds. Many of the windows had been covered with sheets of plywood and many more were left broken. People were installing more plywood panels as the minivan drove up.

"Come in! Come in!" General Grimes greeted them when they found his new office on the fifty-eighth floor. He was wearing a new, smartly-tailored uniform, jet black in color. As far as Jared could remember, this was the first time he had ever seen the general smile. "I've taken the liberty of ordering breakfast for you all. It should be here any minute. That was an excellent job you did in Malden. Now tell me all about your latest adventure." Shelby suddenly noticed that Grimes now sported three silver stars on each shoulder of his uniform.

"Is that a promotion or a demotion, sir?" Shelby asked pointing to his insignia.

"Neither, actually, merely recognition by the regular army of my status. I shall get to that later. Your story please."

Shelby did most of the talking, but Grimes slowed down her pace by questioning almost every decision that had been made during the mission. The team felt more at ease once that started. A smiling, jovial Grimes was an unknown and possibly mythical beast - much related to a dragon, no doubt - but a questioning, cynical Grimes was someone they were well acquainted with.

"Well done!" the general told them when Shelby had finished. "Tired? Yes, I expect you are. Well, I shall let you go soon. According to the latest reports, we have cleared the Point-ears completely out of the Boston area, but they are still holding out in New Hampshire, most especially at Camp Goodfellow."

"Then we are heading north next," Shelby asked.

"Yes and no," Grimes replied. "As of this moment, Jean Tretheway and Mark Nevada, at Captain Shelby's recommendation, you are both promoted to the rank of captain. My congratulations. Your first orders are for each of you to assemble a team of twenty. Choose anyone you want except Puck and Laker, but choose them quickly. Both teams will be needed at dusk tonight. You'll find Captain Watney on the next floor down. He has the latest rosters. You may also requisition whatever transportation you'll need. When you've done that, you are to leave immediately to join the attack on Camp Goodfellow. Watney will have your written orders and location of your rendezvous. Good luck. Captain Shelby, Laker, Puck, please stay a bit longer. The rest of you may go now."

There was a brief pause while everyone congratulated Jean and Mark. When the rest of the team had gone, General Grimes told the remaining trio to sit back down.

"So," Shelby asked, nervously. "What's next?"

"Promotions and transfer," Grimes replied. "We expect to have New England completely liberated within the week. At that point the Resistance in this region becomes non-existent."

"It is difficult to resist something that no longer exists," Puck said calmly.

"Exactly. Members will be given the option of transfer to other held areas, but I suspect that we'll lose all but the most dedicated members. That is why I gave Captains Tretheway and Nevada their promotions now. They are both quite dedicated and after only a single mission in charge they will no doubt be willing to accept transfer."

"You said something about promotions?" Shelby prompted the general.

"Yes. General Meisterhaus has established a temporary base here using the fiftieth floor. Oh, if you run into him you might congratulate him on his second star. Anyway, it appears that the Resistance groups across the nation are joining together in a more organized fashion. That should satisfy you, captain."

"There are pluses and minuses," Shelby admitted.

"Oh? That is not what you said just a few weeks ago."

"I've had an opportunity to change my mind. Our system seems to work. Why change it?"

"Because it is our system, not theirs, I suppose. The other Resistance groups are adopting a full military ranking system and therefore so shall we. You three will be the first, not counting me. I have been asked to fix proper ranks for all those who choose to continue the fight after we finish up in New Hampshire so that our people will be accorded their rightful rank and recognition as we merge with other units."

"So we are adopting the army's system of rank?"

"That is our choice, but yes. From what I can tell, only the San Diego and Hawaii cells are using naval rank and insignia. Anyway, as recommended, Captain Shelby, I hereby promote you to the rank of brigadier general. According to the standard conversion tables I've worked out, a captain should only be a full colonel, but you've earned the extra rank and you'll need the star on your next assignment anyway." Grimes picked up a small black jewelry box and handed it to Shelby. It contained two silver stars. He also handed her a brief document officially promoting her.

"Now as for you two," Grimes continued, turning toward Jared and Puck, "I had to think this over long and hard. Neither of you has served as a team leader in the Resistance, so it is not a matter of course that you would hold any officerial rank. Puck, however, has served as an elder of his own people. There is no clear equation, but the closest I can come up with would be a full general, and I cannot grant you that. However, you do hold a unique position in this army. Therefore, I hereby promote you to colonel," Grimes handed the elf another piece of paper and black, hinged box with a pair of silver eagles inside. "That's the best I can do for you."

"Colonel Goodfellow," Puck chuckled. "It has a ring to it, but I must decline." He pushed the box back toward Grimes.

"Are you certain?" Grimes asked, but in a manner that implied he had expected this.

"Quite. As you say, I am an elder among my people. It would not be proper to officially join what is, in effect, an enemy army even if I strongly oppose the policies of the current leadership of my people. I will,

of course, continue to work as a special advisor under the same conditions that I have so far."

"In which case," Grimes replied, "I am empowered to tell you that we will be glad to have you on that basis, and that you will be accorded the courtesy rank of colonel. No don't stop me. This is so that other commanders will know where you stand in regard to privileges while you are with them." He pushed the silver eagles and a different document back to Puck, who accepted them this time.

"And that brings us to you," Grimes told Jared, as he placed the first document he had given to Puck into a small personal shredder. "Laker, the highest rank I would normally accord you would be second lieutenant. That, however, would leave you at the bottom of every totem pole, so to speak, and at the mercy of any passing officer of higher rank. Given the potential you have shown as a magician..."

"A wizard, general," Puck corrected.

"Excuse me?"

"He is a wizard - one skilled in magic, to some extent and improving. To call him a magician makes him sound like one of your clever stage illusionists."

"Point taken," Grimes replied, tearing up the last remaining piece of paper on his desk and consigning it to the same resting place as Puck's official promotion. He then pulled another document out of his desk and filled in a few blanks. "I had a few thousand of these printed up," he explained. "I suppose I had better get used to signing my name."

"Or get a rubber stamp made," Shelby suggested.

"Too risky. Even if only one was made, someone might still have the matrix to make another with. I'll sign my own signatures if I must."

Puck looked briefly at the signature on the document in his hand and conjured up a wooden device that looked something like a rubber stamp without the rubber. "Here," he told Grimes, "use this."

"A wooden block with a handle? What good is that?"

"Try it." Grimes did and a perfect copy of his signature in a dimly glowing, richly hued blue appeared on the document before him. "You will find that it only works for you," Puck told him, "so even if stolen, no one will be able to use it to counterfeit your signature."

"How does it work?"

"Magic, of course," Puck laughed. "The spell is a complex one, and usually only cast with the aid of the elvish equivalents of machinery, but I am an elder, after all, and that is not something that comes just because I am old."

"Uh, thank you," Grimes replied slightly uncomfortably. He was still uncomfortable with Puck and half expected the device would leave a black mark on his hand where he held it. "Laker, I have had to create a new rank for you - Wizard-Lieutenant Colonel. What others might make of that, I do not know, but it should at least give you the sort of rank and privilege you'll need to match your responsibilities on your next assignment. That is, if you are staying on. Perhaps I should have asked that first." Grime held back the document he had just completed.

"Why wouldn't I?" Jared asked.

"We have managed to get your name cleared by the Third District Court in New Bedford. You can go home now, if you want."

Jared considered that, then shook his head. "I'll stick around," he replied, "at least as long as Puck does. I'm just starting to learn magic and want to learn more."

"Good man!" Grimes approved, passing the document across to Jared. "Now we have a slight problem about the insignia. There is no insignia established for magi... I mean wizards, so we will have to invent something. Ideas?"

"Puck," Shelby asked, "is there some symbol for magic we might use?"

"Many," Puck replied. "Thousands, in fact. Most religious symbols either are or have been considered magical in nature, but I can't think of a single one that merely stands for magic. Do any of your insignia use a charge within an annulet?"

"Charge? Annulet?"

"Heraldic terms," Puck explained. "A charge is a discrete element of any sort and an annulet is a hollow circle."

"No," Grimes told him. "They do not. Yes, that might work."

"Like this?" Puck opened the box that contained his two silver eagles. Each bird was now mounted within an annulet.

"Quite. I will draft a document that proposes such a usage. Would you do the same, please, for these?" The third and final insignia box was passed to Puck who nonchalantly passed it without opening it to Jared. It, too, now contained two sterling silver oak leaves in annulets.

"I'd hate to talk myself out of such a good position," Jared admitted uneasily, "but wouldn't this system work just as well around a second lieutenant's bar?"

"It would," Grimes replied, "but as the first wizard we have, it will fall to you to train those, if any, to come after you. You should have an impressively high rank."

"I'll not try to talk you out of it twice," Jared returned with a smile. "Thank you, sir."

"You're welcome, colonel. Now, I intend that the three of you stay together so your new orders, which you will have by this evening, will send you as a unit with General Shelby in charge."

"Where are we going, general?" Shelby asked.

"I haven't decided yet. Probably to help break the siege of Washington, D.C."

"I hadn't heard that it was under siege," Shelby commented.

"The news just arrived a few hours ago. For now, you should ask Captain Watney for sleeping quarters and a set of the new uniforms, dress and fatigues. As officers you are expected to pay for them, but you

have sufficient ammo credits so that shouldn't be a problem."

"General," Puck replied, "just as I refuse to join your army, I must refuse to wear a uniform as well."

"You're basically a civilian with a courtesy rank," Grimes said dismissively. "Do what you want, but please wear the insignia while on duty."

Captain Watney had more dormitory space than he knew what to do with, but most of it was in one of the nearby hotels. As Shelby, Jared and Puck would leaving that night, he put them in a trio of office rooms on the thirty-seventh floor.

"We're trying not to get too comfortable in this building. The owners will, no doubt, be back any day now," Watney told them. "Of course, we'll all be out by the end of the week in any case. No more action down here, time to go north. We haven't even bothered to unpack the trucks, just kept a current inventory of where everything is."

"Did we leave much behind?" Shelby asked.

"Some of Doc's equipment, but that's no loss. He's been setting up in a real hospital and if he really needs something he left behind, he can always go back for it. He'll be staying here in the city. There's more need for doctors here than in the field."

"Really? Why?" Jared asked.

"The city is far from empty. A lot of people just went underground, hiding out in the subway tunnels and various apartment buildings. Add to that the expected return of the refugees from two years ago and Doc is going to be very busy."

Jared's room turned out to be some high-ranking executive's corner office with the windows still intact. Instead of a cot he found sheets and a blanket piled neatly on a couch. Even if it had not been as comfortable as it was, after the past few weeks on a slim canvas cot he would have been asleep in a few minutes.

He woke to the sound of a telephone ringing on the nearby desk. Making a detour to check the name on the door, he answered it, "Kyle Perkin's Office."

"Stop fooling around, colonel!" he heard Grimes tell him sternly. "Get up to my office on the double!"

Uncertain how literally Grimes meant that, Jared slipped into the black uniform pants he'd acquired earlier and jammed his feet into his boots. "Socks!" he said aloud to himself. "I forgot the socks!" He pulled off the boots and put the socks on, then pulled the boots on again. As he did this he noticed just how overdue those boots were for polishing. They were also the wrong color. Maybe Puck could help. Then he threw the light gray shirt on and without waiting to button it up, grabbed the tie and jacket and ran, full speed, to the elevators.

"In a hurry, Acorn?" Puck asked lightly as Jared ran by his door. The elf had changed out of the long robe in favor of a silver-trimmed black tunic and trousers that looked suspiciously like the new dress uniforms. He had pinned his Wizard/Colonel eagles on the shoulders, which only served to increase the uniform-like appearance of his garments.

"Grimes wants me upstairs fastest," Jared panted.

"Yes," Puck replied, joining him at a brisk walk. "I got the same call. A bit undressed, aren't you? And those boots are all wrong."

"Only boots I have." They reached the elevators and Jared pushed the "Up" button. "I figured I could finish dressing while waiting. I don't suppose I could talk you into spiffing up my boots for me." Jared tossed his jacket to Puck, who caught it deftly.

"It's not a complicated spell," Puck demurred. "Why don't you do it yourself?"

"I left my wand in the room," Jared replied as he tucked his shirt in and started working on the tie.

"Bad move," Puck reprimanded him. "From now on you are to go nowhere, not even the men's room without it. Do you understand?"

"No, I don't."

"Acorn, that wand is not only attuned to you, but you are also attuned to it. No other wand will work for you so long as it exists so if you lose it, you're stuck to casting spells without it, and at the moment you're not up to that." The elevator arrived and they got in.

"Hold the door!" Shelby shouted. Jared put his hand over the sensor bar and waited for her to get in. "Thanks. Jared, your tie is crooked."

"It is?"

"Here," she said exasperatedly. "I'll fix it. That's better. Nice boots. They new?"

Jared looked down, the beat-up brown boots were now shiny and black. "What? These old things? Thanks, Puck."

"Por nada," he replied graciously, helping Jared on with his jacket. "You should have told me about the iron bars in the heels. It was difficult to work around them."

"Sorry. I'd forgotten they were there. The boots were a gift." He quickly told Puck about Bernie Holmes. By the time he was done they had reached the fifty-eighth floor and had his uniform on in presentable fashion. It was only then that he noticed that Shelby had waited until she was fully dressed before answering the Lieutenant General's summons. He filed that datum away for future reference.

"About time you all got here," Grimes grumbled at them.

Only Puck had the chutzpah to say what they all thought. "You did get us out of bed. It does take a moment or two to get the sleep out of one's eyes."

"Yes," Grimes growled with his eyes narrowed to slits. The joviality he had shown earlier was gone. Something bad had happened.

"We're here now, sir," Jared said quickly when he noticed Puck getting ready to deliver a snappy reply.

"Uh, yes," Grimes cleared his throat. "You look good in that uniform, colonel."

"Thank you, sir. Where did they come from anyway?"

"We found them in a warehouse down near Commonwealth Pier."

"A warehouse? Why would anyone store enough uniforms to equip an army?"

"According to the shipping labels they were supposed to have been shipped to Uruguay for some elite military unit or other."

"Pretty snappy dressers those Uruguayans," Shelby noted, "but sexist to the max! You think it might be possible to get a skirt made to go with this?"

"Feel free to order one from Captain Watney," Grimes told her. "I'll see that it is forwarded to you."

"Thank you, general."

"You're welcome, general," Grimes replied. "Although where you're going you aren't likely to need it."

"Where are we going?"

"The Baltimore - Washington metroplex. This dispatch just came in over our fax line before the phone lines were cut off. You may read it if you like but the fast and dirty version is that while we were liberating Boston, the elves were completing their move on Washington. The federal government has fallen."

iii. A Very Big Fire

One

"And it can't get up?" Puck asked impudently.

Grimes ignored him. "This fax came out just as the Point-ears established an anti-tech shield that covered the two cities. You'll notice that the last few lines are missing. Naturally there is no organized Resistance there yet so I had to call the regular military. There are quite a few bases in the area there, which was why they held out so long. Most of them, however, are trapped under the shield now."

"So where do we report?" Shelby asked.

"Quantico."

"The Marine base?"

"Right. It's the nearest major base to the area that isn't inside the shield." Grimes handed a thick manilla

envelope to Shelby . "These are your official orders. You've been assigned a jeep; it's waiting for you downstairs. These maps are as accurate as we can make them for you, but once you hit the New York City area you'll be on your own."

"The city is elf-held, isn't it?" Jared asked.

"Yes it is," Grimes replied. "You're going to have trouble getting through there. There are check points every two or three miles from the Connecticut border until deep into New Jersey ."

"Can we avoid it by taking the Tappan Zee ?"

"Maybe. That area is disputed land; changes hands on a moment's notice. That still won't put you out of danger on the New Jersey side. You'll have to take the back roads until well south of New York . Also, you'd better avoid Philly. That city is currently under attack. No telling how that will turn out."

"That's easy enough," Jared pointed out. "The turnpike goes well east of there."

"True," Grimes agreed. "Just don't decide to stop over there for breakfast. After that, you'll have a clear shot if you take the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel and then double back up the coast."

"That's a long distance out of the way," Shelby pointed out. "Isn't there an alternative?"

"Yes, there is. Pick up I-84 somewhere west of Hartford - that territory is currently held by elves who escaped Boston, but should be liberated soon - and take that over to I-81. Then travel south until you hit Virginia . The maps have both routes plotted."

"But you prefer the coastal route," Shelby noted. "Why?"

"I think it is more certain. Intelligence indicates that the entry point to this world from Faerie is somewhere to the west of Baltimore and Washington."

"There is a wide area of access in the northern section of the Blue Ridge area," Puck told them.

"That's it then. If you take that route you'll have to be prepared for an ambush. There have been a few such incidents."

"Then we'll take the coastal route," Shelby concluded.

"Very good," Grimes approved. "You'll leave within the hour."

Actually they were not ready to move out until half again that time. Shelby ordered a skirt to go with her dress uniform. The girl who took the order admitted that she had already made a skirt for herself and offered to slap together a quick wrap-around number at no extra cost while Shelby waited. Shelby agreed on the condition that the more standard style garment be sent down to her when finished.

While waiting, Jared took a page or two from Nate's book and arranged to cash in their remaining ammo credits for hard currency. They were heading out for human-held territory where money was still good and ammo credits were worthless.

"You're cashing in just in time," Captain Watney confided as he paid out the money - almost two thousand dollars. "I think that the ammo creds have hit their highest value and are about to crash in on us."

When the Resistance breaks up or is absorbed by the regular army, everyone is going to want to cash in, and, just between you and me, we don't have enough cash on hand. I suppose that the Army will have to cover the bills, although at a reduced rate, but with the government in collapse God alone knows where the money is coming from. Take my advice and change as much of this as you can for physical goods when you get to Quantico - precious metals or corn, perhaps - before they realize that this paper is worthless."

What Watney didn't tell them was that the jeep had been customized for Shelby's use. It was painted in camouflage unlike most of the Resistance's vehicles, although it had actually been made for commercial sale. A single black star had been painted on each side, and a small black pennant with a white star on it flew from the antenna. With a back seat fitted in, there wasn't much room for their bags, especially with the top down, but they managed.

"So this is my staff car," Shelby commented. "It'll do, I guess."

"At least they gave you a military-looking vehicle," Jared told her. "You might have been given a Buick. What would that have done for your military dignity?"

Shelby laughed. "I'm not sure the world is ready for the concept of a camouflaged 'Le Sabre'."

Already late, they decided to hit the road rather than eating at the temporary cafeteria that had been set up in an ex-pizza shop across the street.

"I'm dying for some real restaurant food anyhow after two years of dining in mess tents," Shelby told them as they traveled outward on the Massachusetts Turnpike. "Let's see what we can find."

"There's Providence," Jared supplied. He was driving the first shift. "It's been left almost untouched, and I know a good Southern-style barbecue place there."

"What about Puck?" Shelby countered. "In these uniforms we'll probably be treated like heroes, but that town is as anti-elf as they come. We'd have to fight our way in and out and wouldn't be able to stick around long enough to find a table."

"I can change my appearance," Puck told her over the wind noise from the back seat. She turned around and saw that Puck now looked exactly like her.

"Imitate somebody else, please," she said tightly.

Jared looked in the rear-view mirror and laughed. When he glanced back there again Puck had duplicated him. "I'm flattered, Puck," Jared told him, "but let's not attract too much attention."

"You're no fun," Puck griped. A moment later he looked like himself again, but was only six feet tall and had lost the elf-ears. His tunic had also been converted into a Resistance uniform.

"I thought you wouldn't wear the uniform?" Shelby questioned him.

"Not as a matter of course," Puck replied easily, "but this is a disguise. I've worn many disguises. This is as good as any. Besides the ribs sound good."

"Strange," Shelby commented, "I always used to think elves were normally vegetarians."

"I don't know why," Puck shrugged.

They reached Providence in well under an hour. The state government had security points manned by the National Guard set up at the borders and at key exits off of I-95 where it passed through the capital city. They were waved through the border, but had to stop and present their credentials when they got off the road in Providence .

The MP who passed them, said to mention his name at the rib house. They did and got the meal free along with a generous doggie bag to take with them. The restaurant had become the local hangout for the area-based guardsmen all of whom wanted to know the latest news from Boston .Shelby told them everything that she definitely knew was cleared, but held back a lot of details when she wasn't certain. Her rank as brigadier general kept the guardsmen and even their officers from pushing too hard, although a pair of majors tried to corner Jared when he used the men's room. When they finally left it was to a standing ovation.

Back on the road they drove on into the night. They were approaching the border of Connecticut and New York at eleven o'clock when they noticed that the overhead highway lights were no longer lit.

"Better turn your headlights off," Shelby told Jared.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "We didn't bring any night-scopes with us."

"We didn't? Damn!"

"What's a night scope?" Puck asked interestedly. Jared explained about the way such a device would take the limited available light and amplify it. "We can do that by magic."

"Sounds good," Jared agreed. "Let's."

"All right, stop the car."

"Why? Can't you work the spell yourself?"

"Of course I can, but I'm not working the spell. You are."

"I am?" Jared asked nervously.

"Yup! That abandoned rest area ahead should suffice."

"Are you sure we have the time?" he asked as he started his approach to the rest area.

"Oh sure. Lady Brigadier Shelby..."

"What?" she laughed at his mangling of her title.

"Whatever," he said, cocking his head to one side. "When are we due at this Quantico place?"

"When we get there," she replied.

"There, you see?" Puck told Jared.

"Of course, we're honor bound to make that without undue delay," Shelby continued, as Jared pulled to a halt between the gas station and the Burger Barn.

"This shouldn't take long. Come, Acorn. The grass over there should be quite comfortable."

"I'm going to walk around back," Shelby told them, "and change into fatigues. You might want to do the same, Jared."

"What about me?" Puck asked.

"You've changed your outfit five times since we left Providence," she replied with a shrug. "Do what you want." She grabbed her bag and walked away.

Jared followed Puck to where the neatly trimmed grass met the cement curbing of the rest area. Puck sat down cross-legged on a chair that wasn't there and floated in front of Jared.

"Well, have a seat and we'll get started," Puck said.

Jared knew better than to attempt one of Puck's show-off moves without instruction, so he just sat down on the curb and watched the bouncing elf.

"Ready?" Puck asked. Then without waiting for an answer, he continued. "Close your eyes. Restful, isn't it? Well, don't go to sleep on me, but think about what you want to do."

"Conjure up a night-scope, right?"

"Wrong. This is shape-changing, not conjuring. The reason your eyes are of limited use at night is because they are not efficient enough light collectors. All you have to do is make them larger. Simple, right?"

"You're kidding, right?" Jared asked, afraid of the answer. Puck merely looked at him soberly. "Okay you aren't kidding. But how am I going to make my eyes larger. I mean the eye sockets are only so big."

"You enlarge them too. Just imagine yourself with bigger eyes that can see in the dark. Got the image? Now hold the wand in both hands and will the change to happen."

"Wait a minute!" Jared stalled. "How am I going to change myself back?"

"That's even easier," Puck replied. "In essence you'll be holding the new shape by the force of your concentration, although it doesn't take much concentration. The moment you stop concentrating on holding the form, you'll shift back into your natural shape. Now try it."

Jared still hesitated. "Wouldn't it be safer to conjure up a night-scope?"

"No, it wouldn't. Shape shifting is one of the easiest things you can do, because it's all internal."

"Haven't you done it yet?" Shelby asked, just now returning in her fatigues.

"Still working on it," Jared replied.

"Still working on avoiding it, you mean," Puck replied.

"Okay, okay!" Jared closed his eyes again and followed Puck's instructions. He felt his head stretching to accommodate his enlarged eyes. When the sensation stopped, light glowed redly through his eye lids. He opened his eyes and was immediately overwhelmed but the slightly fuzzy, multi-colored display.

"You look weird," Shelby commented.

"You look naked," Jared replied. "I'm seeing in the infrared."

"That's wrong," Puck told him.

"I'll say that's wrong!" Shelby agreed vehemently. "If you want to see me naked, try starting with a bottle of wine and some soft music and we'll see where it goes from there."

"That isn't what I meant," Puck replied calmly. "Acorn, you weren't supposed to change the frequency of visible radiation to you. Try again. Let the shape go. There. See how easy it was? Now the same thing with big eyes only don't make them sensitive to infrared." He did and this time got it right.

As they continued on into New York, Jared had an idea. "Why didn't we just wear some Greenpeace uniforms to get through the city?"

"You can get shot as a spy doing that," Shelby told him.

"It didn't stop the Concord cell."

"That's when we were guerillas. Now we're being organized into a more coherent force."

"It wasn't that long ago. Two days by my count."

"Acorn, it just wouldn't be honorable," Puck told him.

"I haven't noticed much honor on the part of the elves and their friends," Jared replied defensively.

"That doesn't make it right for you. Whoever said that tripe about fighting fire with fire dealt a death blow to morality in the world. The only way we will ever have peace between our peoples will be when there is mutual respect and an attempt at understanding."

"I just meant," Shelby said, "that there are things that are considered fair in some circumstances but just aren't done in others."

"Situational ethics," Jared interpreted. "Sorry, general, but I'll have to side with Puck on this one. As far as I'm concerned this war shouldn't be for the extinction of elfkind, but for the peaceful and, hopefully, prosperous coexistence of elves and humans."

"That's not the way you felt a few weeks ago," Shelby pointed out.

"That was before I heard about what happened to Faerie. I can never condone the elvish attempt to conquer the world, but the destruction of their world was our fault."

Shelby thought that through. "You're right, of course, but you'd better watch out how you present radical new ideas like that when we get to Quantico. The Marines are particularly fanatical about their patriotism,

and they might not understand. Not until they get to meet Puck here."

"Gotcha. Tappan Zee exit coming up in a mile. Want to take it."

"Yes, that seems the safest way through this region."

"Let's try driving straight through," Puck suggested.

"Are you crazy?" Shelby asked. Jared took his foot off the gas pedal while they argued.

"Maybe. It certainly isn't the first time I've been so accused. However I think I can sneak us through."

"Are you certain?"

"No."

"Well, you don't bother to lie. Sorry, Puck, but this time I think we'll play it safe. Take the Tappan Zee, Jared."

"You got it!" Jared said, speeding back up again.

"Take the Cross Bronx, Acorn," Puck told him in the same tones that Shelby had. Jared lifted his foot off the accelerator again and looked at Shelby.

"My what big eyes we have," she muttered. Then she turned to face Puck. "This is the map!" She thrust it under his nose and used her pocket flashlight to illuminate it. Those marks are known check points. I'm not talking about a couple humvees with a board between them, either. These are permanent installations - ferro-concrete blocks with steel beams blocking the way and missile launchers on both sides of the road to take out anyone who somehow manages to get past the roadblocks."

"Piece of cake." Puck shrugged.

"Explain yourself, elf!"

"Well, Oberon got horny one day and took up with this serving wench, see? And..." he trailed off when stung by Shelby's venomous glare. "All right. I was going to save it as a surprise, but as one of your old radio dramas put it, I have the power to cloud men's minds. Women too, for that matter. The men at the checkpoints will only see what they expect to see and hear what they expect to hear."

"And how is that different from wearing enemy uniforms?"

"It's a matter of elvish ethics, at least the sort I was brought up with. Spells are fair game. If broken they will see who we really are and the jig is up, but if not, the fault is their own for letting the enemy drive brazenly through their own security measures."

"I don't see the distinction," Shelby replied, "but I'll let that pass. Why don't you want to take the northern route?"

"Just a feeling. I can't explain it in human terms, but I guess you could say that I sense that it would be a mistake."

"Why didn't you just say so?"

"You believe me?"

"No," Shelby replied. "Not against the evidence I have, but my life has been saved far too many times by a hunch to ignore one now. Jared, do as he says."

The first checkpoint turned out to be just out of sight, but it wasn't manned by elves or elf-friends. Instead, the people there wore mostly civilian clothing although two had on camouflage fatigues. It was obvious they were the local Resistance.

"You're lucky you didn't take the Tappan Zee," the obvious leader of the group told Shelby once she had established her identity and rank. "The Point-ears wiped all the bridges out yesterday. The nearest intact bridge is up north where the thruway crosses."

"That's a hell of a long way out of our way," Shelby complained. "They even got the I-84 bridge? Damn! That's way out of their territory."

"There is an alternative," the man pointed out, "but you'll have to guts it. The Lincoln and Holland Tunnels are still passable, but are heavily guarded by Greenpeace and other collaborators."

Shelby turned to Puck and noticed that he was in his human disguise again. Just as well, the Resistance fighters would have shot first if they had seen an elf back there. "Well? You're the expert."

"What's life without a little excitement?" Puck countered.

"Comfortable. Well, captain..."

"Team Leader Koss," the man corrected her.

"You haven't adopted standard military ranks yet, Koss?"

"We're in the process, ma'am."

"Call me Shelby," she replied. "That's the way it's always been with the Resistance."

"Right!" Koss visibly relaxed. Jared noted that. There were definitely times when rank got in the way. "Anyway, my team has been out here for a week now. We've been told that we'll be switching to the rank system, but won't have our new assignments until our relief shows up."

"All right. What's the best route through town?"

"Difficult to say, Shelby," Koss told her. She brought out her map and he had a quick look at it and shook his head. "Why don't you pull up and to the side and I'll see what I can do to update you." Jared did so. They spread the map out on the hood of the jeep and studied it. "Okay, you have the permanent blocks down accurately. How were you planning to get past them? The side roads are barricaded. It's strictly a pedestrian route for us."

"We have a secret weapon," Shelby told him. "Puck?" The elf dropped his disguise.

"Holy Mother!" Koss whispered, "And he's on our side?"

"For all extents and purposes," Puck spoke for himself. Koss accepted that without further comment.

"Well, assuming you can get past the next four road blocks, you want to take the Throgs Neck Bridge and then get on 495 West, that's the Long Island Expressway; except for the approach to the Bridge you won't find any more checkpoints. Now don't take the Midtown Tunnel. That one is heavily guarded and you can only use it by appointment."

"I can get around that," Puck told him.

"It doesn't matter. Our look-outs will be watching and won't trust anyone who crosses the East River by the tunnel. Instead, take this exit and cross over the Queensboro Bridge. You will be watched. Now follow these directions closely; we use this procedure instead of a password." He traced a round-about route that eventually entered Central Park from the South and brought them to a rest at 79th Street. "You'll be met." Koss said simply. Shelby thanked him and they continued on.

The next checkpoint was manned by Greenpeace regulars.

"What do I do, Puck?" Jared asked.

"Just drive on up as if you own the place. I'll handle the rest."

"Papers?" the guard demanded roughly when Jared had come to a full halt.

"Out of our way!" Puck shouted imperiously. "We are on official Command business and may not be delayed!"

"Yes, sir!" The guard snapped to attention and saluted. A moment later, the gate was raised and they continued on.

"That was incredible, Puck!" Jared complemented him enthusiastically. Shelby just stared at the elf suspiciously. "What did you do?"

"You heard me," he laughed. "I just told him to get out of the way."

"No magic?"

"Acorn, there's magic and then there's Magic. I told you I'd cloud his mind. I just did it with psychology. I got the idea when we were speaking to Koss. These uniforms are new and it's a sure bet nobody down here has ever seen them. So as far as our noble opposition knows, we could be one of them and with me shouting the commands, we can just sail through the whole city. If you like we won't even have to stop off in Central Park."

"That's fine by me," Shelby told him. "I don't mind making social calls, but I'd rather have New York behind me."

Puck's trick worked three more times but the security point at the base of the Throgs Neck Bridge was a different matter.

"Stand aside and let us through!" Puck said for the fifth time as they rolled up to the gate. "We're to pass on the authority of the High Command!" This time the imperious order was met by the frightening sound

of far too many weapons' safeties being turned off. "What is this!" Puck demanded. "Stand aside or face the consequences."

Instead of opening the gate the green-garbed men tensed up as though waiting for an excuse to fire their weapons. Before Puck could think of some suitably insulting comment to make an elf walked into sight.

"Elder Rondel," the elf smirked, "I am Deathly Ironbane. How nice to see you."

Two

"And who the hell are you when you're up and dressed?" Puck asked.

"The young rising star who recaptured you, of course," Ironbane replied happily.

"Of course," Puck agreed. Just what I need, a young snot trying for the easy way up, he thought privately. "There's just one small detail you've failed to take into account."

"What's that?" Ironbane asked, confused. He blinked and suddenly the jeep containing the elder elf and two humans had disappeared.

"What a sucker," Puck laughed hysterically about halfway across the bridge. "It's like a real-life cartoon."

"What did you do?" Shelby asked.

"Stasis spell on them and a teleport on us. Of course they snapped out of it as soon as we weren't there, but I think we've made a clean get-away."

"You do?" Jared snapped, slamming the jeep into first gear. "Try turning around. See those lights just coming over the top?"

"Oops."

"Puck," Shelby suggested. "Just cast another stasis spell."

"They're too far away. The range is only twenty to fifty feet. Even then I'd have trouble affecting the steel bodies of their vehicles. I had to tap into Acorn's power in order to teleport us and that's too dangerous to attempt again. We're going to have to lose them. At least we're running without our lights."

"Maybe. The moon is a little too bright for my taste tonight," Shelby commented.

"Why is it too dangerous to tap into my power?" Jared asked as he shifted to second gear and floored the gas pedal.

"It would probably kill you. Don't slow down!"

"Kill me?" Jared shouted.

"Right!" Puck told him over the rapidly increasing wind noise. "You see you store a certain level of magical potential which you automatically replace when you cast a spell. It's sort of like the way the alternator in this jeep keeps the battery fully charged."

"And when you used my power?"

"It was like giving me a jump-start without your motor running. You'll recharge naturally, but don't bother trying to cast a spell for the next few hours. You're going to have a hard enough time keeping up the big-eye look."

While Puck was talking, Shelby checked the map. "Jared, take this exit for the Cross Island Parkway. Maybe we can lose them on the exit loop."

"Which way? Toward La Guardia?"

"No, head away from the city. Let's make them think we're heading outward."

"You're the boss," Jared said, making the turn at maximum safe velocity, which in the jeep was not as fast as he would have liked. "Next time someone wants to give you a staff car," he told Shelby, "insist on a Ferrari."

"And where would I sit?" Puck asked. "The glove compartment?"

"Would you fit?" Shelby asked maliciously.

Five vehicles had started pursuing them, but they managed to lose three just by taking the exit. The Belt Parkway went through several twists and turns before the next exit.

"Signal a turn here, but don't take it," Shelby instructed. "Maybe it will slow them down if they have to send one of their cars off the road to see if we actually turned."

The summer moon was not far above the horizon and there were many deceptive shadows. When Jared signaled the turn it did look like he might have left the highway and one of their pursuers exited to find out. The other, however, was still closing on them. They repeated the trick but by then the first car had rejoined the pursuit, although much farther back than it had been.

"Next exit should be Route 25A," Shelby shouted. "Take it!" Jared did and then took the next two right turns until they were over-looking the highway in order to watch the pursuing vehicles pass.

"Oh oh, that one's getting off here," Jared remarked, turning the jeep off.

"Why did you turn off the motor?" Shelby asked.

"Watch," he replied. The pursuer, in a jeep with a machine gun mounted on the back got to the top of the ramp and stopped. Across the distance of two hundred feet they heard the other jeep turn off its engine. The two men inside sat there listening for a minute and then proceeded on, crossing the lane divider and getting back on the parkway. "Okay, we've got a choice," Jared pointed out. "We can wait here until we see them return to base, we can continue on, or we can follow 25A on in. For the record, I say we take 25A."

"That still gives us a check point where it passes Shea Stadium," Shelby told him, checking the map, "but I think we can take this smaller road. You drive, I'll navigate. Too bad we don't have a city map. This thing's fine for the major highways, but there are a lot of streets missing."

Jared started the jeep up and drove back to Route 25A. "Could be worse," he told her. "I once had to navigate through London with nothing more than the inset on a travel club map. The damn thing listed the streets by route numbers only, while the street signs used only names. Compared to that, this should be simple."

"Now that we've managed to get the attention of the High Command, however," Puck told them, "perhaps we'd better pay a social call on the local Resistance cell. We may need their help to get to New Jersey." Shelby nodded. "Also it looks like it's starting to cloud up. We'll want a place to stop and put the roof up."

Manhattan without lights was an eerie and frightening place. However, while the streets were dark, the skyline was not entirely unlit. There were dim lights on in parts of the United Nations complex, which Puck thought were magical in nature. The bonfire flames on top of one of another tall building, however, were obviously not.

"Is that building on fire?" Puck asked.

"I don't think so," Shelby replied. "It looks like somebody built a fire place up there."

"Why? It's got to be noticed by the High Command."

"What I want to know is where the wood is coming from?" Jared commented.

"Central Park, probably," Shelby remarked. "Much of it can be accurately described as a forest. As for why, perhaps the Resistance can tell us."

Central Park had always had a few wild spots; areas off the paved and beaten paths where naturalists loved to make a show of the hundreds of species of wildlife that thrived in the heart of the "Big Apple". When the elves had first returned to Earth, many of them had spent vast amounts of their time in the park. It was the one location in the city where they could feel comfortable.

After the coup, however, local gangs, all of whom had long claimed various sections of Central Park as their "turf" began to assert their claims. In the absence of a cohesive police force, anarchy reigned with each warlord/gang leader ruling an ever shrinking realm beset by other gangs and the elves who sought to wipe them out.

Gangs became important parts of the Resistance in other cities, but only in Manhattan did they form the command core of the local cell. The difference was in leadership.

Almost any intelligent, self-confident person can be trained to be a good leader, but truly great natural leaders only appear once or twice in each generation. The potential might be in all people, but each one needs a different set of circumstances to bring it out. The leader of the New York Resistance found his special conditions in the aftermath of the elvish coup. Two years after the fall of New York City there was nobody, neither elf nor human, who had not heard of El Corte, "The Cutting Edge".

There had been no real reason why the Resistance had to use Central Park, aside from a source of some

materials. But since the elves seemed to like the place, that was one place the Resistance would keep them out of. Guerilla warfare was best for that. The constant harassment had soon driven them to penthouse gardens where only an all-out assault could harm them.

Central Park had gone feral, which was to El Corte's taste. He saw the unkempt paths and the grass growing profusely through cracks in the pavement as a monument to his first real victory against the elves.

Jared drove the jeep carefully northward through the park. When they reached 79th Street he stopped the jeep and turned off the motor and waited.

"We're being watched," Puck announced sotto voce.

"I saw them," Shelby replied equally quietly. "Two behind the bush to the left and another one, maybe two, ahead of us on the right."

"Actually there are eight watching us at the moment. There was another, but she already ran off as we came to a stop."

"I don't see anyone," Jared told them.

"Your see-in-the-dark eyes, must be reverting to normal," Puck told him. "That's all right. Release the spell now. It was only inhibiting your ability to recharge."

Jared did so and noticed that the world didn't get any darker. Checking in the mirror, he saw that he looked human again. "Well, Shelby," he asked, "what now?"

"Koss said to wait. We wait," she replied. "They're probably trying to decide what to do with us. Visitors from other Resistance armies are not exactly common. We might be the first in months."

They continued to wait.

Half an hour later a solitary man walked out of the shadows with a battery-powered lantern in his hand. He started toward the driver's side of the jeep but quickly changed his mind when he saw Shelby's star reflect the light of his lantern and walked around to her side of the jeep. He rested the lantern on the door between them, giving Shelby her first clear look at him. He was of medium height and had black hair with long sideburns and the half-filled-in beginnings of a young man's moustache. He was wearing dark glasses and a camouflage baseball cap. The rest of his costume consisted of a jet black silk shirt and tight-fitting black jeans. Shelby estimated that he was no older than twenty-two.

"Names?" he asked with an almost concealed note of interest.

"Brigadier General Aina Shelby, late of the New England Resistance," Shelby replied, "Lieutenant Colonel Jared Laker, and Colonel Robin Goodfellow, ditto. You?"

The man's eyes lit up briefly at the sound of Shelby's name. He obviously had heard of her, but wouldn't admit it. "Later," he said, trying to sound harsh. "Who sent you?"

"Team Leader Koss. We met him out on I-95."

The man nodded. That part of the story fit, but it wasn't the information he wanted. "No. Why is a New England Resistance officer in New York?"

"Just passing through on our way to our new assignment."

"And where is that?"

"Uh uh, bub! You want that, you'll have to prove you have the clearance."

"There are a dozen guns, all aimed at you," the man threatened. "Speak!"

"You'll get no answers if you shoot us," she replied coolly.

He smiled and nodded. "What's with the Point-ear? Captive?"

"I already told you, and he's an ally."

"All right." He turned off the lamp. "Move over, colonel. We're going for a ride." Without waiting for a reply, he hopped into the back with Puck. "Go left here."

They drove out of the park and went to an elegant apartment building in Central Park West. The man led them inside, beyond a quartet of guards and up one flight of stairs to a suite of rooms that had been converted into a well-appointed office. There were two guards just outside in the hall and another two inside. Several other people were working in the suite and all looked up interestedly as Shelby and company entered. They were led past a secretary's desk, which was unmanned at the moment and into what had once been a bedroom beyond it. The man nodded at the two guards and then followed him into the back office.

"Sit," he told them, walking around an antique desk. "Can I offer you anything to eat or drink?"

"Coffee or tea, if you have it," Shelby replied looking toward Jared and Puck, both of whom nodded. "Anything else, if not." The man in black glanced at one of the guards who promptly left the room. "So, you're El Corte," Shelby continued. "Not quite what I expected."

"Who said I was... Oh all right, what gave me away?"

"Come on, El! I've read your letters. You write precisely, as though you have to think out every word. From what I've heard of you, you're mostly self-taught and proud of what you've managed to learn. You've been speaking the same way you write, trying to cover up that natural Hispanic accent of yours. Who else could you be?"

"Any one of a dozen others who have been attending our classes."

"No. I'll admit that I expected you to be older, but that's my fault. You've been described as the Resistance's answer to Alexander the Great."

"Alejandro? I mean, Alexander?" he labored over the pronunciation, embarrassed at his slip into Spanish, "Really?"

Shelby smiled and nodded. "Look, El..."

"Please, call me Juan." His accent came out a little as he relaxed, but he still spoke English with a cultured accent that he was obviously proud of. His Hispanic accent became more noticeable when he

spoke Spanish words. "That's my real name. Juan Miguel Carlos Rodrigues. El Corte was the name of my gang. It became useful as a title after we organized the Resistance here. Memorable, no?" The door to the office opened and the guard returned with three large cups of cappuccino and danish.

"So," Juan continued, "to what do I owe the pleasure of your company?"

"The pleasure of our company?" Shelby laughed and then promptly sobered up when she saw Juan's face darken. "I'm sorry, Juan. It's just that you're trying too hard. Your accent is nothing to be ashamed of. There's no need to try to hide it."

"That is not so," Juan told her. "Two years ago I was just another punk gang leader. Now I am a leader, not just of a gang, but of an army. My army has people from every class of society. It is important that I present the proper image."

Juan, unlike some of his colleagues, was extremely intelligent and had an eidetic memory, capable of recalling everything he had ever seen or read. Although he dropped out of high school, he had always been interested in history as a child, especially when it concerned the great warrior/leaders; Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Belisarius, Charlemagne, the Cid, Napoleon, Eisenhower, Patton, Guevara. General Norman Schwarzkopf had been his personal hero during and after Operation Desert Storm.

"I dropped out of school when I was sixteen," he admitted, "but I have been working with teachers and professors who joined the Resistance to learn more. They convinced me that as a general I needed to know more than how to kill. We set up classes, not only for me, but anyone else who wanted to learn. A few of the punks," it was clear that he no longer considered himself one of them, "scoffed at first, but after a few incidents and a few lessons, they too started attending our school. We may have the best educated army in history here."

"So we've heard," Shelby admitted.

"And you're the Captain Shelby I've heard of?" Shelby nodded. "General Grimes speaks highly of you. Captain to brigadier general is quite a step, but I suppose that should be expected with the new ranking system. I am supposed to be a lieutenant general. Imagine that, a kid from Hell's Kitchen, a three-star general. I prefer the other title. El Corte. It has power. But you still haven't told me why you're here."

Shelby gave him a quick run-down, explaining that they had to get down to the Washington area. Juan listened politely and took notes as she talked. He asked about Puck and Jared and eventually he was satisfied with their story.

"All right," he replied when they were done. "Are you sure you have to go south? We have a great need for people of your qualifications right here. I'd prefer you remained with us."

"Orders are orders," Shelby shrugged wondering whether they would have to fight their way out of the building.

Juan considered that. "Yes. That is so," he admitted at last. "I am tempted to keep you here, but with New England freed, I'm sure we'll have reinforcements here soon enough. Do you need to leave tonight?"

"If at all possible."

"Well, then, let's go." He got up from his seat and they went back to the outer office. "Manuel!" he called

to one of the men at a desk. "Is your team ready to go on a mission?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Good. Have them outside in five minutes, and tell Captain Williams I want her and her team too."

Five minutes later, ten vehicles - pick-up trucks and vans - rolled up outside the building, tightly filled with people and weapons.

"Where did you ever find all those heavy assault weapons?" Jared asked. "I thought New York was badly isolated."

"Oh we are, colonel. These came from various weapons shops here on Manhattan. You can buy anything in New York, you know." Jared nodded. "All right, everybody, listen up. Captain Williams' group will attack the security post at the Lincoln Tunnel. This is a diversion, so you need not charge. Just keep them pinned down for a half an hour or so. Captain Cardoza's team will do the same at the Holland Tunnel, but with a difference. Our three comrades from New England here need to get across the river. Give them time to get to the security point and wait a minute before attacking. Understand? Good. Attacks will begin in precisely fifteen minutes. Good hunting, Amigos!" He turned to Shelby as the trucks moved out. "There you go, general. Next time perhaps you will stay for dinner?" Shelby said she would and then got in the jeep and they drove off.

"You must be exhausted by now, Jared," Shelby told him. "Would you like me to drive?"

"I'll last until we get to Jersey," he replied, starting the engine. Shelby nodded.

"Puck," she remarked, "you were amazingly quiet in there."

"Yes I was," he replied. "I was busy keeping our 'cutting friend' there under control. He really didn't want to let us go. We're too valuable to him."

"I wondered about that," she admitted. "In spite of his hard-won education, he has a reputation as a user. That was one of the reasons I'd have rather skipped our little visit with him."

Before approaching the tunnel entrance they made sure that Captain Cardoza and his men were in place and ready to go. The actual ease of the operation was a testimony to El Corte and the discipline of his troops.

"You're early," the Greenpeace soldier said to Puck.

"We have finished our business here," Puck replied haughtily. Shelby and Jared both wondered who they were being mistaken for. "Do you expect us to sit around and wait for your schedule?"

"No, sir," the guard replied deferentially.

"Good. Then allow us to pass."

"I need to see your papers, sir."

"Oh, of course. Girl," Puck snapped at Shelby. "Take care of this and quickly. My time is too valuable to be wasted with such nonsense."

"Yes, sir," Shelby replied, sounding just a touch fearful. She picked up the packet containing their orders and started to fumble with it, hoping to stall until the shooting started.

"Quickly, girl!" Puck shouted, "or I'll throw you back to the pits I found you in!"

"Oh please, sir!" she cried scrambling through the papers frantically.

Then to the north they could faintly hear the sounds of shooting as the team at the Lincoln Tunnel went into action. Two seconds later much closer shots were heard along with the fearful pings and splats of ricochets.

"The Resistance!" one of the Greenpeace men shouted and started returning fire.

"Let us through," Puck boomed, "or there'll be Hell to pay!" One guard had kept his head under fire and raised the gate for them, official passes completely forgotten.

A flash of lightning turned the world incandescent as Jared started forward into the tunnel.

"Well at least it waited until we were in the tunnel before it started to rain," Shelby commented as they drove through the dark, concrete wormhole. "What are we going to do on the other side?"

"What do you mean?" Jared asked.

"They're bound to have a security station on that side too, you know, and we still don't have a pass."

"Are there any further check points after that?" Puck asked.

"No. This will be the last one."

"Then we'll run the gate."

"What?"

"Trust me. The only unfortunate thing is that we'll have to get wet as we'll have to leave the top down. Acorn, stop the car for a moment." Jared did so and Puck trades places with Shelby. "Okay, Shelby get ready to use your rifle. Everybody use your seat belts. This is going to get rough. Start up again, Acorn. You'll need to hit the gate at sixty miles per hour or better."

They drove up the slope of the tunnel constantly accelerating. The steel beam of the checkpoint blocked their path at the end of the tunnel.

"Puck! We're going to crash!" Jared shouted.

"Just keep driving!"

Just before they reached the barrier, the pavement suddenly lifted up off its foundation and formed a ramp, which sent the jeep and its passengers up and over the steel beam. Then another ramp was formed on the other side of the barrier, easing the descending jeep back to pavement level.

As soon as they landed, Shelby spun in her seat and started shooting at the guards behind them. An

ex-police car parked on the side of the gate started moving forward, so Shelby directed her shots at it. A moment later, the car burst into flame blocking the path of any other potential pursuer.

"Well done, Puck!" Shelby congratulated the elf. "I don't know why we didn't think to handle the pursuit vehicles at the Throgs Neck the same way. We should be out of elf territory in a minute or two!"

Jared continued to drive with his foot pressed hard on the accelerator. "Welcome to New Jersey !" he laughed, reading a passing sign.

Three

"You might think you're hot stuff," Major General Robert Everhard Lorrington, USMC, rounded off on Shelby, Jared and Puck, "but none of you so-called Resistance fighters are any more than amateurs playing 'Cowboys and Indians'. We only have room for professionals at Quantico ."

They hadn't been on base for five minutes before being summoned to the base commandant's office for an afternoon of verbal abuse. Puck had been in his human costume since arriving and Jared just wanted to take a nap.

"You're a brigadier general?" Lorrington had asked incredulously when they had first entered his office. "What were you before the war."

"I was a senior at MIT," Shelby replied.

"Great! A nerd with a star! Just what we need." From there it had gone downhill. It had been their intention to reveal Puck's identity immediately, but Lorrington never gave them the chance, so Shelby tailored her tale, waiting for the moment when she could take a small measure of revenge on this pompous ass.

"If you don't want us here," Shelby told the base commandant frostily, "I'm sure there are places where our talents will be better appreciated. We had a very tempting offer from Lieutenant General Rodriguez. You may have heard of him, although he is usually called El Corte."

"Another amateur," Lorrington scoffed. "Your Resistance is made up of untrained secretaries and sales clerks that only inhibit the activities of the real men."

"You mean the Marines?" Shelby asked mildly.

"I mean all the professionally trained armed forces of the United States of America ."

"Well then, general," Shelby told him, rising from her seat, "since you don't have any need for our services in liberating D.C., just cut us a new set of orders and we'll be on our way."

"Sit down, general!" Lorrington snarled. "You were brought in at the request of the Corps Commandant. I don't have the authority to transfer you out."

"Then perhaps you'd like to finish our debriefing," Shelby replied sweetly. Lorrington growled but nodded for her to continue. She told him about the escape from New York . "The rest of the trip was fairly quiet

although we did have to wait an extra day for clear weather at the bridge-tunnel."

"And now that you're here, just what do you expect me to do with you? There's nothing you can do that my men can't do better."

"Really?" Shelby asked, starting to lose her temper. Puck caught Jared's eye and somehow conveyed the impression that getting ready to use the wand would be a good thing. "Well, general it was the work of my Resistance fighters that opened the crucial hole in the elvish defenses in Greater Boston. And you're wrong about the Resistance being composed of amateurs. It is true that many of our people were civilians before the war, but many more were highly decorated veterans. Our people were in Korea, Vietnam, Grenada, Panama, Lebanon, and the Persian Gulf. Lieutenant General Grimes, who I served with last, has been a career Marine since the Fifties. We have members representing nearly every special forces unit you can imagine, so if we also accept college students and gas station attendants, they also get some of the finest and most intensive training possible."

"So you say, girl. Tell me. In what way could three make-believe officers possibly assist the world's greatest fighting force?"

"For starters we have two years experience of continuously working behind enemy lines. We know the enemy more intimately than you ever could. We know what sort of attacks will work and what won't work. We know how to pick away at their defenses until you can bring out the big guns and use them for maximum effect."

"And why can't we just move right in. Everyone knows they can't tolerate or affect iron and steel. A single tank battalion should be able to chew them up and spit them back out again."

"General Lorrington, where the hell have you been these last two years?" Jared retorted in spite of himself.

"Colonel, you forget yourself!"

"No, sir. I remember all too well. I'll admit it right out, I was just another civilian hoping to live quietly while the war was raging all around. Well, my plans for a quiet life got squashed when I was captured by an elf-raiding party and that began a course of basic training that nearly killed me several times. While I was still a prisoner, I met an Army colonel who had been part of the full frontal assault on Boston. They went in with tanks and APCs and every other weapon they could muster. Only ten percent came out of the city alive. Ten percent!"

"Well, general," Jared continued. "If you want to try the same thing on Washington, you go right ahead. When nine out of ten of every man you command is dead or captured, you'll have to explain to a court martial why you went ahead with a plan you had been warned was dangerous and ineffective."

"Well said, colonel," a man applauded from the doorway. Standing there was General Moses Endymion Walsh, Marine Corps Commandant. "Bob, I warned you these people were every bit the professional that our men are. You aren't going to be able to push them around and they know it. It's time you realized it as well."

"Yes, sir," Lorrington replied sullenly.

"That's better, Bob. As it happens they are not going to be under your command, but I expect them to cooperate with us and vice versa."

"Sir," Shelby asked General Walsh, "may I ask what we will be doing?"

"We need an organized Resistance movement in the Baltimore-Washington area. According to the file I have, you were one of the key organizers of the New England Resistance, the first area we have managed to win back from the Point-ears."

"General Grimes is the real brains of the operation," Shelby replied modestly.

"Harry's a good man, but he's getting old and wants to retire. He tells me that you're fully capable of doing the job, and I'm inclined to agree with him."

"So we're to sneak into enemy territory and organize the Resistance there?"

"In the long run, yes."

"What about the short run?"

"The President and his Cabinet," Walsh replied simply.

"What about them?"

"You haven't heard? The elves took DC with such speed, that we were unable to evacuate them. There are at least seventy-five senators and congressmen inside as well. We don't know if they were captured or killed or if they're hiding out somewhere in the city. The Navy sent in a company of Seals, but they were detected and neutralized immediately."

"Navy Seals were neutralized?" Shelby was shocked. "How?"

"The timing and size of the unit," Puck replied. "My people can detect almost anything if they're ready for it. If a full company was sent in all at once or right after the city fell, they'd be easy to spot because we'd be looking for them."

"Your people?" Lorrington asked. "Who the hell are you?" Puck merely smiled.

"Haven't you told him?" Walsh asked Shelby. "Bob, don't you read the papers you receive?"

"They only said that a Resistance brigadier general with two aides would be arriving."

"Really? I'll look into that, you should have had a full briefing. Aina, why didn't you introduce your staff?"

"I was never given the chance, sir," she responded. "General Lorrington, you will notice the insignia on the uniforms of my colleagues. Those circles are not some affectation of the Resistance. A mark of rank within such a circle indicates that the wearer is a magic user."

"Magic? Girl, do you actually expect me to believe..."

"Bob!" Walsh warned him sternly.

"Thank you," Shelby said sweetly to General Walsh. "Yes, magic. Lieutenant Colonel Laker here is probably the first human wizard in centuries."

"Prove it," Lorryng challenged.

Shelbynoddod to Jared and told him with a smile, "Be convincing."

Jared drew forth the wand and closed his eyes to concentrate. He briefly considered performing some worthless but impressive ritual, but instead decided to merely incant, "Bippity boppity boo!" With the last word, he pointed the wand at Lorryng and cast his spell. The color of Lorryng's uniform was abruptly transformed into a hot pink. "Good enough?" he asked his victim. Lorryng sputtered incoherently while everyone else in the room laughed.

Lorryng rapidly got himself back under control. "All right. I was wrong," he grudgingly admitted. "Now change it back."

"Your turn," Jared told Puck. Puck blinked and the pink color ran off the uniform and formed a blob on the desk. Then the blob turned into a plastic, wind-up elephant that proceeded to walk a dozen steps before coming to a halt.

"Keep it as a souvenir, general," he told Lorryng.

"Wait. If Laker's the first human wizard in centuries, who are you?"

Puck grinned and regained his normal appearance. At the same time his uniform transformed itself back into the more comfortable tunic and trousers he had worn on the trip down the coast.

"Major General Lorryng," Shelby introduced, "I present ColonelRobin Goodfellow. We call him Puck."

"You're suppose to be dead," Lorryng accused.

"That sounds familiar," Puck commented. "Maybe I'm a ghost. Do you believe in ghosts, general?"

"No," Lorryng flatly replied.

"Neither do I. Now how about we all stop playing games here and get down to business."

Lorryng was not ready to just let everything go, however. "You're an elf and can't be trusted. We're trying to kill your people. Do you really expect me to believe you're willing to help us do that?"

"Bob," Walsh cut in, "all that was in the file I sent you, and you know it."

"I want to hear it from the turncoat Point-ear himself."

Puck's expression darkened. "How," he demanded of General Walsh, "did such a closed-minded, stubborn ass rise to be a general?"

"Colonel!" Lorryng growled.

"Shut up, general!" Puck hissed at Lorryng. "My rank is a courtesy only and I'm here only because I see it as the best way to bring a productive peace between our two peoples. I am not answerable to you. My first allegiance as an elder is to my people. After that my loyalties include friends. Idiot generals who, by their actions, are begging to be turned into fairy tales get no pity from me."

"Remember your Shakespear, general," Shelby smirked.

"That is more than enough," Walsh broke in before anyone else could fire off another verbal volley. "Bob, Aina, now that you have had a chance to vent a little steam, you and your teams will both get along. I was under the impression that we were all adults here."

"General Walsh, sir," Jared spoke up. "Perhaps this would be better after we've had a few hours of sleep. General Shelby, Puck and I haven't slept more than an hour at a time since we left Boston and that was only while waiting for the weather to clear up at the bridge-tunnel."

"That is a good idea, colonel," Walsh said. "You're dismissed." After they had left the room, Walsh turned on Lorrington. "Now what the hell was that all about, Bob?"

"I don't like dealing with amateurs," Lorrington replied.

"Amateurs? Bob, I know you had trouble in Atlanta with the first Resistance group that formed there, but you'd better get it through your head that they are not all like that. This General Shelby has more experience behind enemy lines than the two of us together. I've known Harry Grimes since we were both raw recruits. He wouldn't send us anyone but the best."

"Moe, you weren't in Atlanta. They were just kids, mostly, and the rest were out-of-shape computer programmers and housewives. You know how long they lasted, don't you." It wasn't a question. "They all died on their first mission and I sent them on it."

"Bob, we don't know what went wrong. Maybe they got greedy and tried to do too much."

"No, Moe. They just weren't up to it."

"Maybe, but Shelby is first rate, and the other two are worth an army each. Magic, Bob. Real hocus-pocus-type magic. Wave your hands and poof! Anything you want, you got. And the elf - Harry didn't like him very much, but he didn't deny his willingness to help."

"He might have been wrong."

"It's a possibility, but I doubt it. Harry's a shrewd judge of character. This Puck has never denied that he will not assist us in the killing of his people, but he will help in the defeat of the High Command, who are our real enemies. If we can get them out of power, the rest of the elves, especially their elders, may be willing to deal, just like they did when they first returned."

"They were lying then."

"That was the High Command. Elves are just another species of people. We're not at war against people, we're at war with their government. Remove the government and we'll be able to negotiate a fair settlement, but don't go angering Colonel Goodfellow. He's one of the ones we have to negotiate with. Look! You sleep on that, but whether you agree or not, I expect you to share all the data we have on conditions in the Balto-Wash area and to give them anything, and I do mean anything, they want."

"I can't believe they think the Washington Monument is a good place to meet," Shelby complained as they trudged up the neatly manicured lawn toward the tall, white obelisk.

"It isn't the wisest of places," Puck agreed. "Aren't underground meetings usually held somewhere that isn't so exposed?"

"I would have thought so," Jared remarked. "Perhaps they thought that this place, being so unlikely, would be even safer?"

"Not a chance," Shelby snorted. "They're thinking with their patriotism glands instead of their brains. Sure, I'll admit this is a wonderful symbol of freedom, but if the elves ever catch on it'll quickly be converted to a symbol of stupidity. It's totally exposed and anyone approaching it is visible for miles."

"Looks like there was action here when the city fell," Jared remarked. "Most of the fences are down around this park. I think we jumped over the only one still standing."

"Terrific."

"Freeze!" a man shouted from just inside the open doorway of the monument. "Put your hands up and walk forward slowly. Make any sudden moves and you're dead."

The advancing trio looked at each other and sighed as one. Resignedly, they did as instructed.

"A bit corny, isn't it?" Puck remarked.

"They're new at this," Shelby replied. "Next he'll be telling us to stop talking."

"No talking!" came the shout.

"See?" she grinned. They finally got inside the monument. The doors were shut behind them and a pair of battery lamps were turned on revealing a dozen men and women aiming various weapons - mostly handguns, one rifle and a shovel. There were several gasps as they noticed Puck. "I am not at all impressed," Shelby told them. "If we were the enemy, you would all be dead or captured now. Put down your weapons or we'll put them down for you."

Half the people complied with Shelby's firmly spoken order and others looked uncertain. One man, however - the obvious leader of this troop - stood his ground. "Keep your hands up and tell us who the hell you are."

"I'm your new boss. Resistance Brigadier General Aina Shelby, just in from New England. The Resistance is organizing across the country, becoming a single army, and I've been assigned to organize the Washington/Baltimore area."

"And what if we don't want you?"

"Then unless you learn fast, half of you will be dead in a month. No, I'm not just saying that. That's how it went in almost every other city across the world."

"Almost?"

"There's a radioactive crater where Moscow used to be and in all of Italy only Vatican City continues to hold out against the elves. There is no Resistance in Montreal anymore. The elves killed them down to the last child. Yes, child! Want me to go on? I joined the Resistance when New England fell, and lost half of my friends and comrades in the first month just from our mistakes. We're here to help prevent that."

"What about him?" the man pointed at Puck.

"Puck's on our side."

"Puck?"

"Right," Puck agreed, "As in Robin Goodfellow."

"You ain't real."

Puck pinched his arm. "I feel real enough to me."

"I thought Shakespeare made you up," one of the woman remarked.

"Not at all," Puck replied, "You'll find written mention of me from before his time if you look hard enough. Oh, put down that gun. If I'd wanted to harm you I'd have done so already, or has this city been so isolated for the past two years that you haven't heard that there are spells that allow elves certain immunities to cold iron?"

"I've heard that, Billy," the woman who had spoken up said.

"And what's to stop me from shooting you right now?" Billy asked Puck.

"Go ahead. Give it a shot," Puck shrugged.

"No. Drop your guns, it's time we started talking."

"Actually, I insist, Billy," Puck told him. "Try to shoot me."

"But..."

"Just do it." Billy raised his pistol and squeezed the trigger.

Click!

"See?" Puck asked. "Oh, you'd better take that bullet out. It'll go off, when the spell wears off."

"When will that be?"

"Either when I release it or it gets over fifty yards away from me."

"Use that shovel," Shelby suggested, "and bury it outside. That way it'll be safer and the noise will be muffled too." After that was taken care of she continued, "I see some chairs. Shall we sit down and

discuss this? Good. Let's introduce ourselves." That was accomplished quickly, then Shelby got down to business. "Now is this all of you or are there more?"

"There are two others who haven't arrived yet," Billy told her, "And we have a look-out at the top of the monument."

"Can he get word down to you quickly and quietly?"

"She," Billy corrected her, "Not really, but she can monitor large-scale movements throughout the city. I can call her down with a flashlight signal if you want."

"Please do. And somebody keep a look-out for the other two. We'll find a more efficient way to watch the enemy. Our next order of business will be to discuss another meeting place and a permanent headquarters."

"What's wrong with right here?" a woman who called herself Eileen asked.

"It's too open," Shelby replied. "We need a place where we can come and go at all hours."

"There are all sorts of buildings all around us," Eileen remarked. "We could take over the congressional offices, or the Capitol Building for that matter."

"How about the FBI?" someone else smirked.

"We could camp out in the Arboretum," another person added."

"When we have real buildings to live in?"

"Hold it!" Shelby told them. "I don't want to use one of the Federal buildings. Too likely to be checked by the elves. In time I'll want to put HQ somewhere in the northern suburbs to be equally contactable from both Baltimore and Washington, but for now we have a more immediate mission."

Just then they heard an odd whistle outside. It was quickly answered by Billy who had taken up sentry duty.

"Someone's coming," Eileen explained. "Dowse the lights."

In the pitch blackness of the interior of the monument they saw the doors open, revealing several figures against the dimly lit skies. When the lights came on again, seven new people were in the room. Two were dressed in the same jeans and t-shirts that the rest of the known D.C. Resistance seemed to favor, but the remaining five were something else. They were wearing ragged camouflage fatigues and were equipped with M-25h automatic rifles knives and hand grenades. Two of them were wounded - an arm in a sling and a bandaged head, but even so they were in far better physical shape than anyone else in the room except possibly for Shelby, herself. They carried military-issue packs similar to those Shelby and Jared had, except that instead of the initials "U.S.A." stenciled in black on the sides, they had "U.S.N."

"Whoever chose such a stupid location to meet in?" the ranking Seal - a lieutenant - asked.

"Nice to hear someone agrees with me," Shelby commented dryly. "One of our missing Seal teams, I presume,"

The Seals turned to face her and, on noticing her rank insignia, straightened up slightly, not quite at attention, but unwilling to offend by outright rudeness. Shelby noted that; it fit her notion of what these men would be like.

"Lieutenant Steven Jakes, ma'am," their leader introduced himself with a polite salute.

"Brigadier General Aina Shelby," she replied, returning the salute, "late of the New England Resistance Movement. This is Lieutenant Colonel Laker and Puck."

"Sir," Jakes saluted Jared then turned to Puck. "We heard you were..."

"Dead?" Puck supplied.

"No, sir. Alive and working on our side. I'm glad to meet you, sir."

"It's about time somebody heard," Puck grinned, shaking Jakes' hand.

"Have a seat, gentlemen," Shelby invited. "I believe we're a little short on seats here. Room too, for that matter, but there are always the stairs. Is this everyone now?" she asked Billy.

"Except for Jenny Bolt," he replied. "It'll take her a while to walk down all the stairs."

"All right. Lieutenant Jakes, has anyone looked at your men's wounds?"

"Just Bestor, ma'am. He's had some paramedical training."

"Can anyone here claim better?" Shelby asked.

"I'm a second-year intern at Saint Luke's," a man who had been introduced simply as Clark. "Without supplies, I'm not sure that's better than a paramedic, but I'll be glad to have a look."

"Please do so. Jakes, do you have some medical supplies with you?"

"General, this isn't our first mission. Of course we do," Jakes laughed. Clark conferred with Bestor and they both went a few steps up the stairway to check the wounded men.

"I heard your company had been sent in, but nobody came out," Shelby told Jakes. "You the only survivors?"

"There may be others," Jakes replied. "We were cut off from the rest almost from the start. Most teams were sent in from the south and west, but we were one of three that were to come in from the north. That was before we found out that the Point-ears got Baltimore too. Our chopper got caught by the expanding anti-tech shield just after it dropped us off. The pilot and the other two teams still on board were killed in the crash. We'd have buried the dead, but the crash attracted the attention of enemy troops so we moved out. We've been around town for three days now, trying to carry out our mission until we ran into these two men. Claimed they were the Resistance and offered to help us out."

"Sounds fair," Shelby nodded. "What's your mission?"

"Ascertain the whereabouts of the president, his cabinet and any of the other high ranking officials we can find."

"No problem," Shelby replied, "We have the same mission."

"What do you mean by 'we'?" Eileen demanded. "You may have been sent in to organize us, but we haven't accepted you yet." There were mutterings of agreement.

"Well, folks," Jakes informed them, "You can choose not to accept the general here if you want, but you'd be crazy to do so."

"Why do you say that?" Eileen asked. She was echoed by several others.

"You've been isolated for over two weeks, what with the siege and occupation. Just before Washington fell, New England was liberated, the first major victory over the elves, and the Resistance was given the main credit for weakening Point-ear defenses." At that point he remembered Puck's presence. "Uh, sorry about that, sir."

"No need," Puck grinned. "Our ears are pointed. They wiggle too." He demonstrated that ability. "Point-ear is better than wiggle-ear. Don't you agree?"

Jakes nodded and continued. "The Resistance there I hear was run by the best and if she was an officer there, than you have a chance to have the best here too. Of course you can choose to go it alone, but I wouldn't bet any money on you're surviving the year."

Nobody spoke for a while after that, all waiting for someone else to say something.

"Tell you what," Shelby said at last. "Lieutenant Jakes and his men need our help and at least two of you have already promised it, right? Do you feel bound by their promise?"

"I suppose we do," Billy replied. Most of the others nodded.

"Now my team has the same mission so it only stands to reason that Lieutenant Jakes and I should cooperate. How do you feel about that, Jakes?"

"Anyone who kicked the elves' butts out of Beantown is tops in my book, ma'am, and you rank me. My team and I will be honored to work with you."

"Now the rest of you. You don't know me and have only my word and that of the lieutenant that I can do as advertised. So I'll make you a deal. Do it my way for the duration of this first mission. After that if you want me out, we'll leave with the Seals."

"That sounds fair," Eileen admitted. "What's the hitch?"

"No hitch," Shelby replied, "except this. You talk this out among yourselves. Take as much time as you need. Then take a vote. But after that this stops being a democracy. This is war and we're an army. A small army as yet, but we'll grow, and armies aren't run by a committee. There has to be one person to make binding decisions."

"And you think you're that person?" a short, black-haired beauty asked from the stairway.

"Do you have better credentials?" Shelby asked the newcomer. "And who are you?"

"Jenny Bolt, and it's hard to say. What are yours?" Shelby introduced herself and repeated what had already been said to the others. "Okay. You got me beat, but then I wasn't intending to challenge you. Me, I'm a fair marksman. I've won a few contests so I can hit what I aim at. I also used to be a gymnast and have tried keep in shape. I'll let my performance speak for itself though."

Shelby nodded. She found herself instantly liking this Jenny Bolt for no particularly discernable reason. "Laker, Puck, and I will take a walk outside while you talk," she told them. "Call us back when you've made your decision."

Outside, Jared asked, "You sure that giving them a choice was such a good idea, Shelby?"

She shrugged. "I took a shot. Besides, I think our best advocate is Lieutenant Jakes. I wonder if I can get him and his men transferred to us for the duration. That'll be in my first packet back to Quantico. I'll have to promote him to captain..."

"No you won't," Jared disagreed. "You're thinking of captain in army terms. He's a navy lieutenant which is an equivalent rank. You could promote him anyway, I suppose, but that's another question."

"You're right, Jared. I'm just too used to army ranks. I shouldn't be too generous with the ranks anyway or we'll be too top heavy. That Billy, though, he's been their leader so far. That would normally make him a captain, but I just don't know him well enough."

"Make it provisional," Puck suggested, "to be confirmed on acceptable performance after the first mission. We should also keep an eye on Miss Bolt."

"I agree. Provisional second lieutenant for starters. She's poised and self confident and when she spoke the others were listening. The rest of them seem to be the sort to be enlisted personnel only, I think. They don't seem to have the command mentality, but I could be wrong. It's tough to make accurate judgement on so short an acquaintance. We'll see."

"General," Billy called from the doorway, "you may come in now. We've decided."

"Yes?" she asked when she was back inside.

"You're the boss," Billy informed her. "We'll play it your way for now, but we reserve the right to review your performance after this current mission."

"That's all I ask," Shelby told them. "So, step one; tonight we find a better HQ. Suggestions?"

Four

"Yes," Shelby said as the sun rose, "this one will do. Let's get inside. I, for one, am tired of dodging patrols."

They had decided to check out the nearby non-federal office buildings. Several of the new Resistance's

members continued to want to check out the federal buildings, but Shelby vetoed that and was seconded by Jakes. That would come the next night after a safe base had been established. Most of the buildings were firmly locked up and Shelby was unwilling to smash the plate glass doors just to get inside. It occurred to her that she had never had to command the set up of an HQ before.

They split up, working their way up and down both sides of the streets, and finally Billy reported that he had found a building whose door had been propped open.

"I wonder why they did that?" Jakes commented.

"It's a security door and the lock works by electricity," Jared pointed out. "There must have been people left here after the power went out."

"You mean there may still be people left inside, sir?"

"It's a possibility. Let's check it out floor by floor."

"Good idea," Shelby concurred. "Billy, take six of your team and check this floor and the fourth. "Jakes, you and yours get floors two and five. Everyone else, come with me."

"The emergency stairway is, by law, unlocked," Jared pointed out as they climbed, "but I noticed that the elevators are the sort that are activated by plastic ID cards with a strip of magnetic media on one side. Who sets up security like that? Do they really think that a thief would balk at having to climb stairs? Oh my!" he imitated a potential burglar. "A stairway! Horrors! They've certainly got me beat! I'll just stroll across the street where I'll only have to kill a few guards." The team laughed.

"The really silly thing," Jenny added, "is that the most likely incidence of theft from the businesses in this building was by computer. The thief would never notice all the elaborate security measures. That was how I made a living."

"Computer theft?" Jared asked.

"No, by writing programs to prevent it, and virus protection, of course. Now that was a full-time job. Security programs are easy to design as long as you have a pinch of imagination, and they'll usually last a few months before some hacker stumbles on to whatever new system you've decided to use. Most of the protection is in changing the password formats."

"Really?"

"Well you can get truly elaborate with multi-level protection and fresh passwords at each new level or even at certain time intervals, but that slows down the legitimate users so they aren't used unless really necessary. The real security leaks occur when a legitimate user writes down his password somewhere, at home so a hacker friend can find it. It's the computer virus problems that can get tricky. Fortunately the news media make viruses sound more prevalent than they really are. These days we can usually catch most destructive viruses, before they cause real damage, although they were a big problem a few years ago. Most viruses are just a nuisance. They get in the works and slow everything way down. Of course, I suppose we can thank the elves for eliminating that problem altogether, but it put me out of work."

The third floor was empty, but the door to the sixth and top floor of the building was locked.

"I thought this was illegal," Shelby commented.

"Looks like a fresh job," Jared pointed out. "See the scratches on the door?"

"Right. I've got some lock picks," Shelby announced, "but I'll stand aside for anyone with more experience than me."

"I think it's time for our junior wizard to earn his pay," Puck announced. "Go ahead, Acorn. Give it a try."

Shelby nodded agreement. "Puck, there's bound to be somebody on the other side. Can you protect us?"

"That depends on what's on the other side. Even I can be surprised. I'll do my best."

"Good enough. Go ahead, Laker."

Only Shelby and Puck failed to gasp at the sound of the lock unlocking itself. Shelby pulled the door open gently with the muzzle of her rifle, revealing a white painted wall on the far side of a wide corridor.

"Let's try talking first," Shelby suggested. "Hello in there! Anybody home?" No reply. "Okay, so much for that idea." She lowered herself to the floor and Jenny did likewise. Facing back-to-back, they leaned out the doorway and looked down the corridor. It was empty. "Let's go. Jared, Take Jenny, and... I'm sorry, I don't remember your names. You and you," she pointed to two men, "go with them. Everyone else, follow me."

Jared looked at his team and noted that only Jenny held a rifle. One man had a .38 pistol and the other a bowie knife. "You know how to use this?" he asked the knife wielder. The man nodded and accepted the gun. "Good, now we're armed to maximum effect, let's go." They proceeded down the hallway until they came to a window where he had to pull one of the men back from it. "You want to be seen?" Jared hissed.

"Sorry, sir. I wasn't thinking."

"S'all right. Call me Jared or Laker. Resistance people usually use names not ranks when talking to one another, although you want to call Shelby 'general' unless she says otherwise."

"I'm Barry," the man introduced himself. "That's Paul. I'm sure you remember Jenny," Barry grinned. It was true. Jenny was very memorable.

Jared nodded and they proceeded on to a right angle bend in the corridor. From behind they heard Shelby calling "Hello," again, so Jared followed suit. They turned the corner carefully, but there was only a glass door and a wall in sight. "Stay down," he instructed his team. Alone he quickly made his way to the door. It was locked and there was nobody in sight. Jared unlocked the door again and waved the team forward.

The office beyond spread out to both left and right and, after calling out again, Jared waved the two men to go one way and took Jenny with him the other way, instructing them, "Try not to kill anyone if you don't have to. Odds are if they're hiding from the elves, they're on our side." He said that loud enough to carry, hoping that if there was anyone in the office they'd know they weren't in danger, assuming they didn't think it was a trick.

Jared and Jenny made their way through the office suite checking the cubicles as they went until they

reached a supervisor's office at the end of the aisle. He went through the same greetings he'd been calling out and still got no results so they stepped inside and were caught dead to rights.

"Freeze," a man in front of them instructed them softly, using a large caliber, smooth bore put the necessary force into it for him. He wasn't alone; there were seven others with him - five women and two men - all packing handguns that impressed Jared only slightly more than the .22 pistol he used on his first mission.

"That's some cannon you got there, friend," Jared commented lightly.

"Enough to leave a hole we can drive through without touching the edges," the man with the musket replied. "Now you two can drop your guns real slow-like. What's that stick, some sort of karate weapon?"

"Actually it's my magic wand."

"Go on!"

"Maybe I ought to try painting it black with white tips." Jared shrugged. "Who are you guys anyway?"

"We're the Resistance," the man replied.

"Funny," Jared said as an aside to Jenny, "I've heard that somewhere before." Jenny laughed. "You guys home-grown, or have I been misassigned?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Lieutenant Colonel Jared Laker," he replied in the same manner that Shelby had, "late of the New England movement. I was sent down here to help General Shelby organize a coherent group down here."

"You serious?"

"Do I look like an elf?"

"You could be Greenpeace."

"I could be Rocket J. Squirrel too, but I'm not."

"Can you prove you're Resistance?" one of the women asked.

"Can you?" Jared countered.

"No," she replied, "but you have a uniform."

Jared looked at his fatigues. "So I do. I ought to stow the rank insignia though, they look real impressive, but their reflective surfaces are not exactly an asset in the dark. Now how's about putting your guns down and I'll call everyone else over and we can talk."

They stood there a minute, with their guns still trained on Jenny and Jared. Finally the man with what Jared had concluded was a shot gun let the barrel down and held out his hand. "Harry Weitz," he introduced himself. "There's a conference room at the other end of the suite."

"Glad to meet you, Harry. Let's go there, the others should be along presently, unless there's someone else hiding in the building."

"Not to my knowledge, colonel." A few minutes later everyone was crowded into the conference room. "Good thing I didn't shoot first and ask about it later," Harry said nervously when he saw how out-numbered his group was. "I can't tell you how close I came, but you'd have blown us away."

"We've all been lucky so far," Shelby told him. "When we first started the New England movement, there were several incidents where just that sort of thing happened when making first contact with other starting groups. The Miami movement failed on its first attempt to organize because there were two strong factions vying for control and unwilling to work as a team. We try to learn by the mistakes of others. Harry, has Colonel Laker explained the offer I've made to Billy's group?"

"Yes, ma'am, he has and it suits us as well. None of us has any military training and are willing to bow to experience."

"Very well, I will give you the provisional rank of first lieutenant, same as I've offered Billy. On completion of the mission, I'll review your performance even as you review mine. Okay?" Harry nodded.

"All right. Objective Number One to find a provisional HQ is complete. Our next step is two-fold in nature. The first priority is to locate the President and any other high-ranking government officials and, if possible, secure their release from captivity. We know that at least one hundred senators and congressmen failed to escape when the city fell and the elvish High Command claims to have the President and his cabinet hostage. I haven't heard anyone mention the Supreme Court. Comments?"

"The Supreme Court had not been in session for over a week before the fall, ma'am," Harry told her. "It made all the newspapers when the justices were required to evacuate."

"See what you miss when you're stuck in Point-ear territory?" Jared remarked with a nod toward Shelby.

"You've been hanging around with Puck too long," Shelby retorted chuckling. "He's right though," she explained to the rest of the group. "Until a few days ago we've been inside the Boston shield. That's history, however, and we're not likely to pull off the same stunt we did to turn the tide up there again, not soon anyway. I'll ask again, however, anyone have an idea of where the President and the others may be?"

"I saw a herd of congressmen, maybe senators, being marched up Pennsylvania Ave. the day after the city fell," Jenny replied. They went right by my place. Hah! Did you hear that? My place? All my belongings are in an apartment in Arlington, I hope, but I'm already referring to the alleyway I hole up in as 'my place'. General, may I move in here? There are plenty of unused offices."

"Of course, Jenny. Actually, I'd like everyone to move in for the time being, unless anyone has a better place."

"My group's been here since the start, general," Harry told her.

"Most of mine," Billy admitted, "have been using the Washington Monument; the remainder have been using alleys and basements like Jenny has."

"Anyone object?"Shelby asked the group at large.

"I have some stuff to retrieve from Billy's and my place," Eileen admitted. "We managed to break into a ground floor apartment. I'll really miss the shower. We've all been using it."

"There are two shower stalls in this building," Harry told her. "My boss here had one in the bathroom off his office as did the president of the company who used the whole third floor. Good thing we still have running water, too bad it's all cold."

"There's no hot water anywhere in the city," Eileen replied.

"We could rig up a solar shower on the roof," Jakes suggested.

"In your free time,"Shelby warned, "and I shouldn't have to tell you to make sure it doesn't show, but I will anyway. Folks, I'm all for creature comforts. Jared here can tell you that, and I'll take advantage of any little luxury I can afford to, but I also don't take risks. Lieutenant, you may go up on the roof and have a look around. If you think you can rig up a hot water tank that won't be conspicuous, go right ahead."

"Aye, aye, Ma'am."

"We're getting side-tracked. So everyone will be completely moved in here by this time tomorrow? Good. Harry, what was your job before?"

"I was comptroller here at the Agency for Scholarly Pursuits. We were a foundation that gave grants for various academic projects, mostly scientific in nature."

"Good. Harry, I'm appointing you base quartermaster. Your first assignment will be to find places for everyone to sleep. We have plenty of space, for the time being, so nobody has to have a roomie unless they want one. Also, all officers get offices; anyone else who wants one may have it on the understanding that if we get crowded, they might have to share. Communal areas - we need a place to eat and a place to relax between missions. You can make it two in one if you like and the place you have is large enough. Mental space goes hand-in-hand with physical space."

"There's a fair-sized cafeteria in the basement," Harry told her. "That should do the trick. No windows either so we can keep the lights on down there."

"We can't use the generator," Puck told him. "The electro-magnetic disturbances are easily detected."

"So I understand. TV and the papers have been warning everyone about that for two years now. Last night we raided the sporting goods department of a nearby department store. Picked up a bunch of gas lanterns and fuel to run them on. Got a bunch of sleeping bags, tents and over camping gear while we were at it."

"Planning on camping?"Shelby asked.

"No, but we figured that stuff would come in handy eventually. We also picked up some sheets and blankets for the couches here. We can go back and get some real mattresses and box springs, if you want. Other stuff too."

"That's a good idea, but we'll have to do that one or two beds per night. I'd hate to get caught over such

a small detail. And above all, be careful! Issue beds as we get them by random drawing, except for me. I'll take mine after everyone else gets one. Heck, I've spent most nights these past two years on a canvas cot. A decent couch will feel like a queen-sized bed after that."

"General," Lieutenant Jakes asked, "You said our mission is two-fold. What's our second priority?"

"The recruitment of more people to our fledgling Resistance movement. Everyone going out on a mission will be looking for the President and the others, but you may well find other people hiding out from the elves. Bring them back when you can. If they don't want to fight, we'll help them get to safety. That goes for anyone here. You don't have to stay. Within a couple weeks we should have established a safe route outside and start our own little underground railway."

"The elves have been rounding up people," Billy commented, "transporting them out of the city."

"It's true," Harry agreed. "We had to hide in the heating tunnels downstairs."

"Heating tunnels?" Shelby asked interestedly. "Do they go anywhere?"

"Aside from the furnace? Only to the building next door. These two buildings were built by the same owners. They figured they could heat two as cheaply as one, but there are heavy iron grates over the ends of the tunnel. We can open the one here easily enough but the other one can only be opened from the other side."

"We can handle that," Shelby told him. "So already we've doubled our available space. Good."

"Actually," Puck told her, "we can open any building we want, which makes me wonder why we didn't think of it earlier."

"Think of what earlier?" Harry asked.

"Using magic to open the doors on other buildings."

"Magic?"

"I told you this was my magic wand," Jared reminded him.

"Thought you were kidding," Harry said skeptically.

"Jared, you and Puck may give a demonstration later. Right now I just want to go over a basic method for approaching potential recruits and then I think sleep is in order."

Five

"Colonel Laker, sir!" Jakes reported, running into the alley where Jenny had lived for several days until Shelby and company had arrived. It turned out to be a good place to hide the jeep and to use for

coordinating activities.

Jared turned toward the Seal team leader. He'd stopped trying to tell him and the others to just call him by name a week earlier. The D.C. cell was obviously not going to be as informal as the one in New England. He had spoken to Shelby about it, but she'd just said, "We're a new team, Jared and are still developing a style. I notice most of the people call you by name when off duty, don't they? Well, maybe it's good to be formal while on the streets."

"We've found them," Jakes continued.

"The President?"

"Yes, sir. And all the rest, I think. We recognized several senators and congressmen, the White House Chief of Staff too. That's the good news."

"This is beginning to sound like a bad joke," Jared replied. "What's the bad news?"

"They're being loaded up on three large buses. They're being moved."

"Damn! We're going to have to follow or we'll lose them. Does it look like they're going to leave soon, Jakes?"

"Within minutes, sir."

"Hell! And everyone else is out right now." He turned to Jenny, the pretty woman who had become his aide and close friend. Aside from Shelby and Puck, she was the only person in the D.C. Resistance to call him by a name rather than a title. Their friendship was possibly turning into something far closer, but they hadn't slept together just yet. "Jenny, you'd better stay here." She nodded. "Jakes, pick two men. We're going for a ride."

"Aye, sir," Jakes replied. "Dalton, you used to race cars, didn't you?"

"Aye, aye sir!" One of the Seals stepped enthusiastically forward. "My whole family races stock cars. Pa won the Daytona 500 a few years back."

"Good, you drive. Wax, you ride shot gun. Everyone else, return to our watching posts around the White House. We'll be at 14th and New York. As soon as they take off I want someone to run back and tell us which way they went." They ran off into the darkness and disappeared.

The Seals had come equipped with night scopes for which Jared was grateful, since he and Shelby had been forced to leave theirs behind. As yet none of the foraging teams had found much in the way of military supplies. The FBI building had been totally cleared out and the team that had been sent out to Langley reported that the CIA headquarters had been reduced to rubble.

On the plus side, the D.C. Resistance had tripled in size even though half of those found had opted to leave the city. Shelby sent reports on their progress and requests for supplies back to Major General Lorrington at Quantico, but it would be days or even weeks before there would be a reply. She also sent a request to Admiral Maize, Chief of Naval Operations, requesting the services of Jakes' team for the duration.

The buses were already moving when they got the jeep running a few minutes later. The sound of the

accelerating diesels carried through the still night air.

"Should I follow them, sir?" the driver asked as he ease the jeep quietly half a block up the street.

"Stick to the plan," Jared decided. "We don't know which way they're going and we don't want to follow too closely."

A few seconds later one of the Seals ran up and reported, "They're headed out on Pennsylvania , sir!"

"Good work, Worry," Jakes told him. "There they are three blocks behind us. Dalton , make a u-turn. We'll follow at a safe distance."

"Aye, sir!" Dalton brought the jeep's engine to life, made a tight, smooth turn, and headed slowly back down the street.

There were several police cars in front and behind the procession of buses and a tank that brought up the rear. They waited a block back until they were sure that no further vehicles were coming and then followed, carefully remaining a conservative three blocks back.

Jared waved at Jenny as they passed the alley and she blew him a kiss in return before sinking back into the shadows. The prisoner convoy crossed The Mall at 4th Street and then picked up Pennsylvania Avenue again where it met Independence Avenue .

"Colonel," Jakes asked as they drove on, "there are two things I don't understand. Why do cars work inside the shield but flying machines don't?"

"I asked Puck the same thing," Jared admitted. "He says that the shield doesn't reach all the way to the ground. It stays about thirty feet up at its lowest point. For that matter it isn't solid - more like a giant invisible dome. When we managed to poke a hole in the one over Greater Boston, we were able to shoot missiles right to the heart of the city. I hope we won't have to do that here."

"Why not?"

"If you saw what happened to Boston you wouldn't ask. Half the city is rubble now. What's your other question?"

"You say that the Point-ears can detect the electro-magnetic disturbance caused by machinery, right?"

"True enough."

"Then what's to stop them from zeroing in on us whenever we start this jeep up?"

"It's like trying to tap a phone line. It takes a while to hone in on a signal, so if you keep moving they'll know you're out there, but by the time they know where, you're already somewhere else. Just don't sit around idling the motor, especially in our parking place. Speaking of which we ought to find a better place than that alley soon."

"Lieutenant Weitz has one of the girls watching an indoor parking lot."

"Maybe," Jared said uncertainly. "We'll probably move all but a few emergency vehicles to an out-lying suburban development, like we had in New England . Garages make good camouflage. That's odd."

"Sir?"

"We're passing I-295, I expected them to get on the highway. It just seemed to make sense they'd go to one of the local military bases, for the added security."

"There's one base out this way, colonel. A fairly famous one. Ever heard of Andrews Air Force Base?"

"Oh yeah. I sure hope they aren't planning on flying them out."

"They can't, can they? I mean the shield would stop that."

"The elves erected the shield, Jakes. I'm sure they can open a window in it if they want. We'd better get word out tonight. Messages to the Marines and Air Force at Quantico, the Army at Fort Lee, and the Navy... Where is Admiral Maize keeping an office?"

"The Weapon's Lab near Dahlgren of all places. Actually I hear the Joint Chiefs of Staff are all moving around. They make tougher targets that way."

"It doesn't really matter," Jared shrugged. "All our messages get relayed through Quantico anyway. That's the nearest base outside the anti-tech shield, although parts of it are actually inside. They can be transmitted by fax from there. I could hope for a friendlier liaison though. General Lorrington doesn't like us 'amateurs'."

"Lorrington thinks everyone but his marines are amateurs, even Seals and other elite units," Jakes laughed. "Some of you guys might be a bit inexperienced, but you've got a top-notch leader. That General Shelby - she really knows how to use what she has to work with. Doesn't stop for a moment to complain about what might be missing and finds a way to put everyone to their best use. That's good leadership in my book. Give it a few months and there won't be a better Resistance cell in the world."

"You've worked with other Resistance groups?" Jared asked.

"A few. My team and I have had to go into several Point-ear territories since this all began. We were up in New York a few months ago. That El Corte guy is tough - a real wacko if you ask me. He gets the job done, but I was glad to get the hell out of there. We practically had to fight our way out. Never knew if he was going to be a friend or a foe. We finally had to sneak off Manhattan and make our way out to Islip - the nearest airport outside the shield there."

"I've met him. I think he had designs on Shelby. I know he wanted us to stay. Puck had to cast some sort of mind-control spell or we'd probably still be there."

"Sirs," the driver called back to them. "the entrance to Andrews is up ahead. I doubt they're going to just let us in the gate."

"Wax, you've been here before. Know of a back way in?"

"Sure do. Dalton, don't take the turn for the gate here, but go straight for another quarter mile. Getting in and out will be just like that time we got in and out of China Lake."

"China Lake?" Jared asked.

"A Naval Ordinance Test Station in Southern California," Jakes told him.

"Is it true the elves have all of California?"

"No, but most of it. The shield goes about thirty miles north of San Francisco and Sacramento and west to include Vegas and ends somewhere south of Tijuana. It's the largest damned shield they've got. I just hope this isn't like that mission. We lost three men that time."

"We'll only be looking this time," Jared told him. "Four men is hardly an expeditionary force."

"You got that right, sir," Wax agreed. "Here's the back way in." Dalton parked the jeep at the mouth of a narrow foot path that came out through a large stand of oaks. "Sir, you don't have a night scope. You want to use mine?"

"No, thanks," Jared replied. "I've got something better." He paused for a moment, resting his hand on the wand, and expanded his eyes for better night vision.

"That's freaky, sir," Wax told him.

"It feels even freakier," Jared replied, "but it does allow me to see clearly at night."

The path wound its way through the trees and ended up at a chain-link and barbed-wire fence near several barracks buildings. They cut a small hole in the fence and crept carefully to the back of one of the buildings. This area of the base was dark but there were lights on ahead. They skulked their way toward the lighted section and found an athletic field with a large portable generator supplying power to the stadium lights. There were no elves in sight, but the captive politicians were being unloaded from the buses under the watchful eyes of an equal number of the Greenpeace Elite. Jared quickly let his eyes revert to normal as he strained to hear what was being said over a public address system.

"Can you make out what they're saying?" Jared asked Jakes.

"No, sir. I think it's some sort of orientation lecture, but they could be reading tomorrow's mess hall menu for all I know."

"Want to move closer?"

"Not unless you order it, sir. It's all open and well-lighted spaces between here and there. Too risky, know what I mean?"

"You're the expert," Jared nodded. "I guess we wait."

They didn't have to wait very long. Fifteen minutes after the lecture started, the politicians were marched off the field and to a large barracks building not too far from the path Jared and the Seals had used to sneak onto the base.

"Well, it looks like they're going to be here a while. Maybe this is a prison camp like the one in New Hampshire. We'd better get out of here."

"I agree, sir," Jakes replied. "We've seen all there is to see."

"Halt!" a voice cried out just as they were about to go through the fence. A pair of men in dark green

Greenpeace Elite uniforms were standing behind them with their rifles ready.

"Freeze!" another voice shouted from the other side. "Drop your weapons and put your arms up."

"Is that the right order?" Jared remarked quietly.

"You think you can brace a few hundred fléchettes?" Jakes countered.

"I don't know. Just be ready."

"Shut up, you!" The first sentry shouted. "Drop those weapons!"

Jakes looked at Jared. "Do it, Jakes." Slowly, they all laid their rifles on the ground.

"Knives too!" the sentry instructed them. Nine knives from the four men fell to the ground. "What's that thing?" the man demanded of Jared pointing at the wand.

"This?" Jared asked casually as he pulled it from his belt. "You mean my magic wand?" He turned to Jakes, "I've really got to paint this thing." Then he thrust the wand upward and cast the spell.

A single shot rang out as a pair of bright amber beams issued from the raised tip of the wand to strike the two groups of sentries. The flash of amber light lasted only a split second, but as they winked out, four piles of what looked like man-shaped heaps of sparkling dust began to fall to the ground, but didn't quite make it. The dust faded into transparency and then ignited.

When the after-images of the bright blue balls of fire faded from their eyes, Jakes asked, "What did you do, sir?"

"I don't know," Jared replied. "I tried to cast a stasis spell. You know, stop them in their tracks. I think I over-did it."

"You stopped them, sir," Dalton whispered, awe-struck. "You stopped everything, even the weak atomic force that held them together."

"I think we'd better get going, sir," Jakes suggested, but Jared wasn't aware of anyone speaking to him. His entire attention was dominated by the shattered end of his wand.

Six

"Sir?" Jakes shook Jared gently to get his attention.

"Hmm?" Jared responded turning to face Lieutenant Jakes. "My wand is broken."

"Can you still use it, sir?"

"I don't know. I'll try." Jared shook his head, trying to clear his mind. He tried to expand his eyes for increased night vision again, but nothing happened. "No, it's dead," he said sadly. "Any idea where the other half is?"

"Nowhere in sight, sir," Wax replied after looking around.

"Oh well, maybe it's time I started learning to cast spells without a wand," Jared shrugged. "Let's get moving."

"Aye, aye, sir!" Jakes replied. Jakes picked up Jared's M-26 and handed it to him before turning to crawl through the hole in the fence.

Navigating his way down the dark path wasn't as easy without his augmented vision, but Jared kept his eye on Lieutenant Jakes in front of him until they reached the end of the path where it spilled out on to the empty roadside.

"Where's the jeep?" Jared asked. "This is where we left it, isn't it?"

"Aye, sir," Dalton replied. "I didn't even leave the keys in the ignition." He tossed the keys to Jared who fumbled for them but managed to drop them anyway.

"Shelby's gonna be real pissed when we tell her somebody hot-wired her staff car," Jared said somberly.

"Better you than me, sir," Jakes replied without a sign of sympathy.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Jared told him flatly.

"Cheer up, colonel," Wax told him. "I noticed a new car lot about a mile back. We'll pick out something really classy for the general."

"She'll want it customized," Jared warned him.

"No problem, sir! I used to work in a body shop. Give me an hour and whatever we choose will have the general's star on it."

Jared looked at his watch. "Why not? It's not quite midnight. Let's see what new models are being offered this year."

It took half an hour to get to the automobile dealership. About half way there, they had to dive into the bushes beside the road when they saw the buses and their armed escort leaving Andrews Air Force Base. The convoy came to a halt near where they had taken refuge at the side of the road and spot lights from the police cars washed over the brush. After a few minutes the convoy moved on.

"Damn! That was close!" Jakes whistled when the buses were out of sight.

"Thank God for camouflage," Jared agreed fervently. "Let's hurry on. They may be coming back."

"What makes you say that, sir?" Jakes asked as they proceeded at a brisk walk.

"The escorting cars. If the buses were just returning to the city, why would they need to stay in formation?"

"Orders perhaps."

"That doesn't make much sense," Jared replied.

"Orders often don't," Jakes countered. "No offense intended, sir."

"None taken. There's the car lot. Toyota, Volkswagen, and Ferrari? What a combination!"

"I thought you might like it, sir," Wax commented dryly. "It always pays to buy American. Perhaps we should each take one. I heard the general say earlier that we needed more cars anyway."

"Too bad there are only four of us," Dalton commented, as they neared the showroom door.

"Why's that?" Jared asked.

"We're going to need all hands when we return to Andrews, sir. The more large vehicles, the better."

"Good point," Jared conceded. "Dalton, while Wax is preparing a surprise for General Shelby, why don't you grab a minivan and take it back to HQ, grab a few more drivers, and bring them back. We'll take what we need tonight."

"Aye, aye, sir! Just one question though. Where are we going to get the gas to run our beautiful new cars? Gas pumps run on electricity, you know."

"Can't we pump the gas up manually? We used hand pumps in New England."

"I didn't bring one with me, sir."

"Yes you did," Jared informed him, "but it was stolen along with the jeep. Pumps are standard equipment with Resistance cars. Look around, there may be something you can use."

"Aye, sir. Some pumps, I've heard, can be operated manually. It's slow but it does the job. I'll try that first."

"I'll help," Jakes offered. "All these cars should have a little gas in them anyway. If we're really stuck, we can always siphon it out a gallon or so at a time. Colonel, why don't you and Wax select a car?"

"Hold on. We have to break in first," Jared told him.

"No problem," Jakes shrugged, aiming his rifle at one of the plate glass windows. A short burst of gun fire reduced the window to shards. "There you go."

"Well," Jared replied, a bit shaken, "let's find you a set of keys."

"I'd better take a demo car," Dalton commented, "I just remembered that most of these cars won't have been prepped yet."

"How long will it take to prep what we need?" Jared asked.

"I can probably do one in an hour to ninety minutes," Wax volunteered. "It usually takes longer, but a lot

of steps can be skipped if your only concern is a moving car."

"That's too long," Jared replied. "We'd better stick to demos and used cars. Well, for now anyway. The keys ought to be here in the office somewhere." He fished a small flashlight out of his pack and looked around the offices. They went from room to room, looking for the keys until they finally found them in one of the back rooms all neatly arranged on a painted plywood board with about two hundred hooks on it. "Here we go. Good. The demo keys are along the top row."

"So they are," Jakes agreed. He flashed a light of his own at the board. "Let's see. Dark red Toyota minivan, # 25. Here you go, Dalton ." He tossed the keys. "Let's get moving!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" Dalton was off like a shot with Jakes right behind him.

"Think they might have a demo Ferrari, sir?" Wax asked Jared.

"They might, but the owners may have taken it to speed their exit from the city."

"That's likely, although there was one hell of a traffic jam that day. A four-by-four would have made better time going off-road."

"Let's see if there's anything in the shop," Jared suggested and together they walked deeper into the building. They passed through a heavy glass and metal door and into a room still redolent with the ghosts of fumes from thousands of exhaust pipes.

Tucked away into one corner of the shop they found a long convertible roadster, lovingly covered by a green canvas tarpaulin. It had been painted bright red and trimmed with chrome. A heavy black leather strap held the shiny chrome hood down, enclosing the engine compartment, and the keys were still in the ignition.

"There!" Jared exclaimed as the full beauty of the vehicle came into view. "That's Shelby 's new staff car."

"What?" Wax replied. "No hand crank?"

"It think it's one of those classic car kits. What's the name on the trunk?" Jared asked.

"Fender. That's a guitar company, sir."

"Okay, so somebody has sense of humor. Let's see if this baby actually runs."

Wax climbed into the driver's seat and turned the key. The engine roared into life. "All the lights and meters seem to check out, sir." he reported as he shut the motor off. "I'd like to have a quick look under the hood to make sure, but I suspect that somebody who worked here or the owner, possibly, must have kept it garaged here, rather than in town."

"All right. Check it out and then see if you can put a star on the doors. Remember - don't run the motor too long."

"Aye, aye, sir,"

"Colonel," Jakes called from the doorway. "Dalton is on his way now. That demo van had half a tank of gas, so I sent him on his way. You want me to find other useable transport vehicles?"

"That and fill the tanks up. Let's work together on that, while Wax works on the general's new car."

"Hey! That's a beauty, sir!" Jakes gasped, looking at the roadster enviously.

"Isn't it though? I'd love to have it myself, but Shelby stands on her rank so infrequently, I think we ought to remind her of some of the privileges that go with it."

They went back to the board of keys and looked for other likely prospects. They found one more new van that had been prepped and two used Chevy and Dodge vans that could be driven right off the lot. Filling the gas tanks was another matter. If the pumps could be worked manually, neither man could figure out how.

"I guess, we'll just have to siphon gas from the other cars," Jakes shrugged.

"One moment," Jared stopped him. "The wand is suppose to only be a learner's tool. Let me see if I can get this pump to work without it." He leaned over the pump and concentrated on making it work, then with every ounce of will he could muster, he cast the spell. The pump glowed dark blue, and hummed at an almost sub-sonic frequency and then stopped, leaving Jared gasping for breath.

"There was something, sir," Jakes told him.

"Maybe," Jared panted, "but not enough. Let's go grab some fuel line hose from the shop and start siphoning."

They returned to the shop by way of the wide garage door that Wax had opened in their absence. "Fresher air," Wax told them when they inquired.

They found several boxes full of vinyl hose and quickly cut a pair of siphon hoses. They were about to start emptying their first two tanks of gas when they saw lights approaching.

"Our pals with the buses again," Jakes commented, "coming back with another load, I'll bet."

"No takers here," Jared replied as the lights continued to approach. "I sure hope Dalton didn't run into them on the way back."

"I doubt it, sir. He's been gone almost forty-five minutes now."

"That long? It feels like fifteen tops."

"Colonel, you were casting that spell on the pump for nearly half an hour."

"What? It felt like no time at all."

"You seemed to be in some sort of a trance, sir. I didn't want to disturb you."

"Good thinking. At least I hope it is. Well they're past us now. Let's get these two tanks drained." A few minutes later, however, they heard, but did not see, another vehicle coming their way. "That may be Dalton returning."

"I purely hope so, sir."

A moment later the red Toyota minivan pulled into view. It was filled to capacity with passengers including Shelby and Puck.

"I wanted to take a look at the situation for myself," Shelby explained, "and to see what sort of a lemon you chose to replace my jeep with."

"Puck," Jared asked, "would you help us get the gas pump working? I truly hate the taste of gasoline."

"And it doesn't do anything for your breath," Puck replied, grinning, "but why can't you do that yourself? You've progressed to the level of getting the results you want." Jared held up the remains of his wand. "Oh," Puck replied softly. "That does complicate things. How did it happen?" Jared explained that he thought the single fired bullet had struck the wand. "Yes that would do it. A bullet would destroy it. That would also explain the dramatic results you got when you attempted the stasis spell."

"Can we make a new wand?" Jared asked.

"Probably, but it takes a full twenty-four hours and must be fashioned from a branch of a living ash tree. Know of any ash trees around?"

"Maybe in the National Arboretum," Jared supplied, "but I've never been there so I don't know that for certain. Maybe on the city streets or in the suburbs. I don't even know what an ash tree looks like."

"Well, I'll need to find one eventually anyway," Puck commented to nobody in particular, "I think I may have found another potential wizard, but we don't have the time right now. Besides, I've been meaning to assign you exercises to wean you off the wand anyway. We'll just have to accelerate the program. For now let's get a look at that pump."

Fifteen minute later all three vans were full of gas and being driven back to town where Harry Weitz was waiting in a parking lot for them.

"Dalton," Shelby commanded, "find the fastest car on the lot ready to drive and take this packet down to Quantico."

"Aye, aye, Ma'am! How about this Ferrari?" Dalton asked, eye gleaming with delight as he looked at the sports car in a nearby demonstrator space.

"Why not?" Shelby shrugged. "Have fun, but get back as soon as possible. We're going to need transports and reinforcements tomorrow night."

"Aye, Ma'am!" Dalton ran to get the key and after topping off the tank, was soon speeding his way south.

"Not exactly an inconspicuous car, is it?" Shelby laughed.

"Not a problem, ma'am," Jakes told her. "The way he drives, nothing can catch him anyway."

"And," Jared added, "if you think that car stands out in a crowd, it's only because you haven't seen yours yet."

"That's right, Lieutenant Colonel Laker," Shelby said turning on him with true anger. "Now what's all this

about you losing my jeep?"

"We still have the keys," he told her, lamely holding them out.

"Thanks," she said flatly. She accepted the keys, looking at them forlornly.

"That's why we came here in the first place; to get you a replacement."

"And what did you have in mind?" Shelby demanded. At that moment, Wax drove the roadster out of the shop and pulled up to the pump.

"Fill 'er up and clean the windshield!" he said gleefully.

"This?" Shelby asked disbelievingly.

"Like it, general?" Wax asked. "The black paint for the stars will be soft for the next three days, but as long as you don't touch it the paint job should hold. I'd have done them in silver, but there wasn't any in stock in a spray can."

"It's beautiful. A kit, isn't it?"

"We think so, ma'am."

"Thank you. Thank all of you. Is there room for all of us?"

"We can fit," Jared shrugged.

"Good, let's go check out Andrews Air Force Base. I want to see what we're up against."

"We might want to wait and make sure nobody else is coming down the road," Jared commented. "They've already made two trips tonight. What's to stop them from making a third?"

"The lights are out now, sir," Jakes pointed out. "With the mist in the air tonight, we could see them from here if they were on. They're probably finished for the night."

When the roadster's tank was full, they got in and drove back toward the path.

"You know," Shelby pointed out. "we could always have used abandoned vehicles in town."

"We could," Jared agreed, "but I haven't seen a lot of vans in town and this way we won't have to hot-wire them every time we need them."

"All right. After tomorrow night we can move what we have out to our new HQ site."

"We have one?" Jared asked.

"Yeah. Laurel, Maryland. The city is a ghost town now and conveniently situated between D.C. and Baltimore. Even the elves aren't living there. We'll have the place to ourselves without having to worry much about Greenpeace patrols."

"Sounds good," Jared agreed. "Who found it - Billy?"

"One of his team anyway. Is this the path you told me about?" Jared, Jakes, and Wax all nodded.
"Good. Wax, stay with the car, please. Guard it with your life. I'll be damned if I lose two in one night. Come on, boys."

The path was just as Jared remembered it. He met several branches with whom he'd gotten intimate on his first two trips up and back and they soon found themselves at the hole in the fence. That was when every light in the area decided to do their damndest to simulate high noon.

"I think someone just discovered they're missing four sentries," Jakes concluded.

"It took them this long?" Jared wondered.

"No," Puck informed them. "I think they noticed some time ago. We just tripped an alarm, not unlike one of your electric eyes. We're about to have company."

"Back to the car," Shelby decided.

"You go on ahead with the Lieutenant," Puck told her. "Acorn and I will cover our tracks, so to speak." Shelby and Jakes ran back to the car.

"Puck, what the hell can I do? The wand is broken."

"Yes, but you're still alive and that's what counts for this plan. Allow me."

Jared abruptly found his visual perspective changing until his eyes were only about two feet off the ground. His posture felt quite natural although he was standing on all fours.

"A German Shepherd, in case you're wondering," Puck informed him.

"Hey! How about a little warning?" Jared complained. It came out as a series of barks and growls ending in a whine.

"Now, now, Acorn. We need to give the guards something to account for the alarms, right? Don't answer, trying to talk with a dog's vocal equipment is horrendous. Just follow my lead." Then Puck transformed himself into a large dog as well and proceeded to walk through the fence.

A few moments later, Jared was about halfway through the fence when five guards showed up and stopped abruptly when they saw Puck and Jared in dog guise. Puck started growling at them - a low, deep-in-the-throat sound that rose in volume and culminated in a series of loud barks.

"God damn!" one of the guards screamed, "They're freakin' wolves!"

"Nah!" another one replied, "Just big dogs. Go on, pooch, beat it!" He half-heartedly kicked at Puck who deftly dodged the swinging foot. "Come on!" Another kick was aimed at Jared who retreated to safety beyond the fence. Puck ran back through the fence too and started growling at the men from the safety of the other side. One of the men shot a few rounds over their heads and they ran for safety deeper into the woods.

"Hey! Are you crazy? Shooting at dogs?" They heard one man say.

"Ah, I was just tryin' ta scare 'em away," another replied.

"Well, we'd better repair this hole in the fence before they come back and trip the alarm again." Hearing that, Puck gestured to Jared and they plodded back to the waiting car. Once there, Puck transformed them back into human and elfin form, respectively.

"That was cute," Shelby observed as she lowered her gun. "What was that shooting all about?"

"I was just giving our friends in there a plausible excuse for their alarms going off," Puck explained. "Resistance using this path as a back entrance would have put them on double alert or some such, but a couple dogs wandering through the fence is nothing they need to worry about. They'll close the gap in the fence and reset their alarms and that will be that."

"What about tomorrow night?" Shelby asked as Puck and Jared got into the back seat.

"The alarm is a simple perimeter ward," Puck shrugged. "Now that I know that it's there I can counter it and any others we find."

"Puck," Shelby continued as they returned to the city, "doesn't it strike you as being all too easy, that most every problem we've been up against, you've been able to counter with magic?"

"Not to me. You have to realize that the ability to use magic is like the ability to use your muscles. The more you exercise it, the stronger it gets. That's why a wand is only a temporary tool. It's there to help strengthen an elf's or a wizard's magic muscles until he no longer needs it. Anyway, by the time an elf gets to be my age, if he has any aptitude in magic at all, he has the potential to be very powerful indeed. The power is the mark of an elder, mind you, not age. I was always a strong magic user, but it wasn't until I entered our version of a university, that I truly began to realize my potential. Elder status is like a post-doctoral degree. There are only about twenty elders on the Council of Elders and none of us have anything to do with the High Command."

"Where are the rest of these elders?" Jared asked.

"I don't know. None of us supported the High Command, but I was the only activist. I suspect their off hiding somewhere, waiting for the dust to settle. Most elves tend to get over-protective of their lives when they approach the millennium mark. That's how long we live, you know. Precisely one thousand years. Or maybe they're being kept under lock and key like I was. Anyway, the High Command is completely made up of young hot-heads, less than two centuries old, most of them, and none over four hundred. Unless they combine their talents, they just can't muster the power to create a spell I can't counter. Except for the time I was initially imprisoned and the few times I was moved, I haven't seen more than one High Commander at a time."

"Don't your people respect their elders, sir?" Jakes asked.

"Do yours?" Puck countered. "Actually most of them do, but they fear the High Command more. Like I said, I'm the only activist among the elders. The rest voted to remain neutral during this conflict."

"But," Jakes continued, "if your Council of Elders denounced the High Command..."

"I suspect many of the elves would rebel, but I'd prefer not to resort to civil war. It would be even messier than what we have now."

"So how do you want to bring this war to an end?"

"Negotiated settlement, of course. I'm willing to offer whatever reparations are possible. In return, I want my people to be granted the same status we had before the High Command mucked things up for us. We'll make good on the promises to help clean up the environment and as a down payment I intend to offer up the High Command on a platter. But make no mistake on this: one at a time or all at once, I'm taking those bastards down."

Seven

"Oh come on, Puck!" Jared complained. "Can't this wait a few hours? I just want to get some sleep."

"Acorn, would I force this on you if it weren't important?"

"I don't know. Maybe you would."

"Never!" Puck insisted. Jared wasn't convinced "Look. You admit that without the wand, you're going to have to build up your command of magic the hard way. Right?"

"Well, yes, but can't we put it off until I can think straight?"

"This exercise is one you can do while asleep. In fact it's what will keep you asleep."

"Puck, I don't need something to keep me asleep. Right now it's everything I can do just to stay awake."

"Good! Then as soon as you learn this spell, you can go right to sleep."

"I'm ready to go to sleep! Just go away," Jared pleaded.

"No."

"Damn! You're worse than a hospital nurse. I have to wake up and learn a spell that will put me to sleep?"

"Now you understand."

"No, I don't. Let's just get this over with so I can sleep."

"Good attitude!" Puck commended him. Jared growled. "Hmm, are you sure I completely removed that transformation spell from you? Never mind, probably just an aftereffect. It'll wear off in time."

"Puck! Just get on with it!"

"Patience, Acorn. That is the key to the mastery of almost everything. Patience. Ready? Good. Now close your eyes and concentrate as hard as you can on sleeping for exactly eight hours; no more, no less."

Now when I say..."

Jared found himself swimming in a comfortable, warm, black medium. He heard Puck telling him softly what to do next, but it seemed remote and behind him on a plane of existence that he had nothing to do with at the moment.

"Acorn! Don't drift off yet. Can you hear me?" Jared was too comfortable to answer and just let himself drift a minute. "Acorn, don't make me wake you up." Puck did not sound pleased. As a matter of fact he sounded very angry. "Acorn!" That last call wasn't remote or behind him. Rather it formed an impenetrable road block on his highway to sleep. "Can you hear me?"

It's got to be easier to go along with him, Jared thought silently. "Yes, Puck. I hear you."

"Do as I say." Puck gave him detailed instructions which Jared endeavored to follow.

The next thing he knew there was bright sunlight streaming in his west-side window and he wasn't alone in his bed. He turned slowly, trying not to wake whoever owned the arm that was draped over him from behind.

"Good morning, love," Jenny Bolt greeted him, wide-eyed and smiling.

"Jenny?"

"Mm hmm," she replied, rubbing her nose against his. "I hope you don't mind, but I didn't want to sleep alone today, not when it might be my last. You know?"

"Did we..." Jared trailed off.

"You don't remember?" she asked, feigning innocence. Jared started thinking back furiously and kept coming up blank. "The look on your face!" Jenny giggled. "Jared, believe me. When and if we make love, I guarantee I'll make sure you remember it. I don't have a fixation on doing it one last time, I just wanted a friend to cuddle with before going out on my first really dangerous mission. Okay?" Jared nodded and held her for a long time. "After that mission, on the other hand..." She let her whisper imply whatever he cared to read into it.

In spite of what Jenny said, they were well on their way toward progressing beyond mere cuddling when Puck interrupted them.

Puck looked the two of them over. "Been up long?" he asked without any particular emphasis.

"A few minutes," Jared replied equally dryly after exchanging glances with Jenny.

"No interruptions? No little trips to the men's room?" Puck continued seriously.

Jared looked at him strangely and decided that Puck really wasn't trying to make cute innuendos. "No, I've been dead to the world for..." He checked his wristwatch. "eight hours."

"Good. The spell worked perfectly. You're getting pretty good, Acorn. How do you feel?"

"Pretty good actually."

"I'll say," Jenny agreed, holding Jared warmly.

"Ha ha," Puck said flatly. "Seriously."

"Really. I feel very good, full of energy, like I can do just about anything."

"Excellent," Puck replied. "Get dressed and meet me in my office in fifteen minutes."

"Don't I have time for breakfast?" Jared asked.

"I'll have some brought for you there," Puck replied as he left, shutting the door behind him.

"You'd better get going," Jenny told Jared. "He kids around a lot, I've noticed, but when he gets serious I get the feeling he really means it."

"You've got that right," Jared replied. "One thing first, however." He reached over and pulled Jenny to him. Then he gave her a very long and deep kiss.

"Mmm!" Jenny purred when they had released each other. "If you'd done that earlier, Puck's interruption might have been very embarrassing."

"Consider it a promise of things to come," Jared grinned as he put his shirt on.

"I'll hold you to that," she warned him. Jared winked and finished getting dressed. Another, briefer kiss and he left with her smiling face etched in his mind.

Puck's office was in the building next door, where he had claimed a large meeting room on the top floor and then set about redecorating it. Jared's room, on the other hand, was on the fifth floor of the first building they had taken over. After several days of climbing stairs, Jared began to understand why Shelby had wanted a second floor office, although the work-out benefits were undeniable.

He finally made it to ground level and headed for the main door. Wax was on guard duty there.

"Good morning, Colonel!" Wax greeted him, "or afternoon rather."

"You had it right the first time," Jared replied. "Morning is anytime before breakfast, Resistance Substandard Time."

"Right!" Wax agreed. "Sir, the general has ordered that nobody is allowed outside the building until after dark. Traffic is too heavy to risk being seen."

Jared looked through the glass doors and saw a pair of Greenpeace trucks drive by.

"Increased traffic," he commented. "How long has this been going on?"

"Since sun up, or so I'm told. I've only been on duty for a few minutes myself. Would you like some coffee, sir?" Wax held out a thermos.

"No, but thanks anyway. I've got a breakfast appointment with Puck. I guess I'd better be moving along. There's a lot to do before tonight."

He doubled back and took the stairway down into the basement mess hall/recreation room and headed for the heating tunnel they used as a passageway to the second building.

"Jared," Shelby called as he passed, "welcome back to the world of the living." She was sitting at a small table with Captain Weitz.

"No offense, Shelby, but you look more like the walking dead. Haven't you had any sleep?"

"In a few minutes. There's been a lot to organize before we go out tonight."

"Shelby, I know you too well. Hundred to one you've been saying 'In a few minutes,' for the past eight hours. You've set up a good organization here, let it run on automatic for a few hours. It's three o'clock and it won't be dark enough to move out until after nine. Try using those six hours for some well-deserved rest."

Shelby looked at him a moment and then laughed. "Jared, it's good to have someone who dares to talk to me like that."

"Have I ever done otherwise?"

"Yes, when we first met, but you got over it soon enough. All right, I'll go catch a few Zees, but I want to see all my officers at nine sharp in my office and we'll brief everybody at ten here in the mess. Harry, will you spread the word?" He nodded and she got up and shambled off to her office.

"Harry," Jared suggested, "you should also spread the word that she's not to be disturbed for anything short of an assault on HQ."

"Yes, sir," Harry grinned.

"I'm on my way to see Puck. I'll let him know about the meetings."

The heating tunnel was not the most comfortable route to the other building. The ceiling was less than six feet high and while it cleared Jared's head, he had the uncomfortable feeling that if he walked too briskly, he'd have the headache to end them all. However it wasn't possible to walk briskly as the tunnel was only three feet wide and changed direction several times. It was a tight squeeze past the furnace and then a similar number of turns before he reached the far end of the tunnel.

There was no one in the dimly lit basement on the other side and the only light was coming from the stairway. Jared nodded at the guard on duty near the front door then started climbing stairs.

"What took you so long?" Puck asked when Jared finally walked into his office. The large room had a desk the size of a pool table at one end and an immense oriental carpet covering most of the rest. The sides of the room were lined with tall tropical plants that made the room look like a clearing in a very civilized jungle.

"I took a breather on the fourth floor," Jared replied sitting in front of the desk. "Now what's so important I had to rush over here, without the benefit of a cup of coffee? For that matter, why couldn't we talk in my office."

"I thought you and Jenny wanted a few moments of privacy," Puck replied. "Besides, you need the exercise."

"The hell I do! Puck, you've been intentionally abrasive since we got back last night. What gives?"

"I'll explain later. Right now I want to test your magical abilities." He pulled a red rubber ball out of a drawer and placed it on top of the desk. "Take this ball. No, not with your hand. Make it come to you by magic."

Jared pulled his hand back and concentrated on moving the ball. At first nothing happened. Jared felt as though he had a firm hold on the object, but some incredible force was resisting him. The ball slowly rolled across the table.

"Come on," Puck urged. "You can do better than that. Try!"

Damn him! Jared thought. I'll show that bastard. He put his entire will into the struggle and the ball suddenly shot forward and sailed across the room and bounced off the far wall. Jared reached down and picked it up as it rolled back his way.

"Much better," Puck approved. "Why didn't you try that hard in the first place?"

"It's always been so easy," Jared replied. "I guess I got too used to the wand."

"Welcome to the real world, Acorn. From now on you'll cast your spells without the wand. It's going to be much harder at first, but in time you'll be better off without it. In case you didn't notice, I was holding back the ball at first, testing your muscles, so to speak, and that's why I've been pushing you, forcing you to concentrate and use your power even when you didn't want to."

"Why?"

"Because you weren't ready to stop using the wand yet - not effectively anyway. If not forced you might not have had the will to keep going. It's actually a testimony to your progress that you were able to move the ball at all. You're going to be a very potent wizard, Acorn, but only if you keep pushing yourself."

"All that from using the sleeping spell?" Jared asked.

"It was sufficient to bring your unassisted abilities up to the level of rudimentary conscious control. You'll find that you won't be able to do some of the more exotic spells for a while yet."

"Can I use the sleep spell again?"

"You may gain some advantage from repeated uses, but the effects will be greatly diminished each time. Of course, it's a great cure for insomnia regardless. Each exercise can only build you up so much and then you have to use a more advanced technique."

"So what can I do and not do now?"

"Well I wouldn't try shape changing for a while," Puck replied lightly. "I'd say you should restrict yourself to elementary material manipulation for a month or so, at least while out on a mission. Here at HQ you may try anything you want. Just don't get frustrated when nothing happens. You'll gradually regain the abilities you had with the wand, although under far greater control."

"So the wand is useless now?"

"Not completely," Puck disagreed. "I took the liberty of lifting this from your room while you slept." He held up what was left of the ash-wood rod, a cylinder about three quarters of an inch thick and seven inches long. The broken end had been reworked and finished showing no further sign of damage. "This will no longer act as an amplifier, of course, but it will still give you a bit of protection against the effects of hostile spells. Not a lot; you've been getting less and less protection as you advanced anyway."

"I had noticed," Jared replied. "That last stasis spell I was caught in felt like I was moving through molasses."

"But you were able to move, weren't you. I wasn't, because as you get more advanced, you stop using such spells subconsciously."

"But if you knew it was coming, you could counter it?"

"If I knew which type of spell, yes. There's no single way to do anything. There are always alternatives. Even under a stasis field, the mind of a magic user still works. I can probably break free of such restraint in fifteen minutes or less, but a lot can happen in fifteen minutes."

At that point one of the girls who worked primarily in the mess hall came in with a tray of breakfast.

"Thank you, Gina," Puck told her. "Care to join us?"

"No thank you, sir," she replied. "I've already had lunch, never mind breakfast and I have a lot of work to do."

"All right," Puck shrugged. Gina saluted and left.

"Is she the one?" Jared asked.

"The one what?"

"You said last night that you think you'd found another potential wizard. Why else would you invite Gina to stay?"

"She's pretty," Puck retorted. "I like looking at her. No, she isn't the potential wizard."

"Then who?"

"Jenny."

"Jenny Bolt?" Jared asked excitedly.

"Yes, that's the one. It may not be anything, but I've noticed a vibration in her aura whenever one of us casts a spell. She may merely be a sensitive, but there's no way to find out for certain without a wand. That will have to wait, but in the meantime, we can try some preliminary conditioning."

"What sort of conditioning?" Jared asked apprehensively.

"Nothing to be so worried about," the elf chuckled. Let me see your belt rope." Jared shrugged and handed it over. Puck took a pair heavy shears out of the desk and cut off a six inch piece and tossed the

large section back to Jared who inserted it back through his pants' belt loops. "Give the other piece to Jenny," Puck instructed him once his belt was re-tied. "It will make a nice present, don't you think?"

"I'm sure I could have come up with that on my own," Jared remarked. "What's the point? Did you do something strange to that piece?"

"I cut it; that's all. Remember the trouble you had getting reliable results at first? Well I want Jenny to be comfortable with the idea of magic by the time I get around to making a wand for her. I want her to believe in it. It might not make any difference, but it won't hurt either."

"Okay," Jared agreed. "I'd like to give her something anyway. I just hope she likes it."

"At least you won't have to worry about whether or not it's the right size."

"It's a nice neutral color too, should go with just about anything," Jared laughed. "I'll give it to her before the meeting."

"Don't tell her the real reason why you're giving it to her," Puck warned him. "Make something up. It might worry her and that could inhibit her ability to use the power. Now what's this about a meeting?"

Eight

Shelby's meeting with her officers was interrupted when Dalton returned from the Marine base.

"Sorry to break in on your meeting, general," he said, sticking his head in the door, "but I thought you'd want General Lorrington's reply immediately."

"Thank you, Dalton. Please come in and have a seat. I'd like to hear whatever you have to report." Shelby accepted two packets from the Seal, opened the first one, and read the single typed page it contained. "Damn!"

"Bad news, I presume," Puck commented dryly.

"That ass!" Shelby shouted.

"I knew one of them once," Puck thought out loud. "Now what was his name?"

"Bottom?" Jenny suggested.

"Who?" Puck replied.

"That pompous, self-inflated, PROFESSIONAL ass!" Shelby screamed.

"Oh, him!" Jared, Jakes and Puck harmonized.

"Who?" Jenny and Harry asked. Billy just looked confused.

"Major General Lorrington, of course," Shelby replied. "He has refused every request for supplies and back-up we made. Listen to this: 'I regret to inform you that the vehicles you have requested will not be available for use for at least two weeks. Similarly, due to a severe manpower shortage at this time I will be unable to assign the troops you have requested. I wish you the best of luck on your proposed mission. In the future, however, please pay proper attention to adequate advance planning before requesting troops and equipment.' Dalton, how does this jibe with what you observed there?"

"I ran into an old high school buddy who's a master sergeant on his fourth hitch. We had lunch together and then spent a couple hours on the practice range. From what he tells me, the biggest problem on the base at the moment is the feeling of frustration the men there have at not seeing any action. One thing I saw no shortage of, are people anxious to hear what's going on here inside and they wish they could be here with us. The base is filled to capacity with Marines and the biggest activity is the construction of additional housing for all the Air Force personnel being stationed there as well. I think General Hiller, the Air Force Chief of Staff, would be glad to give us support, but your packet never got beyond Lorrington, and the shield nullifies any flying machine we have so there's not much they can do in terms of physical support. He did send you that other packet however. It contains the ground plans for Andrews Air Force Base."

"So there's no shortage of manpower," Shelby summed up very slowly and clearly.

"Shortage? More like a surfeit, general," Dalton replied.

"What about transport vehicles?" Jakes asked.

"Are you kidding, sir? Lorrington has hundreds of vehicles at his disposal. Trucks, half-tracks, tanks, humvees, APCs, you name it and he's got it there. I don't know what he's up to, but he has enough vehicles on hand to transport every captured politician one at a time, and as many more that would have to make the trip empty."

"He wants us to fail," Shelby snarled. "He wants us to fall flat on our faces just to prove his point about the Resistance being an ineffective group of amateurs."

"Nobody will buy that, ma'am," Dalton replied.

"He's right," Jakes agreed. "With the exception of one or two others like Lorrington, the senior officers of all the armed forces have only the highest respect for the members of the Resistance, and all base commanders have standing orders to work with local Resistance forces whenever possible."

"Then how can this General Lorrington get away with this?" Jenny asked.

"Simple," Harry Weitz replied. "He's the one who reads everything we send out of here. He can destroy the evidence of his interference."

"But that makes him a traitor," Jenny concluded.

"Not in his eyes," Puck told her. "I'm sure that General Lorrington really does believe everything he says about groups like ours. I'm sure his defense is that our plan is ill-considered and therefore unduly dangerous and destined to failure so that it would be criminal for him to commit the lives of his men."

"Terrific," Jenny replied flatly. "So there's nothing we can do?"

"Of course there's something we can do," Billy told her.

"That's right," Jared agreed. "We can go in and free those politicians on our own."

"Exactly," Billy nodded. "Then we can shove that victory at Lorry and stick his face in it!"

"No," Shelby disagreed quietly with Billy, "We'll just do the job to the best of our abilities and when that is over, proceed to the next job."

"Even though it means operating without the support of the Marines," Jared concurred.

"Even though," Shelby added, "we have to act without any reinforcements."

"Oh, it's not all that bad, Shelby," a voice said lightly from the doorway.

"Nate!"

"Good guess, boss, but I'm not alone." Nate entered the room followed by Jim, Mark, Jean, and Otis.

Shelby quickly introduced her old team to the rest of the people present. Under the new ranking system, Nate was now a first lieutenant, Otis and Jim were sergeants, and Jean and Mark remained captains. "It's great to see you guys," Shelby told them, "but what are you doing here?"

"It turned out," Jean reported, "that Camp Goodfellow was being defended by about three dozen Greenpeace rookies who took one look at the thousands on our side and couldn't raise the white flag fast enough. The elves were nowhere in sight although released prisoners swore they had been there as recently as three hours before we arrived."

"Well," Mark continued, "it was all over by the time Jean and I arrived with our chosen teams. We were back in Boston the next day wondering what to do next. We were given the choice of reassignment or discharge."

"Obviously," Shelby concluded, "the lot of you were too dedicated to take even so much as a small vacation, so you decided to follow me down here."

"We missed your smiling face," Mark explained facetiously. "Grimes sent us down here about two days behind you. We'd have been here sooner, but we had to go a long way around New York. We'd been sitting around Quantico for several days - Lorry wouldn't let us join you until we had directions to your HQ. Then Dalton showed up in his Ferrari. We figured that there was only one commander classy enough to use a car like that for a courier vehicle, so we collared him as soon as we could and got the real story."

"Lorry knows how to find us here," Shelby said coldly.

"Just put it on his account to be paid later," Puck suggested mildly.

Shelby thought about that and laughed. "Very well, then I suppose we're going to have to revise our plans a bit. We're suddenly a bit top heavy with officers, but..."

"Not too badly," Jean interrupted. "We should have mentioned this sooner, but we brought another thirty

people with us. The real problem will be coordinating everybody, when half of us don't know each other."

"You're right," Shelby acknowledged. "Let's work something out quickly." Twenty minutes later they had a plan and were ready to brief the rest of the troops.

Nine

"Puck," Jared whispered in the dark. "are you sure you can disperse the security field?"

"I'm sure I can't," Puck replied, "but I can modify it to show where its edges are."

"I thought that you were supposed to be able to counter any other elf's spells," Jenny pointed out.

"Except possibly another elder's, yes," Puck agreed. "but no single elf can create a ward this size. Just like the anti-tech shield it's a machine-operated and maintained spell."

"You have machines?" Jenny asked.

"After a fashion. Inanimate devices that can cast and hold a specific spell. This is a high-power but essentially menial spell. Why shouldn't we have built devices to do the hard work for us? Humans did."

The three of them formed a single team, their job to find a way to neutralize magical defenses. Jenny protested that she hadn't the foggiest notion of how to cast a spell, and Puck had countered that by pointing out that he and Acorn needed an expert marksman to cover them in case they were under attack.

Lieutenant Jakes and his Seals waited about thirty feet back and Mark's team behind them. The other units were stationed at various points along the far side of the base perimeter waiting for the proper time; five past midnight because Shelby hated doing anything exactly on the hour, especially that hour.

Jared glanced at his watch. "It's time," he said.

Puck nodded. "You remember what to do?"

"I just hope I'm up to it," he replied.

"Don't worry. I'll do most of the work."

Together they concentrated and as one cast a spell on the security ward. A clear blue glowing line, about a half an inch thick, formed two and a half feet above the ground, marking the lower limit of where the magical electric eye was at work. Jared went forward and cut a large hole in the fence where it had been repaired since the previous night. No sentries were in sight and the three quickly crawled through the fence and then ran to the side of a nearby barracks building.

"Now what?" Jenny asked.

"One more spell," Puck told her. "Ready, Acorn?" Jared nodded and a dull red fog formed around them and then spread out until a barely noticeable trace of it surrounded the building they were leaning against and the two to either side. "Any outside guards should be asleep now." Puck saw Jakes leaning partially through the hole in the fence and waved him forward. Soon both the Seals and Mark's team were through the fence and ready to go.

Mark's team had the easy work if everything went according to plan. They had merely to escort any freed prisoners to the path and to a pick-up area across the road. Shelby would have preferred to just transport them out of there, but without the back-up truck from Quantico, they would just have to make do.

"They're empty, sir," Lieutenant Jakes reported a few minutes later.

"All of them?" Puck asked in disbelief.

"Yes, sir. They do appear to be lived in, but there's nobody in any of the five buildings in this area."

"Damn! All right. And you're sure you saw them being put in these buildings last night?"

"Of course, sir. Ask Colonel Laker. He was there too."

"Sorry, lieutenant. I didn't mean to imply that I didn't believe you. It's this whole situation I'm having trouble with. Oh well, time to institute Plan B."

"What's Plan B, sir?"

"Damned if I know," Puck grinned. "Let's fake it. Maybe they've herded everyone down to the athletic field again."

"Or the air field," Jared added.

"What makes you say that, Acorn?"

"It's just that if I held the leaders of a country captive, the last thing I'd want my enemies to know would be where they are. I'd keep moving them around so nobody could keep track of them. Maybe even take them out of the country."

"Good point," Puck admitted. "Which way is the air field from here?"

"Follow us, sir," Jakes told him. The Seals moved out at a brisk jog with Puck, Jared, and Jenny close behind. Mark's team carried up the rear and they threaded their way through the base toward the airfield.

A siren sounded when they were about halfway there, but the lights came on in a quadrant other than the one they were in.

"Someone tripped an alarm," Jared said needlessly as they stopped for a short rest.

"That's good," Jenny opined. "That means we'll have a diversion working for us."

"Probably," Jakes admitted, "but if they're getting ready to fly the politicians out of here, this might speed

up their schedule."

"Then let's get moving again," Puck told them.

They made it to the airfield in time to see a long line of men and women being loaded on a Boeing 747 jumbo jet.

"You were right, Acorn," Puck told him. "They're being flown out."

"Do we use the sleep spell again?"

"That will put everyone to sleep," Puck warned him, "even the ones we're here to rescue."

"And while everyone's asleep, we can separate the guards from the politicians and then tie up the guards."

"That would be a lot of work," the elf replied. "I'd like to find something easier. Too bad there's so much iron in that plane. From this distance, we could never affect the whole thing."

"Puck it isn't exactly made of steel. The skin is probably aluminum or titanium or a similarly light metal. In any case steel is too heavy to use except where strength is required, but there's no need to affect the plane as a single unit in order to keep it on the ground."

"What do you have in mind?"

"We could bugger up the wiring."

"Do you know enough about how this sort of craft works to be that subtle?" Puck asked.

"Subtle? What I have in mind is about as subtle as a sledgehammer. As a matter of fact, the results would be similar. All the controls are wired with copper. Right?"

"So I've been told," Puck allowed. "So you want to break some of the wires. Which ones?"

"All of them. Melt them together is what you want. It doesn't really matter much, but the more damage we do, the less likely it is that they'll be able to take off."

"I see," Puck proclaimed. "Then when the plane can't take off, they'll march the captives back to the barracks."

"That's what I figured."

"Good thinking. Electronics are not really my strong point," the elf admitted. "Melting them might be a bit risky. We don't want to start a fire. How about we just break every wire in the cockpit?"

"That'll do it. How?"

Puck explained and a few minutes later every light in the jet went out and the engines which had been idling suddenly became quiet. Shouts could be heard from the aircraft and Puck instructed Jakes and Mark to return to the barracks area. Puck, Jared, and Jenny continued to watch until the hostages were marched back off the plane toward the barracks.

"What are you doing here?" an elfin voice demanded from behind them. They turned and found themselves face to face with half a dozen, green-uniformed elves. "Elder Rondel?" the leader - a pretty female elf - asked. Her attitude had been belligerent, but the expression on her face rapidly changed to surprise mixed with great respect. "Is it truly you?"

"Yes, Dewdrop." Puck acknowledged gently. "It's good to see you are well. How fare your parents?"

"My father died two years ago by orders of the High Command," she answered with a hard edge to her voice. "My mother lives, but she is not well. Iron poisoning."

"I'm sorry, Dewdrop. Oh, by the way, I'm being called 'Puck' again. This is my apprentice, Acorn the Wizard and the beautiful Jenny Bolt. Dewdrop is a distant cousin of mine on my mother's side."

"Pleased to meet you. My adult name is Dolomite."

"Dolomite Summersong? A strange combination of names." Puck grinned.

"Brought on by strange times. I heard you had joined the Resistance."

"It is true."

"Traitor!" one of Dolomite's companions spat.

"Shut up, fool!" yet another elf snapped vehemently. Some of the others nodded agreement.

"Something strange is going on here," Jared noted.

"You can say that again," Jenny agreed. "This is certainly not the reception I would have expected here."

"It's more than you deserve!" the elf who had called Puck a traitor shouted at them.

"Oh shut up, Mace!" Dolomite told him harshly.

"Elder Rondel is a fugitive under a death sentence," Mace replied. "You act as if you're going to let him go."

"Actually," Dolomite replied in a fair imitation of Puck, "I intend to join him."

"Traitor! We'll kill you where you stand!"

"We, Mace? Who else do you have in mind?"

"He still hasn't caught on," one of the other elves commented dryly.

"You're all traitors?" Mace asked incredulously.

"That's a rather limited vocabulary you've developed, friend," Dolomite said sadly. "No, Mace, we never swore fealty to the High Command."

"All of you?" Mace asked. "The Underground?"

"There is no Underground," Dolomite laughed. "Not organized as such anyway. Just a few brave elves, waiting for a chance to make a difference against the tyranny of the High Command."

"I'll turn you all in!"

"All of us?" another female elf laughed lightly, then her manner turned menacing. "And how will you manage that?" As she said that one of the male elves cast a spell which knocked the hapless Mace unconscious.

"I won't let you kill him," another elf - a short male - told them.

"I thought you were with us?" Dolomite asked.

"I can't support this. I'm sorry. Does that mean you'll kill me too?"

"No, Asp," Dolomite told him gently. "We wouldn't kill Mace either. That's not our way. We're going to join forces with Puck and the Resistance. Will you join us?"

Asp looked miserable. "I can't!" he blurted out. "The High Command - they're holding my father hostage. Now what?"

"We'll knock you out too and tie you and Mace up together. When someone finds you, just keep on pretending you're loyal to the Command."

"All right."

A moment later Asp fell to the ground beside Mace. They quickly tied the two elves up with Mace's belt rope.

"I'm very confused," Jenny admitted. "What's going on?"

"I'm very proud," Puck smiled at Dolomite. "I always knew you'd turn out right." The young elf smiled in return, and there were tears glistening in her pale eyes.

"Not everyone agrees with what the High Command is doing," a young male elf explained. "Most don't, but to openly disagree is to court death, so we walked around pretending to be loyal little soldiers for the cause and hoping we'd run into other like-minded elves."

"It's a frightening thing to do," Dolomite added. "We take our lives in our hands every time we approach someone new and bring up the subject of mutiny. Mutiny. It's a harsh word, but against the High Command, we feel that mutiny is our duty."

"It's no coincidence that we, rather than someone else, found you. When the alarms went off, most units went to where the wards had been tripped, but I figured that it might be a diversionary tactic to cover the rescue of the hostages, so we came here and poked around in the shadows until we found you."

"I was sure Mace wouldn't go along with us and only hoped that Asp might, but I knew the rest of us were committed to the downfall of the High Command and wanted to hook up with the Resistance. We'd talked about it often enough. So can you guys use a little extra elfin magic?"

"Warning," one of the males - a blond with a wide smile - told them, "We don't do cookies!"

As they headed toward the barracks, Dolomite introduced her remaining three companions as Warhead, Plague, and Tulip. All four were short, averaging about five feet in height, an indication of their relative youth. According to what Puck had told him, Jared estimated their ages to be between twenty-five and thirty.

"Rondel... Puck," Dolomite asked, "Why have you started using your youth name again?"

"Second childhood, perhaps," Puck shrugged.

The elves laughed. "No," Dolomite persisted. "Why?"

"Well, I was being held prisoner by the High Command."

"They dared to imprison an elder?" Tulip gasped.

"The least of their crimes, dear child. Anyway, when my new friends released me it felt like a new life to me, and I've never liked my elder name anyway, so..."

"I see it!" Dolomite decided. "I think I'll do the same and go back to being Dewdrop."

"I never liked my youth name," Plague remarked, "but I like Plague even less."

"Why did you choose it then?" Jared asked.

"With the High Command in charge?" Plague countered. "Tulip's the only one I know who had the guts to choose a traditional name. But from now on I'll use the name I wanted in the first place - Waterfall."

"How about you, Warhead?" Dewdrop asked.

"I'll keep this name for a while," he replied grimly. "I chose it with the fall of the High Command in mind."

"So, Elder Puck," Dewdrop asked, "what's the plan?"

"We've come to rescue the politicians being held hostage here," Puck replied.

"Why?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why rescue them? Are they really all that important to the war effort?"

"They are from a propaganda and morale viewpoint," Puck shrugged. "It will be considered a major victory for the humans if we can release them."

"They're under heavy guard," Tulip commented. "Greenpeace Elite. Real fanatics. I honestly don't understand those people. Why would they go along with the extermination of their own species?"

"Extermination?" Jenny squeaked.

"That's what the High Command wants," Tulip told her. "It's been their goal all along. Didn't you know that?"

"The members of the High Command may be twisted, but they're not stupid," Warhead remarked.

"That's a matter of opinion," Puck told him.

"Regardless," Warhead continued, "they haven't let their allies in on their true goals."

"Shh!" Puck silenced them. "We're almost back to the barracks and I need to know what level of mastery you four have achieved."

"The practice of magic without a license has been strictly forbidden since the coup," Dewdrop informed him. "None of us ever got beyond the freshman level."

"That's better than Acorn here is capable of at the moment," Puck replied. "He's just recently off the wand and not by choice. Dewdrop, we need to cast a sleep spell on the Greenpeace soldiers guarding the barracks."

"Can't do it," she replied. "Those buildings have been warded against hostile magic. We can take the men outside the buildings but not inside."

"Then we'll storm the buildings," Puck decided.

"Whoa!" Waterfall replied. "You want to storm five buildings and nearly one hundred Greenpeace Elite with five elves and a pair of humans?"

"We're not alone," Puck replied. "We have at least twenty others besides."

"So we're only out-numbered five-to-one."

Ten

Puck came to an abrupt halt, causing several others to crash into him. "Five-to-one? Really?" he asked at last. Waterfall and Warhead both nodded. "Maybe an alternative strategy is called for. Follow me." He walked decisively forward forcing the others to rush to keep up with him. They found Lieutenant Jakes and his team watching the barracks buildings from a nearby copse of trees.

"Captain Nevada and his people are on the other side of the buildings," Jakes reported. "What's the plan?"

"We have some new allies," Puck told him and introduced Dewdrop and the other three elves. "Let me see the map. Uh huh! Dewdrop, which parking lot are the buses in?"

"This one," She replied pointing at a location about a mile away. "Why, what do you have in mind?"

"I'll let you know when we pull it off. Is the lot well guarded?"

"It isn't guarded at all," she replied, "but you'd never be able to drive them off the base without going through one of the gates and they're all guarded."

"Trust me. Lieutenant, please send a man over to Captain Nevada's team and ask them to meet us at the parking lot. We're going to have a little fun."

Half an hour later when the sounds of fighting had become sporadic, they met in the parking lot near the buses.

"What," Jim Bass, the former trucker asked, "no keys?"

"We'll hot-wire them!" Nate laughed, clapping his friend on the back.

"And what about unlocking the doors?"

"I'll handle that," Jared told him.

"Are you sure you're up to it, Acorn?" Puck asked seriously.

"If I can make a ball sail across your office, I can wrestle with a few spring-loaded tumblers. Besides, I can't let you go grabbing all the glory."

"Very well. Give it a shot."

Jared had to strain a bit but after a few minutes he had all three buses open.

"Very well done, Acorn!" Dewdrop told him warmly. "That trick is one only an elder among our kind can do."

"I thought you had spells that can control or neutralize cold iron."

"We do, but they're horribly complicated and time consuming. Well, not all of them. We have one really easy spell that gives us temporary immunity against the debilitating effects of cold iron, but we still can't manipulate the stuff without the really advanced spells and that means either elder-class magic or machine-assisted spell casting, usually the latter."

"All aboard!" Puck called. "Acorn, Jenny with me. Dewdrop and Waterfall in the second bus. Warhead and Tulip in the third and try to look as though you know what you're doing."

"Ah," Dewdrop laughed to Jared and Jenny, "acting. Good thing I was in Drama Club in high school."

Inside, the buses had been converted to put a steel door between the front of the bus and the passenger section, so that prisoners could be locked in and transported with a minimum number of guards.

"Wait up!" they heard Shelby call from the darkness. She ran up, accompanied by half a dozen men and women

"Shelby!" Jared called. "What are you doing here? I thought you were supposed to be running diversion."

"Battleplans are always the first casualties," she gasped. "Tell you while we move out." Before the buses' headlights were turned off, Jared noticed that Shelby was favoring her right arm and was developing a pair of shiners that would make her look vaguely raccoon-like for a while. The others of her party were showing similar minor wounds. "Picked these up when we ran off a cliff," she told him when he asked. "It's dark out in the woods and we ended up taking a tumble."

"But what are you doing this deep inside the base?"

"Playing it by ear the same as you are," Shelby replied pointedly.

"Touché," Jared admitted. "Only I'm playing this by Puck's ear this time."

"That's different," she smirked, tracing the shape of Puck's pointed ear in the air between them.

"General!" Puck called, walking up to Shelby, "I'd like you to meet my cousin Dewdrop. Her team has just joined ours."

"Please to meet you, dear," Shelby replied distractedly. "Puck, what are you doing with these buses?"

"Taking them," he replied. "Dewdrop, you'd better get back to your bus." Dewdrop whispered something to him and then went to join Waterfall on the second bus. "Your turn," Puck told Shelby.

"I think I understand why Grimes took an instant dislike to you," Shelby muttered. "Jared?" The buses started moving toward the barracks.

"Unless he's suddenly gone insane, we're going to use these to transport the hostages."

"So you've secured them already?"

"Well, no," Jared replied slowly. "That's the part of the plan he hasn't told us yet. How about you? Why did you come here?"

"We were going to blow up the buses to hinder the further transport of the hostages," Shelby replied.

"Wouldn't have worked. They were being taken out by jet," Jared told her. "but we stopped them. Anyway the guards out-number us a bit. With your bunch I'd say by four-to-one. So Puck has a tricky little plan."

"That he won't tell us," Shelby pointed out. "All right, Puck, 'fess up!"

"Simple. We're going to drive up and load the hostages on the bus with the help of the Greenpeace Elite."

"How?"

"Well, we're here," Puck avoided answering. Outside, nearly one hundred automatic rifles were trained on the three buses. "Okay, Acorn, here's your chance. Go order them to bring the hostages out."

"Right!" Jared said sarcastically, "I don't exactly fit the dress code..." He stopped realizing that his clothing had been transformed into a Greenpeace Elite uniform.

"Congratulations on your promotion, general," Puck snickered pointing at the stars on his shoulders.

"I should be doing this," Shelby told them.

"Sorry, general," Puck informed her, "but Greenpeace doesn't allow female officers in their Elite Corps."

Meanwhile, Jared was asking, "What am I supposed to do?"

"Bluff," Puck replied, pushing him out the door.

Jared half-stumbled down the steps, but caught himself as he hit the ground. He then took a few steps forward until a harsh voice shouted, "Halt and put your hands up!"

"Do you know who you are talking to?" Jared demanded.

"No," a major with a name patch that read "Downs" said calmly, stepping forward, "Why don't you tell us?"

"Major!" Jared snapped angrily, "Do you always address your superiors in this fashion?"

"I do when he's an imposter who fails to use the password," the major replied, knocking Jared down.

"Major Downs!" Puck raged from the doorway. Downs looked up and shuddered. The elder elf seemed to have been transformed. There was an aura of fire and brimstone about him and his voice seemed to resonate. "Stuffed shirt," Puck snarled the password that Dewdrop had whispered to him in the parking lot. "Now help the general up and order your men to put their guns down."

"Yes, elder!" Major Downs replied nervously.

After getting to his feet, Jared reached out and imperiously ripped the insignia from the major's uniform. "Congratulations on your new position, private," Jared said, patting the stunned officer on the cheek. "Who's the next in charge here?"

"That would be me, sir, Lieutenant Alejandro Mendez," the man stepped up eagerly.

"Very good, major," Jared replied, handing him the oak leaves he had plucked from Downs' uniform. "I want all the hostages out here and on the buses in five minutes."

"But, sir," Mendez objected, "it took two trips to bring them all here."

"Then they will sit on each other's laps," Jared replied. "We have another plane waiting for them at Dulles."

"Why not just fly it here like we did the first one?"

"Fool!" Jared stormed. "Haven't you heard the sounds of battle this evening? This base is under attack from the Resistance. They've already sabotaged one plane tonight. I will not give them another chance. Load those people on the buses and be quick about it or don't you know how to obey orders either?"

"Yes, sir!" Mendez replied and turned to relay the orders.

A few minutes later, the buses were filled to capacity with people standing in the aisles when they started moving away from the barracks.

"Well, Puck," Shelby asked when they started moving, "how do you propose to get off the base?"

"Same way," he replied. "We'll bluff our way out."

"I just hope you're right."

"You there," the President of the United States shouted from the third seat back, "I demand to know what's going on here."

"It's a jail break," Puck replied irreverently. "What's it look like? A Midnight picnic?"

"Where are you taking us?"

"What difference does it make? We're getting you out of town. Now, Mister President, I really do need to talk to you, but it will have to wait a few minutes or so."

"Here comes the gate," Shelby reported. "Jared, Puck, be ready to go into action." The buses pulled up to the gate and several security guards met them with drawn rifles.

"Stuffed shirt," Jared told them calmly.

"Up yours!" a guard replied, raising his gun until it was only an inch from Jared's nose.

Jared drew himself up like what he imagined a general might do in such a situation and hissed menacingly, "I suppose you know what you are doing, sergeant?"

"Apprehending a group of dangerous criminals, yes sir!"

"Close enough," Jared muttered softly.

"You should have known the major would have you checked out before you could leave the base."

"Any problem out here?" Puck asked innocently, poking his head out the door of the bus. The sergeant had no chance to reply. Puck cast a spell and the guards were instantly caught in a misty pink aura. A moment later they slumped to the ground unconscious. "I guess not. Acorn, if you'll lift the gate we'll continue." A large collection of sirens could be heard behind them. "On second thought, it's just a wooden board. Get back inside." The bus was already moving when Jared jumped through the open door.

"Well, that was easy enough," Jenny commented.

"It's not over yet," Jim told her from the driver's seat. "I see gumballs flashing behind us."

"How far back?" Shelby asked.

"About a mile, and to tell you the truth, boss, I doubt that the police cars are alone back there. You saw what else was parked in that lot. Some of those tanks can more than keep up with us."

"Puck," Shelby asked, "can your magic slow them down?"

"I can collapse a bridge behind us, but we'll have to let the other two buses get ahead of us."

Entrance to the Beltway coming up," Jim announced. "Do I take it?"

"Yes," Shelby decided. "Go south, but once we're on the highway, wave the other two buses ahead. Puck needs us to bring up the rear."

"You got it, boss," Jim replied.

Jim drove the bus as fast as he dared up the tightly curved ramp and then let the other two buses pass him. Puck and Jared forced their way to the back of the bus.

"Too bad about the back window," Puck sighed.

"Why?" Jared asked. "What's wrong with it?"

"It's still in one piece." Puck touched the glass and quickly dissolved it into a sheet of fine sand, which fell out of the frame. "There," he said, "now we can go to work." He quickly explained to Jared what they intended to do. A few seconds later they crossed a small culvert and together they concentrated on lifting up on the buried pipe. The ground virtually exploded behind them leaving a deep gash in the road. "That should take care of that," Puck told him smugly.

"Bandits at 11:30!" Jim called from up front.

"What?" Puck asked.

"He means we have pursuers coming from the other way. For that matter, a tank could drive right over the hole we just made and we only did it on this side of the road."

"Great!" Puck shouldered his way past a few more politicians and dissolved the nearest side window.

"Getting pretty windy back here," Jared commented as Puck stuck his head out the window.

"It's windier out here," Puck shouted back. "Quick, link with me!" They did and twin balls of fire formed on the far side of the road.

"The other buses are slowing down," Shelby shouted back to them.

"Find out why," Puck replied.

Jim drove the bus around the other two and immediately found out why. "Roadblock!"

Puck used a swear word that nobody aboard had ever heard, but that all instantly understood. "We're going upstairs," he told his assistant. Still linked together they cut a hole in the roof and Puck levitated them through the hole. The bus was only going about thirty miles per hour and was still slowing as they ran forward.

"Funny," Jared commented, "I never thought running along the top of a bus would be so easy."

"I've modified your shoes so they stick to the surface," Puck told him. Then Jared noticed that there was a bit of tackiness when he lifted his feet off the roof.

Ahead they saw the roadblock. Jeeps, tanks, and even a semitractor-trailer parked across the road.

"Nasty," Puck commented. "We'll just have to be nastier. Link up, we're driving a wedge through them." He meant that literally, and soon a wedge of force was pushing the tanks and other lesser vehicles off the road. The semi was split in two with a horrendous shriek of agonized metal. Then each half of the truck, too, was cleared off the road as the convoy advanced on that location where there was another highway exit for Andrews Air Force Base.

The Greenpeace soldiers started shooting at the passing buses, but this was met by automatic weapons' fire from the Resistance fighters on the accelerating buses. Puck and company destroyed more bridges on both sides of the road and soon everything was going smoothly again.

"How is everything in there?" Puck called down through the hole in the roof.

"About a dozen wounded, two dead," Jenny replied. "Everyone else was able to stay below the windows. Do you know any healing magic?"

"Yes," Puck told her, "I can help as long as the bullets aren't still inside." A few minutes later the wounded had been tended to. They weren't fully healed; that would take more time, but they'd hold until they got to Quantico.

"More trouble ahead," Jim reported as he once more passed the other two buses. "More tanks, it looks like."

"Open the door!" Puck commanded. As Jim complied, Puck linked up once more with Jared and leaned out the door.

The tanks started firing before they could react and it was all they could do to deflect incoming shells. Finally Puck managed to catch the shells before they could leave the tank guns, effectively destroying them. They rolled past the debris at a cautious twenty miles per hour and continued on. Shelby instructed Jim to stay in the lead for the time being.

"No further injuries this time," Jared noted.

"Not to our side, but that doesn't make this a good night," Puck pointed out sourly. "Acorn, we don't want to kill anyone."

"I'll admit that it would be preferable to settle this by talking, but those guys don't seem ready to meet us at the bargaining table."

"How do they keep getting ahead of us?" Jenny asked.

"Side roads," Shelby explained. "While we're encountering each unit, others keep moving ahead on the side roads trying to cut us off."

"If we can reach the Potomac," Jim added, "we should be able to lose them, assuming we blow up the bridge behind us. Another exit coming up in a mile. Get ready, guys!"

There were no waiting troops at the next exit and they began to breathe a sigh of relief which was abruptly cut off when a shell exploded in front and to their left.

"Where did that come from?" Puck asked excitedly.

"There's a pair of tanks on a parallel road off to the left," Shelby told him.

Another two shells bracketed the lead bus before Puck could reply, "Not anymore!" Dissolving yet another window, he cast a destructive bolt of energy that appeared to be an unholy hybrid of fire and lightning. Both tanks were demolished, but not before one got off one last shot.

The shell landed directly in front of the third bus. The driver was good, but not quite good enough. The bus skidded out of control and ran into the guard rail. A shower of sparks illuminated the night where the side of the bus scraped the guard-rail and then fell over on its side.

"Keep going!" Shelby shouted. A minute later they were on the approach to the bridge where I-95 crosses the Potomac. "Stop the buses, Jim," she ordered, "I'm taking a team back to look for survivors." Shelby left Jim, Puck and Jared on the first bus and Jakes' Seal team on the other, and left with everybody else, telling Jared, "Get these two bus loads to Quantico. By the time you get back, we'll be at the new rendezvous point."

As the buses reached the other side of the river, Puck finally allowed himself to relax. He made his way back to the President and sat down next to him, displacing the White House Chief of Staff with a brusk, "Go away, boy. You bother me," in a flawless imitation of W.C. Fields. "Now Mister President," Puck continued, "You and I are going to have a very long talk, leader to leader..."

Epilogue

"Jared, welcome back!" Jenny greeted him. She rose from where she was sitting in the mess hall with Shelby and Dewdrop and repeated the greeting by hugging and kissing him fiercely. "I've been so worried. What took you so long?"

"A lot of little things," Jared replied. "The others should be right in. Here they are." After several minutes of comparing notes from the past week, Shelby decided to let the reunion turn into a debriefing.

"General Lorrington was in high dudgeon," Jared reported, "with all his ranting about the ineffectiveness of amateurs until the President told him to stick it. Of course, we were vindicated two days later when the remaining thirty hostages arrived. Too bad we lost so many when the bus crashed. How did our own people do?"

"We lost ten people that night, six in the crash, and over half the rest were badly wounded. Jean was pushed to her limit trying to patch them up, but the good news is that the sounds of battle attracted other people of unorganized resistance who we quickly recruited, including two doctors and a half dozen med students. By the time they brought their friends and their friends' friends, our numbers had tripled. We have scouts now in Baltimore trying to organize a Resistance Cell there. How about you?"

"Did I tell you we nearly had to walk back?" Jared asked.

"What happened to the buses?"

"Lorring confiscated them," Jakes informed her. "Fortunately, Seals are Navy not Marines and I requisitioned several vehicles, which have been assigned to you for the duration. I and my team are yours too, by the way. It's all in the packet."

"Thank you, Lieutenant Commander, and congratulations on your promotion."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Well," Shelby told them, "we can live without two bullet-ridden buses. There are plenty of others here in Laurel. Puck, how did your negotiations go?"

"Quite well," Puck smiled. "The president agreed to all my terms and the members of congress that were present assented in a formal vote on the condition that the High Command be defeated and that no member of that body be allowed to hold office again. Individual war crimes trials to be held later. I didn't tell them that it was my intention that no member of the High Command live long enough to survive such a trial. There are still details to be worked out, but most of them will be with the Council of Elders when we manage to get the 'old gang' back together." Everyone present groaned appreciatively at Puck's pun.

"The rescue of the hostages is getting really good press on the outside," Jared supplied. "The word when we finally got clearance to leave Quantico was that enlistments in the regular armed forces were way up, and the President and the Joint Chiefs of Staff announced that they officially recognize the Resistance as an official unit of the U.S. Military for the duration of the current situation and old Harry Lee Grimes has been appointed Commandant of the U.S. Resistance."

"So what are we supposed to do now? Set up our own recruitment centers?"

"No, ma'am," Jakes told her. "The Resistance is a special case. The other forces are being instructed to assign units to work with Resistance cells as available and requested. My team is the first such since that directive."

"The only fly in the ointment, however, is that we'll still have to work through Lorring at Quantico," Jared told her. "Grimes has been directed to continue to command from Boston, rather than moving down here and he decided that the current system of cooperation has worked well so far, so why rock the boat?"

"Well I guess we can live with that if we have to. Lorring is a prickly bastard and we got off to a bad start with him. Maybe he'll come to appreciate us a little more."

"Don't count on it," Jared told her. "Puck pretty well buggered up any chance of that."

"I hesitate to ask."

"It wasn't anything he didn't have coming to him," Puck replied defensively. "Oh, by the way I am pleased to report that young Acorn here has achieved a sufficient level of mastery, that he won't miss the use of the wand. Well, not much, anyway."

"My 'magic muscles' have been getting a lot of exercise lately," Jared nodded.

"And while we were detained," Puck continued, "I made a little present for," he turned toward Jenny,

presenting her a white wooden rod, "you."

"A wand?" she asked. "I'm no magician. I can't even do stage magic."

"The word is wizard, dear," Dewdrop corrected her.

"True," Puck agreed with his cousin, "and as for you being able to use this, well, we'll just have to see."

"Puck," Shelby refused to let herself get distracted, "what did you do to General Lorrington?"

"Something truly Shakespearean," Jared told her.

"You didn't," Shelby stated.

"He did," Jakes confirmed, barely able to keep a straight face.

"You turned him into an ass?" Shelby asked, both horrified and amused.

"Just his ears," Puck replied with a sly smile.

"Permanently?"

"Or until someone else changes him back."

"Of course," Jared pointed out, "he can always have them surgically altered."

"I hope he tries," Puck laughed.

"Something you didn't tell me?"

"Well if he tries to have them bobbed, they'll only grow back again, but that's just the least of it. Surgery will trigger the other half of the spell." Jared raised a quizzical eyebrow. "He'll grow a tail too."

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