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CHALLENGE 47

The Magazine of Science-Fiction Gaming

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Cadillacs AND Dinosaurs

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144-page trade paperback. Fully illustrated with Mark Schultz's art. Game rules by Frank Chadwick. GDW: 3000. \$18. Available in November 1990.

G

iven that I didn't know where I was when I woke up, I figured that still having my clothes on was a plus. I mean, I can remember similar incidents when I thought otherwise, but I hadn't been tied up in those situations. I also didn't have a kid sitting on the end of the bed pointing a pistol with a bowling-ball bore at me.

"Kyrie, he's awake." The little albino showed me his teeth in a feral grin and held the heavy revolver with pale, unwavering hands. "Do anything, Kies, and the last thing going through your mind will be a bullet."

Great, I thought. *I'm being held by some psycho punk who's been downloading intimidation lessons from Kid Stealth.* "No problem, ace."

I took a moment or two to assess my situation. Because of the thick, blue and red Indian blanket drawn up to my neck, I couldn't see my hands, but it felt like the kid had used hawser to bind my wrists together. The cable had been knotted tight, but my hands weren't tied behind my back. Whatever spark of hope that little gift inspired died in the railroad tunnel at the end of the gun barrel staring at me.

The old, metal-frame bed had been painted enough times for me to see a rainbow of colors where chips cut through to bare metal. Off to my left, just on the far side of the doorway, I saw a table and two chairs. My leather jacket hung over the back of one of the chairs, and my shoulder holster, complete with pistol, lay on the table. The room, from the cobwebs in the corners to the cracks in the plaster, had seen better days, but it was still habitable. The bedding looked fairly clean, but the scent told me it had been a week or two since it had been washed.

Using my elbows and heels, I slowly pushed myself back and up into a sitting position. I clamped down on the blanket with my chin, pulling it up with me. Bending my knees and digging my heels in, I popped the blanket up into a little tent and watched the albino over the artificial horizon stretched between my knees.

"So tell me, do you have a 'preferred guest rate,' or am I being soaked for full fare during my impromptu stay?"

The albino's pink eyes watched me without blinking. His white hair had been shaved into a mohawk and stiffened with glue into a bristle of porcupine quills. Aside from the reddish cast to his eyes, the only color on him came from the dirt beneath his fingernails and the little creases at the corner of his thin-lipped mouth. His jaw showed white wisps of beard-to-come. His Mercurial T-shirt and synthetic pants matched the dingy gray walls in hue.

Before he could answer, or pull the trigger, a second person entered the room. She was a pretty little Elf, if a tad on the lean side. She had fire in her dark eyes, though she seemed to take care to hide it when she looked at the albino. She wore her black hair very short in a boyish cut. That, and her slender figure, made it easily possible for her to pass as a young man—a wise thing to do if, as was my guess, we were in the Barrens and this was where they lived. She wore mostly synthleather—standard for the Sprawl—though hers was of browns and tans that would have seemed more appropriate out in the Tir.

"How are you feeling?" Kyrie leaned on the foot of the bed as she asked the question. "Are you hurt?"

I shook my head casually. "Tongue feels thick. I could use some water."

She turned to leave, but the gunboy snarled at her. "Overruled. You'll get water when I say you get water."

"Albion, he's not an enemy."

"He's not a guest either, Kyrie. He's a hostage." Albion locked his serpent-stare on me again. "You're Wolfgang Kies, right?"

My eyes narrowed. "Cut to the chase."

"My game, my rules, my speed."

"Okay, if that's the way it is. Yes, I'm Wolfgang Kies." I pulled my head up and back, pressing it against the wall behind me. "Next?"

"You work for Dr. Richard Raven, right?"

That question, combined with calling me a hostage earlier, started alarm bells going off in my head. I knew Etienne LaPlante, a Seattle kingpin, had a standing reward for delivering Raven's head in a sack. I didn't think these kids were setting a trap for Raven with me as bait, but anything was possible in the Sprawl. As desperation finds plenty of prey

in the Barrens, that might be exactly what was happening.

"Yeah, I work for Raven."

Immediately Kyrie's expression brightened. Albion remained

stonefaced, but tipped the pistol up toward the ceiling. Some of my anxiety drained off as the pistol ceased its violation of my personal space, but I knew lots more was going on than I could read.

Two more kids entered the room, and the second I laid eyes on the smallest of them, how I got involved in this mess came flooding back with a clarity that caused me to blush. I'd just come out of Kell's over between 1st and 2nd, down by the Market. I'd been drinking a bit, but not too much because I was more interested in watching the Seadogs in their fight for the pennant than I was in getting drunk. Jimmy Mackelroy salted the game away with a three-run homer in the 9th, so I left and headed out toward Stewart to get my Fenris.

I should have known better, but in the alley between Kell's and the Gravity Bar I heard someone crying. I pulled my Beretta Viper-14 and thumbed the safety off, then glanced around the corner of the alley. Aside from two rats perched on the rim of a dumpster and the usual accumulation of trash, I saw nothing out of the ordinary except a tiny humanoid form.

Its head came up, and I saw the most cherubic little face I'd ever laid eyes on. Because of the multiple layers of clothing swathing the child, I couldn't tell if it was a boy or girl. It took one bold step toward me with its left foot, then hesitated and let its right leg drag shyly in behind the left. With the length of cuff overhanging its right hand, the child swiped at the tears on its grimy face, then smiled at me.

"Ah you Wolfgang Kies?" it asked in an innocent, mush-mouth voice.

I slipped my Viper back into the shoulder holster I wore beneath my leather jacket. "Yes." I stepped into the alley and approached the child.

"And do you wook for Docto Waven?" it followed up in a voice rising with expectation.

I dropped to one knee and held out my left hand. "Yes. Are you lost?"

It smiled as agelessly as a Buddha. "No." It held its hands out to me. As it did so, an aerosol neurotoxin mist sprayed out from its left sleeve, while the little figure clapped its right sleeve over its own nose and mouth.

The spray stung my eyes, but before I could even think of running, I'd pulled enough in through my open mouth to drop me on my tail. I coughed weakly, then lay back. As consciousness drained from me, I remember praying one thing over and over: "Please, God, if I have to die, don't let Stealth find out how I got it."

The little boy disengaged his hand from that of the fourth member of the youth assembly and approached the head of the bed. "Ah you okay?"

The hurt and fear in his quiet voice prompted an instant smile of reassurance on my part. "I'm fine."

The albino looked over at the other girl in the room. "Sine, get Cooper away from him. You're supposed to be watching out front."

The blond flipped her long hair back from her shoulder with a contemptuous toss of her head. "Get real, chummer. These are the Barrens. There's nothing out there, and no one will find us here. No one but that damned preacherman." Still, despite her defiance, she held her hand out to the little boy, and Cooper took it. His other hand came up to his face, and his thumb disappeared within his mouth.

"Okay, chummers, what's the action?" I put a nasty face on and centered my attention on Kyrie. "You tagged me good, and you've got me here. You want something, that's obvious, or I'd have woken up dead. Slot and run—I've got places to go and people to see."

"You're going nowhere, Kies." Albion began to get antsy with the gun again. "We want Raven to do a job for us."

I shook my head. "Is that all? A job? Fine, let me call him."

"Nope." Albion dropped the gun down toward me and sighted a pink eye down the barrel. "He won't do it on your say-so. He's legal—he's got a System Identification Number. We question authority and



don't trust anyone with a SIN. The only way Raven will work for us is if your life is on the line."

"That six-shooter has more bullets than you have brain cells." I looked at Kyrie. "You're an Elf, you could have gotten word to Raven through the Tir, and he'd have helped. You must have thought of that."

"Overruled," snarled Albion.

I felt my anger rising, and along with it came the howl of a wolf in the back of my mind. "Overruled, Albion, because that was a bad idea or because you couldn't control the situation then?"

"Overruled because we don't trust anyone legal." He opened his arms wide. "We're a family. We do for each other and can trust each other because we're all alike. You get a SIN, and all sorts of laws start kicking in. Folks get worried about covering themselves in legalities. Not us. We just want to be left alone, and that's what we want Raven to ensure."

"Okay, if that's what you want." I snorted a little laugh. "I think you're making a mistake, however. I think Doc would prefer working with folks who accepted his help openly, not coerced it."

"My rules, remember?"

"You might want to reconsider." I pulled my hands from beneath the blanket and shook the frayed hawser from them. "I think he'd frown on having me tied up." Looking past Kyrie and Sine, I smiled. "Isn't that true, Doc?"

The kids spun toward the doorway faster than a pedestrian hit by a Porsche Mako going full open. Albion's jaw hit the floor, followed a second later by his pistol. Kyrie leaned back against the bed's frame. Sine sat down hard in the chair with my jacket on it, while Cooper just stared wide-eyed and continued to suck his thumb.

Doctor Richard Raven more than filled the doorway. Tall, even for an Elf, his head rose at least 15 centimeters above the top of the door. His broad shoulders tapered down into a narrow waist, slender hips and powerful legs in a build more typical of humans than Elves. His coppery skin, high cheekbones and long, black hair bespoke an American Indian heritage, though his white shirt and khaki canvas slacks were the latest in corporate casual.

Somehow, though, his size and mixed Amerind/Elven racial characteristics were not what surprised them. His eyes held their attention. Red and blue ribbons of color wove through their black depths in an aurora-like display. Half-terrifying and 100% fascinating, his gaze swept over them, then he nodded solemnly.

"I thank you for finding and taking care of my friend. When the emergency locator beacon built into his belt buckle was activated, I became understandably concerned."

I kicked the blanket off and brushed the remnants of the rope from the sharpened edge of the buckle. "Did that thing get activated again?" I shrugged. "Just as well, I suppose, Doc, because these kids want to hire you to do a job for them."

Raven smiled easily as I crawled out of bed and slipped my holster back on. He looked over at Albion. "How is it that I can repay your kindness to Wolf?"

Albion swallowed hard, bringing a little joy to my heart. "You know Reverend Dr. Lawrence Roberts?"

I tugged my jacket from beneath Sine and recalled her earlier remark. "The television preacher?"

Albion nodded. "The same." He looked around, silently polling Kyrie and Sine. They gave him nods. "We want you to kill him."

II

As I headed my Fenris sports coupe out from the garage beneath Raven's headquarters, I found myself silently agreeing with Kyrie's final comment about Rev. Roberts—it didn't make any sense. What the kids had told us defied logic in the way only insanity or divine inspiration can possibly manage. Had control of my life suddenly been threatened that abruptly and radically, I'd have wanted the man dead, too.

Reverend Lawrence Roberts, doctor of divinity by some ROM-staffed diploma mill, had decided to make that band of kids his own little project. He wanted to redeem their lives. Not only did he intend

to baptize them into his particular sect of Christianity, but he wanted to get them System Identification Numbers and bring them back into the mainstream of society. He wanted to create in them an example of a way Christians could fight back against Satan's rule on the earth.

Raven had Tom Electric run a sample of one of Roberts' services by me. It was part of a simsense tape package that Roberts' ministry offered. I got version 20M because I was a male in my 20s. Because simsense records and feeds back the emotions of the person observing the service, matching me with the appropriate tape was vital for me to get the full impact of the good doctor's presentation. As the static wall thinned and evaporated, the tape played for me and the Old One growled in disgust.

The preacher oozed charisma from the top of his thin, blond hair to the Italian leather loafers on his feet. Clutching a battered Bible, he looked out from his lectern like a prisoner about to confess before a jury. One amid thousands, I felt my heart begin to pound with anticipation.

"Yes, my friends, the things you have heard about me are true." He started in low embarrassed tones, but I sensed he was in control of the whole situation at all times. "Fifteen years ago I was nothing but a con man, and one of the most vile stripe. My partner and I used to read the newsfax to see who had died, then we'd print up a customized edition of a Bible. It would be inscribed from the deceased to whoever his survivor happened to be." He showed us his well-used book. "This was the last of the Bibles we ever created.

"We knew no shame. We'd go to the bereaved and asked for the deceased. When we were informed of the death, we'd get embarrassed and eventually confess that the deceased had special ordered the Bible. He had paid only ¥20 of the ¥100 it cost, and had gotten it specially for whoever the person was to whom we were speaking. We said we were sorry for bothering them in their grief and turned to leave."

Roberts' eyes flashed down at the ground as a blush rose to his cheeks. He stared at one of the many carnation bouquets surrounding him. "Of course, the bereaved would stop us and give us the ¥80 remaining on the book. We would then hand it over, having earned an easy ¥75 profit. It was an easy life, for anyone would pay gladly for that last piece of their departed loved one, and we talked ourselves into believing that we were really offering them another chance to say goodbye—manufacturing memories the people so dearly hungered after."

Roberts brought his head up, and steel entered his spine. I knew, aided by the digitized emotional feed coursing in through the 'trodes, that Roberts had somehow been motivated away from this evil path. He smiled and confirmed my belief.

"Then, one night, my partner and I were heading out for what would be our last attempt. God and the Devil came to us, and each showed us a vision of what we would reap in the afterlife. My partner held his hand out to the Devil and was taken to hell right then and there. I looked upon the face of God and chose the path of light. Praise Jesus, I was saved!"

Thunderous applause washed over me, and I found myself mouthing the word "Alleluia!" I pulled the 'trodenet off in disgust and let the Old One's growl rumble from my throat. Raven looked over at me and smiled. "What do you think, Wolf?"

I patted my Beretta Viper. "I've got a love offering for the good reverend, right here."

Raven decided that might be a bit extreme as our first effort at contact. He gave me the address for Roberts' ministry headquarters. I changed into a corduroy suit jacket, button-down shirt and tie before I headed out, deferring to Raven's sense of decorum, not mine. The tie and jacket hid my silver wolf's-head pendant and my Beretta, but I didn't so much mind that. When entering the lion's den, it's best to dress like a lion.

III

Roberts' personal secretary was pretty enough that I would have considered converting were she willing to do some missionary work with me. She flashed me a smile as I came up the stairs to the third floor foyer, but she kept getting distracted by the big goomer seated on the edge of her desk. He was clearly intent on ministering to her, but she looked like she wanted him exorcised faster than you could say "amen."

I cleared my throat and quickscanned her nameplate. "Evening, Miss Crandall. I'm Wolfgang Kies. I called ahead for an appointment with Dr. Roberts."

The big man moved off the desk as she positively glowed at me. "Yes, Mr. Kies, 6:45 and you're on time exactly." Her smile carried right on up into her blue eyes and clearly irked the man.

"Do I get points for punctuality?"

"With me you do, Mr. Kies." She looked up at the man. "Brother Boniface will take you to Dr. Roberts."

Boniface looked like an ape that had been dipped in Nair, or a troll that had been cold hammered into a smaller shape. Either way he did not look happy to be in a suit or being sent on a mission that would take him away from the charming Miss Crandall. As a result of his discomfort, somewhere inside his tiny skull one electron collided with another, and all of a sudden he had a thought. It was too much for him to contain, and he made his move to frisk me.

The Viper's barrel made a thunk sound as I drew it in one smooth motion and poked a Mark of Cain in the center of Brother Boniface's forehead. He retreated a step and raised both hands to cover the bruise. "Ask, and ye shall receive, Boniface. Presume, and I'll make a martyr out of you."

I let the gun slip forward and hang from my index finger by the trigger guard. Boniface made a grab for it, but I ducked it beneath his hand and slid it onto Miss Crandall's desk. "Keep it warm for me."

"My pleasure," she cooed. The gun slipped from sight beneath the level of her desk.

Boniface slunk forward and led me down a short hallway to Roberts' office. He only opened one of the two oak doors, but it was double-wide anyway and provided a stunning panorama as I entered. I didn't feel slighted only getting a single-door treatment because I got the distinct impression even if Jesus returned for an encore he wouldn't get a two-door salute.

The very first thing I noticed in the room was the expensive wooden paneling on the walls, and the stunning number of leatherbound books in the bookshelves. Reverend Roberts had laid out significant nuyen to splash old world respectability in his office. The west wall was made entirely of glass, and the view it gave of the Sound impressed even the Old One. Shown a picture of this place and asked to choose whether it belonged to some highly placed corpgeek or a preacher constantly crying poormouth, I'd have been wrong even with two free guesses.

It took me about two seconds to scan the place and get the Old One's howl to vet my opinion. By that time, the unearthly scent of hundreds of carnations assaulted my nose. Save for the top of Boniface's head, every flat surface in the room boasted a vase jammed with carnations of various colors. I recalled the riot of flora surrounding the reverend on the tape, but 3-D reality was another order of magnitude above the pictures.

The gaudiest of the carnations resided in the buttonhole of Roberts' lapel. Standing behind his desk, the preacher nodded to me and extended his hand. "Welcome, Mr. Kies."

I accepted his hand and found his grip disturbingly firm. I normally judge a man by how he shakes hands, but Roberts' grip felt too right and practiced. The difference might have been subtle, and I could have put it down to my general dislike of him, but I got the feeling he was playing at being a regular guy.

"I thank you for agreeing to see me on such short notice." I dropped myself into the chair in front of his desk. Boniface drifted over to stand right behind me, but I chose to ignore him. "I apologize for any inconvenience this might be for a man with your busy schedule."

Roberts nodded and gave me a reassuring smile. "How could I refuse to see you when the message said you were interested in the children in the Barrens?"

His smile grew, and his hands spread wide apart. "Of course, I have heard of your Dr. Raven. While I have never had cause to use the services of an individual in your trade, what I have heard about Dr. Raven has been very encouraging. The respect in which he is held by some of the lower classes will help ease concerns about possible sinister motives on my

part. I must admit, however, I had not expected Raven to join forces with me in this matter."

I leaned back in the padded, leather chair. "I hate to burst

your bubble, Reverend Roberts, but I am not here to offer Raven's help concerning the children. We want you to leave them alone."

His head came up and a bit of light reflected from his scalp despite the thinly sown rows of blond hair transplants. "Leave them alone? How can I do that, Mr. Kies?" His wounded tone began to parallel the tape's parable preamble, but I could do nothing to deflect him. "Those children need help. They need good food and schooling and direction. They cannot be allowed to waste away in the dungheap of society. We must take them into our fold to encourage others to do the same."

"Dr. Raven agrees with you, Reverend." I held a hand up, sending a quiver through Boniface. "He's already running full background checks on all the children in that house, using resources you don't command. He will find out who they really are and will get them help. We can get them protection in the Barrens, and we can ensure they will have the aid necessary for them to rise above their beginnings."

"Can you, Mr. Kies? Can you expect me to back off when what you suggest is making them fit fish for that small pond, whereas I will take them away from the Barrens and make them productive members of society?"

I didn't like the reproving tone of his question. "The people of the Barrens are capable of taking care of themselves. Betty Beggings and others work to form metafamily groups and give people a solid base from which to operate."

Roberts smiled like a shark. "But they do not have the resources at my command." He stood and indicated the opulence in his office. "They can command tribute from others in the Barrens, dividing and subdividing a very small pie into yet tinier morsels. I, on the other hand, solicit money from the rich and well-to-do in this society. I get in single contributions more nuyen than Betty Beggings and all her ilk see in a lifetime. I can do for these children what no one else can do."

"But you do it at the cost of their freedom. They do not want your help."

Roberts batted my objection aside contemptuously. "They are without proper documentation. They do not know what they want. The law says they must have custodianship, and I have chosen to be their benefactor. In following my example, other members of my flock will adopt children from the Barrens, and we will rebuild this society."

My eyes slowly shifted from green to silver as my anger rose. "You will remake these children in your image?"

The good reverend ignored my question as he walked toward the wall of windows in his office. Standing with his back to me, the dying sun cut him into a silhouette outlined by a red corona. The shadow narrowed then expanded again as he turned to face me. "Do you believe in God, Mr. Kies?"

"I fail to see what that has to do with the matter at hand."

"I'm sure you do, and I will accept that as a 'no' for the sake of what I am about to say. You see, I *do* believe in God. I believe in a merciful and forgiving God, but a God who demands his people work for their salvation. Once upon a time I was like those children—wild, abandoned and angry at society. Then God gave me a choice: eternal damnation or life with him forever. For the first time I looked beyond my next meal and chose a course for my life."

The silhouette hung its head wearily. "My choice is not without its price. My God demands I do all I can to help lead others to him. The kingdom of Satan started its millennial domination of the Earth in 2011—the dragon was seen in Japan to herald this change. All this magic is merely Satan's will made manifest. It is my duty and my calling to do all I can to bring Satan's reign to an end, and I *will* do it."

The strength in his voice spoke to me of a fanatical devotion to what he saw as his divine calling, but somewhere, deep down, I felt



I was being conned. "I don't think we have anything more to discuss, Reverend Roberts." I started to rise from my chair, but two heavy hands jammed me back down into it.

"You don't go until Reverend Roberts says you can go."

Deep inside, in the lightless cavern in which the wolf spirit dwells within me, the Old One howled bloody murder. Insistently he demanded I let him have control. He promised to reshape me into an engine of primal fury. *I will show them justice and righteousness!*

I forced myself to be calm, but I let some of the Old One's anger enter my voice. "Larry, do you practice faith healing?"

Roberts stiffened at the tone of my words, then nodded. "I do."

"Good. Brother Boniface has three seconds to stop this laying-on of hands, or he'll need all the healing you can give him."

His hands tightened.

"Two."

Roberts waved Boniface back, and the pressure eased. The reverend returned to his desk and seated himself. "Brother Boniface can be overzealous, but that can be said of all my warriors for Christ." Though he smiled benignly, the implied threat was not lost on me.

I stood slowly and straightened my jacket as Boniface retreated and opened the door. "You may not believe this, Larry, but I actually do respect those who listen to the message from the Prince of Peace. I think, however, the words you're hearing are a bit garbled. Let me make this very clear: Leave those children alone."

Roberts smiled and laid his right hand on the Bible I'd seen him thump in the tape. "I understand your words, Mr. Kies, but I cannot be deflected from my course. On this very Bible I swore I would help them. I cannot go back on my word."

I snatched the Bible from beneath his hand and saw him blanch as I started to flick the pages open. I saw that the liner sheet backing the cover had popped free. Amid the glue stains I could see a curious collection of strange symbols, but they were as much gibberish as the Greek passages on the facing pages of the book. The flyleaf had been inscribed, "To my darling Tina, I will love you for eternity. Andrew Cole."

He made a grab for it, but I held it back, frustrating his effort. My stare met his, and he flinched. "Consider this a reading from the Second Book of Revelations: 'And the Wolf saith unto the preacherman, if you want apocalypse, stay your course.'"

I tossed the Bible onto the blotter and plucked a carnation from the vase on his desk. Stuffing it into the buttonhole on my jacket, I turned on my heel and left him scrambling to clutch the Bible to his chest. I headed straight to the door, but Boniface grabbed me and spun me around to face him before I could leave the office.

"This is not over between us." Though his back was to the window, the solar effect did nothing but make him a big-eared shadow. The threat in his voice made him into a big-eared shadow clown.

I nodded slowly and carefully, letting the Old One fill me with the strength and speed I'd need. "You have a point there, Boniface. What do say we take it outside?"

His smile widened his cheeks enough to nearly eclipse his ears. "Yeah, outside."

My hands shot up into his armpits and boosted him back toward the window before he could so much as yelp with surprise. The glass shattered in a halo fashion starting with the area around his head, then fragmented into a million pieces. The glittering glass shower rained down as Boniface disappeared from view. A second later a vase of carnations I'd pulled from a table near the door followed him to the street.

I wiped my hands off on the drapes. "Sorry about ruining the view. Good day."

Outside, after I'd shut the door behind me, I noticed Miss Crandall was having a hard time keeping a smile from her lips. She slid my gun across the desk to me.

"Much obliged."

Her blue eyes sparkled. "My pleasure, Mr. Kies. God be with you."

"Thank you, Miss Crandall, I'm sure one of them is."

IV

I got back into my Fenris and punched in the ignition code. The scream of an ambulance siren started the Old One howling triumphantly in my head. I pulled away from the curb and got off the road before the DocWagon™ careened around the corner, lights blazing. It headed for the alley into which Boniface had plunged while I started down 5th Ave.

The meeting with Roberts left me angry and not a little puzzled. I had hoped explaining to him that the kids didn't want his help, and reassuring him that they would be taken care of, would be enough to deflect him. Raven had dealt with other "do-gooders" in that manner, and they were content to let shadowfolk take care of their own.

I'd believed I could accomplish my mission until Roberts asked the stopper question: "Do you believe in God?" I'd known other preachers and found them all quite capable of rational thought and the logical analysis of a problem. Like Roberts, however, when a discussion took them into a realm where they had no expertise or facts to bolster their argument, they resorted to the divine shield. For them, and for him, the ultimate refuge boils down to this: "We might not understand it, but it is part of God's plan, and we must do what we can to empower it or Satan will win."

I was willing to grant Roberts his supposition that Satan had taken over the Earth in 2011, when magic made its return to the world. At the risk of being seen as a heretic, I also acknowledged that the reemergence of magic in the world had done virtually nothing to change the lot in life for most folks. Yes, the few lucky ones who could wield magic were able to turn that talent into a career, but it did nothing for the magic-blind in the world. Giant corps still controlled the economy, and most of them controlled cadres of magickers as well.

I recognized my mental discussion was doing several undesirable things. First, I had half a mind to turn around and defoliate Roberts' boutonniere with 9mm weedkiller. I realized that particular half of my mind had been taken over by the Old One, so I tucked the Homicide Hound back into his little box. I also saw that I was heading south toward the Barrens, and I knew I'd not feel good unless I could ensure that the kids were safe. While Roberts seemed very earnest and directed in his Christianity, the theatrical bits layered on top of it still made me uneasy.

More than any of that, though, it dawned on me that I was hungry. I scanned the street and slid the Fenris into a parking place just up the block from a Dominion pizza joint. Even with an armed escort they'd never consider delivering to the Barrens, so I went in and ordered five pizzas, including two vegetarian specials just in case Kyrie was not a carnivore.

While waiting for my order, I decided to call the office. I got change for a nuyen from the clerk and pumped it into a pay phone. Valerie Valkyrie, our computer specialist, answered and got Raven for me immediately.

"How did it go, Wolf?"

"I discovered Roberts' bodyguard can't fly." I grimaced and chewed on my lower lip for a second. "Roberts appreciates our concern, but he says he's made the kids into a centerpiece for a drive to encourage his flock in helping the disadvantaged. He sounds sincere, but something deep down inside me doesn't like him, and I agree."

Raven asked some pointed questions, and I reported the meeting back to him as completely as I could. He sounded most interested in the Bible, its inscription and the sigils, but my momentary glance at them meant the information I gave him was fairly useless. I promised I'd try to duplicate the symbols for him when I returned to headquarters and told him I was taking some food to the kids.

"Good idea, Wolf. Valerie has turned up some interesting information on Roberts, but we've yet to find anything truly sinister. I'll have her working on this Tina and Andrew Cole. Maybe we'll have something when you get back here."

"Good. I'll be back early, I think."

I hung up and discovered, to my surprise, that my order was ready. I took the pizzas out to the Fenris and belted the stack of boxes into the passenger seat. As I got the car on the road, my

stomach growled more fiercely than the Old One had ever managed.

Kid Stealth would have questioned the wisdom of bringing my Fenris within a nautical mile of the Barrens, but then he feels like he's travelling in a kiddie car if the vehicle isn't armored and doesn't have a .50-caliber machinegun mounted in a turret on top. I parked right in front of the crib that had been my temporary home and set the antitheft system on "maim." With a stack of pizzas precariously balanced on my left hand, I knocked on the door of the ramshackle townhouse.

Kyrie answered the door and didn't recognize me by what little of my face looked at her over the top box. "You've got the wrong place. We didn't order any pizza."

I lowered the boxes and smiled at her. "Not to worry, this is Dominion's new service. We drop pizza off, and you pay for what you eat. You're a test market."

She laughed lightly, and I saw true happiness in her face for the first time. "Smile like that more often, Kyrie, and I think you could convince Dominion this service is more than worth it."

Her dark eyes glowed with a more mischievous light. "I'm sure Dominion would just love to give me an endorsement contract. We eat pizza fairly often, and it's usually theirs." She stepped back away from the door. "C'mon in before the neighborhood catches a whiff of that stuff."

Albion met us halfway to the kitchen, and I dealt him a box off the top. Sine splashed a bucket of water over a soapy collection of plates and glasses in the sink, then wiped her hands off and took a box from me. With one broad swipe with the box she cleared some old paper plates and styrofoam burger cartons from the table onto the floor. When that earned her a reproving glare from Kyrie, her next pass was less swift and more silent.

Cooper came clumping up the steps from the basement and shut the door behind himself. He looked at me and smiled. I presented him a box with all the ceremony of Seattle's governor bestowing a citizenship medal on someone, and his smile broadened to show me all of his teeth. He scrambled up on a stool beside Sine and pried his box open.

I handed Kyrie the next to last box, leaving one for me. "Help yourself. Raven doesn't often cater his jobs, but when he does, the food is good."

She smiled and looked down timidly. She started to say something, but Cooper's surprised shout cut her off. "This isn't pizza!"

"Sure it is, Cooper. I just got it myself from Dominion. Eat it and you'll grow up to be big and strong like Jimmy Mackelroy."

The little guy shook his head adamantly and jammed tiny fists against his hips. "Nope, it's not pizza. It doesn't have pizza stuff on it." He glared at me, his lower lip thrust out defiantly.

I frowned and looked to Kyrie. "Pizza stuff?"

She blushed. "You don't want to know. We do most of our food shopping in dumpsters." She set her pizza down on the kitchen shelf and squatted beside Cooper. "Listen, Coop, this is special pizza, that's why it doesn't have pizza stuff on it. You don't have to scrape it off, see?"

Cooper's eyes flashed warily. "Special?"

Kyrie nodded emphatically. "It's birthday pizza. Today is Wolf's birthday, and he's sharing his birthday pizza with us."

Electric excitement lit Cooper's face with neon intensity. "Weally? It's yuwa biwfday?"

I tossed him a wink. "You bet—that's why I have this flower on. Now eat your pizza so I'll have a good birthday, okay?"

"Kay."

Kyrie walked back over to me and hugged her arms around herself. "A carnation. You went to see Roberts, didn't you?"

"Sure did." I started to reach for some pizza, but the worry in her voice cut my hunger. "I tried to explain to him that you wanted to be left alone, but I don't think he got the message. Still, his bodyguard will be recovering from a test of faith, so we might have bought some time. Don't worry, you'll be fine."

I wanted to reach out and take her in my arms just to reassure her, but she held herself back and I instantly knew why. Her welcoming a hug would have showed weakness, and that she could not allow.

Albion styled himself the leader of the little band, and probably did motivate them to get lots of things done, but Kyrie certainly held the group together on a daily

basis. If she gave him any opening, he would lead the group to ruin because of his bitterness and anger.

Cooper hopped down off his stool and came over to take her hand. "Don't wowwy, Kywie. Mista Wolf and Hawse will protect us. I pwomise." As if that affirmation had set all right with the world, he smiled and returned to smearing more pizza sauce over his face.

In a quiet voice I asked, "Hawse?"

Kyrie licked her lips. "When we scavenge, we sometimes have to leave Cooper here all by himself. Harse is his imaginary friend. He says Harse is guarding the house, and it helps keep Cooper calm, so we don't discourage him. Everybody has imaginary friends when they're young. He'll outgrow it."

"Or write simsense scripts about it and get rich. Listen, Raven wants me back at headquarters so we can figure out what we're doing next. I'll take a look around the area just to make sure nothing strange is going down, then I'll take off." I folded one piece of pizza over on another and saluted the assembly with it. "Thanks for sharing my birthday pizza, gang. See you later."

The second I stepped from the slice of multiplex that housed the kids, I felt something was wrong. The Old One kept a growl simmering in the back of my mind, and the hackles rose on my neck. The Barrens is, even at the best of times, a lawless warground that makes all but the irredeemably insane feel insecure. This time, however, it felt malevolent.

I bit off some pizza and chewed as I started a circuit around the block. I reached inside and demanded the Old One lend me his heightened senses. He did so, but the garlic in the pizza quickly erased any advantage the Old One's olfactory abilities might have given me. Still his increased nightvision did help me pierce shadows, and his hearing made audible everything from rats scrambling inside walls to lies whispered passionately in one of the upper floor apartments across the street.

I definitely heard something out of the ordinary. It started with the slushy, muffled sucking sound that a boot would make when slowly drawn out of mud. Along with that came the crunch of beer-bottle glass being ground against stones and a metallic clinking like links of a chain striking a post. And yet, as clearly as I heard what I have described, I heard much more as those sounds played in concert with others.

Above and beyond that I knew two other things. Had I tried to point those sounds out to anyone without hypersenses, they would have thought me crazy. The sound had no rhythm or repetition and thereby it avoided classification. It could have been a figment of my imagination, but given my other realization, I was uncomfortable in dismissing it as such.

It was stalking me.

That's not a conclusion I drew without benefit of experience. I've been stalked by some of the best. Two of the Elven High Lord's Paladins came after me during the Full Moon Slashings. Back before he became one of us, Kid Stealth had done his best to put my head on his trophy wall. Each and every time the uneasy feeling I get coiling in my guts tells me I'm one rung down on someone's idea of the food chain, and I don't like it.

I swallowed, and the pizza spiraled into the knot that had once been my stomach.

I turned toward the place where the sound was coming from, but I saw nothing huddled in the piles of debris between two buildings. I tossed the pizza away and drew my Viper. I hunkered down behind the burned-out hulk of a Miata II GS and suddenly found an acrid, bitter odor dissolving the garlic and carnation scents from my nose. Whoever or whatever was coming after me had bizarre ideas about personal hygiene.



Waiting behind cover irritated the Old One no end. *Do not slink here like a coward, Longtooth. Let me help you. I will destroy this thing that hunts us. Leave it to me.*

I shook my head. Though the scent had grown strong enough to be completely distracting, I concentrated beyond it. I heard a different sound: running feet. They were approaching from my back. I whirled and jammed my Viper toward the car's rear bumper.

Cooper stopped short and looked at me with eyes full of innocent hurt. "Mista Wolf?"

I swallowed hard. "Cooper! What are you doing out here?"

His smile cracked caked tomato sauce at the corners of his mouth. He extended a newspaper-wrapped bundle bound with string. "Biwfday pwesent."

Somehow, as if his words were a magic spell, the sensation of being hunted vanished. I slid the Viper back into the shoulder holster and accepted the little, pencil-thin package. I carefully tugged the string off it. "Did you wrap this yourself?"

He nodded proudly.

"You did a good job, Cooper. Why, what is this?"

As I peeled the paper away, I knew exactly what his gift was. The slender, boxy stick was a credstik. They came in one of two flavors. A personal or account credstik has a microchip in it that can be encoded to take care of credits and debits—as convenient as cash and no problem with arguing if a corp's scrip is good this month or not.

The second type, of which this was one, is a bearer stick. It has a set amount of credit burned into the chip. When that is transferred into a computer banking account or into a person's credstik, the chip melts. Some corps mass produce them for petty funds expenses, but those sticks are generally of low credit value. The chief benefit of the bearer stick is that it can be used to transfer large amounts of funds without their being immediately traceable. Bearer sticks are small, unmarked bills in a much handier package.

The bearer stick Cooper had given me had been broken in half. The break, which rendered it useless, was jagged, so I assumed it was an accident. I fingered both halves, but couldn't make heads or tails of the coloring scheme on them. I looked up to see an expectant expression on Cooper's face. "Thank you very much, Cooper."

His voice sank into a whisper. "The othews look to the longa ones, so I decided to give you two of the small ones." He clapped his hands. "You and Hawse will keep us safe."

I tousled his blond hair. "You got that right. Harse will have to watch you right now, because I've got to go talk to Raven. Thanks again for the present."

The little boy beamed, then turned and ran off into the shadows. I noticed he headed straight for the area from which I had earlier heard the sounds, but he disappeared before I could warn him away. Using the Old One's ears, I heard him giggle happily, and I envisioned more pizza leftovers peeling off his face.

Hopping into my Fenris, I made a quick circuit of the area, then left the Barrens to ward their own.

V

The scowl on Valerie's face meant only one of two things. Either the Seadogs were losing, or she'd not been very successful in getting data out concerning the Right Reverend Roberts. "What's the score?"

She shrugged. "Roberts 1, me zippo." Her frown darkened her cafe-au-lait skin, but only intensified the azure fire in her eyes.

Raven came down the stairs and gave Valerie an encouraging smile. "I'd not say that, Val. You've pulled plenty of data on all the Andrew Coles who've ever lived in Seattle." He tapped the hardcopy report in his hands. "This stuff on the kids is very complete. You've also given us a rundown on Roberts' empire. As soon as your other ferret programs report back, you'll have everything you set out to get."

Val's blue eyes narrowed. "I know, but something is wrong with that report on Roberts. I know it's been tampered with."

"Mycroft?" I asked, naming the only other computer expert I knew of.

Valerie wrinkled her pretty nose. "No, if it were Mycroft I'd have to be in and dissecting it with a scalpel. This file's forcing me to use a chainsaw. If I had to guess, I'd say it's got a government mask running over a transcription program."

Raven's head came up. "Assuming you're right, how tough would it be for Roberts to find out the government is tapping his accounts to keep track of him?"

"Not that hard." Val half-closed her eyes as she concentrated. "Jack could spot it, and maybe the Glass Tarantula. Maybe a half-dozen other deckers in Sea-Tac, but his network goes all over. He could have deckers from New York or Dallas checking his stuff."

Doc nodded thoughtfully. "Wolf, did you learn anything from the children when you went out there?"

I seated myself on the edge of a chair. "No, not really. Most of the food they eat is scavenged, but I think I knew that all along anyway." I plucked the carnation from my lapel and tossed it into the trash. "Wait, I did get something."

I reached into my pocket and pulled out both halves of the broken credstik. "Cooper gave this to me as a birthday present."

Raven took the two halves and fitted them together. Wetting the tip of his finger with his tongue, he washed away some of the mud and got a clear look at the colored markings on it. He stared at it for a second, then turned to Val. "Cross-correlate Cole, Andrew with Kensington Industries." He studied the stick for another second. "Backdate the search from 15 years ago to 2005. When you get a match, give me resident data for the house the kids are squatting in for the month on either side of Cole's death date. I'll also need a full file on the house's resident at that time, starting with Lone Star data."

I managed to pick my jaw up off the ground by the time Raven looked back at me. "What are you looking for?"

"I scanned the Cole data earlier, and I seem to recall an Andrew Cole working for Kensington Industries. The color coding on this credstik is the type they used for a period between 2005 and 2035, before their merger with Muriata."

I nodded. "Didn't Kensington get into money trouble, so Muriata came in like a white knight before Beatrice-Revlon could snap them up?"

Raven smiled. "Wolf, I'm surprised at your knowledge of Seattle's financial history."

I said nothing. I wasn't going to tell him it had been the subject of a miniseries docudrama infocast I'd once seen.

"Home run, Doc!" Valerie's enthusiastic shout saved me from any chance of Raven testing my command of mergers and acquisitions among megacorps. "Cole, Andrew, married to Tina, died 14 March 2034. He worked in their accounting and disbursement division and was under suspicion of having embezzled 500,000 nuyen in bearer credstiks. Tina died just last year, but Kensington gave her a clean bill because she never spent a dime that couldn't be accounted for by her income. Insurance paid Kensington/Muriata off after her death."

"And the resident of the house where the kids are?"

"Thomas Harrison lived there from June of 2033 to March of 2034. The house was reported abandoned after some food riots in the area. Officials list it as ASC-1, but no one has filed a claim on it, so it technically remains in the hands of the city. Harrison himself was a small-time hood and con man." She spun in her chair. "He has a list of bunko arrests longer than Mackelroy's hit streak!"

I blinked twice. "Wanna bet Harrison was the unnamed partner the good reverend claims the devil took away?"

Raven nodded. "They went to work the Bible scam on Tina Cole after her husband died. She doesn't buy into it, but confesses to these two obviously godly men that her husband has been stealing from his corporation."

"Yeah, Doc, yeah. She's afraid for his soul, so they offer to return the credstiks to Kensington anonymously. That way her husband gets eternal salvation, and his terrestrial reputation doesn't take any hits either. Harrison and Roberts have 500,000 nuyen in credits to split, and Harrison skips with them?"

Raven shook his head. "I doubt it. Harrison would have gone through 500,000 in 16 years. Given Roberts' success in that time, I would have to assume Harrison would return to blackmail his former partner. I am certain Harrison is dead and that Roberts killed him in a rage after Harrison said he'd hidden the loot."

"I don't follow."

Raven folded his arms. "The Bible Roberts has and uses is left over from the scam they tried to work on Tina Cole. I suspect Harrison hid clues to the location of the credstiks in the Bible. The symbols you saw on the cover liner are undoubtedly a code that leads to the credstiks. The glue finally gave way, exposing the secret, and Roberts has deciphered it."

I frowned heavily. "I've been to his office. What's 500,000 nuyen going to be to this guy?"

"Curve ball, wait, two curves," Val announced as her computer beeped at her. "To answer your first question, Wolf, ¥500,000 is the cost of getting out of Seattle and living comfortably. The government has a lock on all of Roberts' accounts pending an investigation of fraud on his proposed Jesusville Amusement Park and Devotion Center."

"What else?"

"Second curve. Roberts has filed to take possession of the house under an ASC-1 action. He has had some judge give him custodianship of the kids in a phantom hearing, so he's got the Abandoned/Squatter Claim filed in their names. Lone Star is supposed to be heading out there to help him serve the papers right now."

Raven tucked the credstik pieces into his pocket. "Val, file an ASC-1 counterclaim on the property." He tore a sheet from the hardcopy file he'd been reading. "Use this name if the computer will take it; otherwise file it in my name, and we'll fight it out later. Wolf, let's move."

The Fenris left two blackened patches on the floor of the garage and part of one on every curve we took as we headed toward the house. I didn't just break speed laws, I smashed them to up-quarks. We surprised the hell out of some Ancients as I took a shortcut through part of their turf, but the Elven bikers abandoned the chase when they realized by my driving that I wasn't in the mood for games.

Standing on the brakes, I swung the Fenris wide around the last corner and brought it smack up against the curb just at the edge of the streetlight's circle of illumination in front of the house. Further up along the street I saw a Lone Star car with the driver's door open and light strobing. Beyond that Reverend Roberts stood in the shelter of his limo.

The Lone Star cop looked over at us as we exited my car with our hands up. "Just get back into your car, Wolf, and leave. We have enough trouble without you here."

"Not much for gratitude, are you, Harry Braxen?" I let my hands drop slowly and closed my door with a hip-check. "Doctor Raven is helping these kids, so just chill."

The Ork Lone Star cop scowled. "Raven, I can run you in as easily as I can the kids. Roberts owns this place free and clear, and he's their guardian." He raised his voice for the benefit of the kids inside as well. "If they don't come out, I'm going to splash the loudmouth with the gun, then bring them out in handcuffs."

Raven raised a hand to hold the children back and another to calm Braxen. "Officer Braxen, no violence is necessary here. I believe, if you'll check your onboard computer, you will find the reverend's claim to this property is in dispute."

That bit of information brought a sharp yelp from Reverend Roberts. "Get thee behind me, Satan!" He marched forcefully forward, brandishing his Bible like a sword. He came to confront Raven, but still kept the Lone Star cruiser between himself and Doc. "You are meddling in good work being performed in the name of God."

Raven's head came up and a sardonic smile twisted his lips. "I was unaware 'God' was a synonym for 'greed,' Lawrence Roberts. I'm certain Tina Cole would be shocked at how you betrayed her trust."

In the half-second Roberts' terrified gaze swept from Raven's eyes to mine, I knew everything Raven had pieced together about him was true.

He started to stammer a denial, but an unearthly roar cut him off. Cooper came running through the front door, and Braxen hunkered down behind his door with his gun drawn.



Surging up and forward through the front yard I saw the thing I had heard and smelled before. More formless than humanoid, it writhed forward like an amoeboid centaur. A vast skirt of mud and gravel and debris swirled around to form a conical base that supported a lumpish torso with multiple arms. At the top of the torso I saw a shape that could have been described as a head, and when some of the slime dripped down I knew I saw bone.

The Old One howled out a challenge that had my skull bursting. I drew my Viper and snapped a round into the chamber, but couldn't see any spot to shoot on the thing that might hurt it. Cooper looked over at me with horror on his face and shouted, "Wolf, no!" He glanced at the creature and repeated the cry. "Hawse, no!"

The creature went straight for Roberts. Multiple bubbles burst from the area of its chest as if the creature tried to speak, but any sound it made was drowned out as Roberts held the Bible up and shouted something. The creature kept coming and, to my eye, picked up some speed. The good reverend tossed the book at the monster, missed high, then turned to run toward his limo. Harse shifted left, tracking accurately even though I couldn't see anything on it even approximating eyes.

Over the acrid burning stench of the creature, I caught a whiff of Roberts' flower and knew how Harse tracked him. It had to be orienting on the carnation. I'd been wearing one before, and it came after me until Cooper proclaimed me a friend. Now it went after Roberts.

I considered shouting a warning for a second or two, then dismissed the idea. Whatever would happen to him, Roberts had brought it on himself. It was time for the moneychanger to be cleared from the temple.

Roberts screamed incoherent prayers as the monster chased after him. He cut back and forth, trying to shake it, but had no success. Harse tracked Roberts like the best cyberbacker going after the bitcarrier in cyberball, closing with each turn Roberts took. The creature slid forward on a pool of mud and oily scum, cutting Roberts off from the limo.

His gun shaking like a china plate in an earthquake, Braxen looked over at me. I looked to Raven for guidance, but he just shook his head. He glanced at the children huddled around Cooper, then back at Roberts. Something in his eyes told me he wouldn't have stopped the creature if he could have.

Denied his escape, the reverend dropped to his knees. Screwing his eyestight shut, he clasped his hands together and prayed furiously. I don't remember the words he shouted exactly, mainly because they all sort of ran together, but they amounted to a confession of his sins and a promise to sin no more. Mind you, this is just a layman's opinion, but his catalog of sins was quite enough for several lifetimes.

He begged for God's absolution, and Harse made sure he was shriven.

The creature slammed into him like a dirt avalanche into a house. One second I could see Roberts, and the next he was covered in oozing muck. The reverend half-stumbled to his feet, literally knocked back by the monster, then fell again as his legs melted away. The creature's acidic touch peeled Roberts' flesh off and smoked his clothing away. He tried to scream, but could only vomit mud.

His body slumped face-first onto the ground, and Harse covered him with a cairn made of garbage. The tentacular arms dissolved into nothingness, and the molten mound stopped moving. A small dust devil danced up and away from the pile as if carrying off Harse's spirit.

Braxen slowly stood from behind his cruiser, and the kids left the safety of the front stoop. Cooper tried to dart forward, but Sine held him back. I took one last look at the barrow, shuddered, and put my pistol back in its holster. The Old One barked out one final challenge,

then retreated to his den.

Harry tipped his hat back. "What the hell was that?"

"Justice?" Raven, on one knee, examined the Bible Roberts had thrown. "This, along with Roberts' deathbed confession indicates that he murdered his partner, Thomas Harrison, for a fortune in bearer credstiks. Roberts buried Harrison in the basement here. Apparently the ghost remained quiescent until Roberts took an interest in this place. His hatred for his old partner was strong enough for him to fashion a new body out of debris found in his grave and elsewhere."

Cooper sniffed. "I used to bwing Hawse things."

I walked over to him and knelt down. "Don't be sad, Cooper. Harse—Harrison—protected you just the way you wanted him to. He's gone, but he's happy now. You want him to be happy, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Good." I stood slowly. "Well, Braxen, I think you can ignore the claim Roberts filed for this place."

The Ork frowned. "I'm afraid I can't, Kies. That claim is part of Roberts' estate."

Raven scooped the Bible up and tucked it under one arm. "Actually, officer, I think you'll find the counterclaim filed against the property is valid. After all, Kyrie has been living here for the requisite time to make a claim."

Kyrie stiffened.

Braxen shook his head. "Nice try, Raven, but she's SINless, so she can't own this place no matter how long she's lived here."

Raven turned and stared at Kyrie. "I did some checking, Salacia. You might have tried to run away from your family, but you are legal. The house is yours under the Squatting Statutes. Pay the back taxes on it, and you own it free and clear."

"Go for it, Kyrie," I smiled. "Harry, how much to claim this place?"

The Ork shrugged. "Ten grand, I think."

Kyrie's jaw dropped. "Where am I going to get 10,000 nuyen?"

Raven tossed her the Bible. "500,000 nuyen in bearer credstiks belonging to the Koshiyama Insurance Combine is hidden in a place indicated by the code on the cover liner. Standard recovery fee is 15%, which should buy you the house and plenty of the things Roberts would have offered you."

Sine picked Cooper up and hugged him, then he turned in her arms and gave Kyrie a kiss. "It's ah house now."

"Yes it is, Cooper—it's ours."

"Fine, take the house and everything," Albion snapped bitterly. "I'm outta here."

"What?" The hurt in Kyrie's eyes slashed through me like a monofilament whip.

"You've got a SIN. We don't trust anyone who's legal." He slapped Sine's shoulder with the back of his hand. "C'mon, Sine. She owns the house now, so we're leaving."

Sine shook her head. "I'll stay."

"Great. Hope the lot of you rot." He whirled around and ran into me.

"You and I need to talk in my office." I grabbed him by the back of his neck and force-marched him to the street. "Has the glue you use on your hair gone straight into your think-box or what?"

He stared at me sullenly when I released him. "She's legal. I don't trust anyone who's got a SIN."

"Think for a minute, will you?" I pointed back to where Kyrie and the others were studying the Bible's clue page. "She's had a SIN for the whole time you've known her, but she's pretended not to. Why do you think that is?"

"We'd kick her out if she told the truth."

"Listen to yourself. You know as well as I do that she could head out for the Tir and get help from the Elves down there. She doesn't need you, but you need her. Cooper and Sine need her. Kyrie hung in here because she didn't want the group to be torn apart."

He spat on the ground. "Good for her."

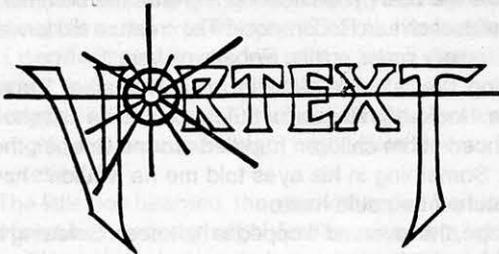
"They also need you. You provide the drive so things can get done."

Albion folded his arms across his skinny chest. "Great, fine, well, someone else can given them the kicks in the pants they need, not me. I'm outta here." He turned and walked away into the darkness.

I wandered back to the others. Kyrie looked up at me expectantly, but I just shook my head. "Sorry."

Cooper blinked his eyes as he turned to me. "Is Albion coming back?"

"I dunno, Cooper, I just don't know." I gave him a half-hearted smile. "Say your prayers and maybe he will." Ω



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