



SHADOWRUN[®]

ENHANCED FICTION



WOLF & BUFFALO

R.L. KING



JACKPOINT

CONNECTING TO JACKPOINT VPN...

...IDENTITY SPOOFED
...ENCRYPTION KEYS GENERATED
...CONNECTED TO ONION ROUTERS

>>>LOGIN: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

>>>ENTER PASSCODE: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

...BIOMETRIC SCAN CONFIRMED
YOU'RE IN. USE IT WELL.

• "REACH FOR THE STARS, BUT EXPECT TO GET BURNED." -ANON

JACKPOINT STATS

Interaction rate: -4%
Posts per hour: -1%
Today's content quality
(signal:noise): 1:2

LATEST NEWS

• "Spirituality is a salve for the weak and a tool for the powerful." —Karsten Prowley.

PERSONAL ALERTS

• You have 12 new private messages.
• Your internal Q score is 39 (up 5 points)
• You have 3 new responses to your JackPoint posts.
• You have 2 new friend requests; 4 friends have dropped you.
• Your Miracle Shooter™ subscription is about to expire. [Renew?](#)

THE INNER CIRCLE

You are visible to your closest 3 levels of contacts.
Your Eyes Only posts have been viewed 87 times
Current Time:
30 April 2077, 0151 hrs

WELCOME BACK TO JACKPOINT, OMAE:

Welcome back to JackPoint, chummer; your last connection was severed 2 days, 7 hours, 2 minutes

TODAY'S HEADS UP

• A good story is worth waiting a while to listen to. – Bull

INCOMING

• Let your friends do the heavy lifting, or at least dodge the incoming.

[Tag: [RiggerV](#)]

• The neo-anarchists aren't the only ones who gather in tribes.

[Tag: [Virtual Tribes](#)]

• Fog City has changed over the years. But still, look out for Saito.

[Tag: [City by Shadow: San Francisco](#)]

TOP NEWS ITEMS

• Ohio's Supreme Court has upheld the State's new vagrancy laws, which are intended to entice any remaining SINless population into the State's expanded public works program. Metahuman rights activists decry the ruling as those people enrolled in Ohio's program are provided with criminal SINS. [Link](#)

• Knight Errant continues to reel from the violence engulfing White Center. Police in riot gear were deployed to the area again this morning as looting orks have destroyed several local businesses. [Link](#)

• Wuxing representatives have requested assistance from local governments in locating the freight submarine Bountiful Voyage. The submarine failed to reach Manila's harbor yesterday and is feared lost. Wuxing has been unable to communicate or locate the submarine for the past 30 hours. [Link](#)



"They're late."

"Chill, bro. They'll be here."

"What if they ran into the Snipes? Or they're setting us up?"

"If they ran into the Snipes, then we're off the hook, yeah?"

The smaller of the two figures crouching in the shadows near the darkened van considered. "Hadh't thought of that."

The nighttime darkness buried the boxy silhouette of the van in the surrounding piles of debris and the hulks of rusted-out vehicles littering the large vacant lot. The two men who were taking every precaution not to be seen were even more hidden. Both stood in tense readiness, one with his finger curled around the trigger of an Ares Predator V inside the pocket of his armored jacket, the other with a Remington 950 pointed at the ground. Scanning the area constantly through low-light glasses, they struggled not to jump at the sound of every stray foraging devil rat.

The smaller figure spoke again, his voice young and nervous in the blackness.

"What if we just ran? We could get a head start if we left now. If we could get out of the NAN, get to Seattle, maybe—"

"Don't be stupid, Dylan." The other's voice was deeper, surer, but still not so many years away from his teens. "Even if we could get away, what about Mom? What about Lena? We're just fraggged. They've got us by the short ones, and they know it."

The smaller one sighed, kicking at the dusty ground. "I don't want to do this, Bryce. It's wrong. It makes me want to puke just thinking about it."

"You got an alternative?" Bryce's voice was oddly gentle. "Drek, you think I want to do it? You think I wouldn't have killed them for even suggesting it, if we had a choice?" He took a small step, then a small step back, his eyes never ceasing their scan. "We do this, we're clear."

The other man snorted. "You believe that? Think, Bryce. Even if nobody catches us and burns us alive, they still know what we did. And next time they need patsies, they know right where to look." The nervousness in his voice tilted to bitterness. "We—"

"Shh!" Bryce held up a quick hand to shut his brother up. In the silence, they could barely hear the approach of a quiet-running vehicle with no lights drawing close to their location.

It was another van, not unlike their own—outwardly nondescript and unassuming, but with an exhaust note that spoke of careful maintenance and more than a little bit of modification. It rolled up and stopped, but the engine remained running. The back door opened and a man and a woman, both dressed in longcoats and with caps pulled down low, got out. Each held a nasty-looking SMG, currently trained on Bryce and his brother.

"You followed?" the woman asked, glancing around.

Bryce stepped forward, careful not to point the Remington at the newcomers. "Nah. You got it?"

They looked him over for several seconds, until he began to wonder if they were scanning more than his physical form. Then the man nodded and stepped back into the van, emerging after a moment carrying a smallish crate about the size of a large toolbox. He didn't hand it over yet. "You know what to do, right, kid? No funny business. We'll know, and you won't like what happens if we find out you didn't show up to the meet with the shipment. Got it?"

Bryce nodded, his face twisted with self-loathing and anger. "Yeah, we got it. But this is it. We're squared up after this, you scan?"

The woman smiled. It was a creepy smile, mocking and amused. "Sure, sure. Just don't go getting any attacks of conscience halfway through. Conscience is a luxury you two screw-ups don't have right now. Not if you want to clear your rep with the boss and keep your family breathing."

The man moved forward, holding the box out toward Bryce and his brother. "Now take it and get out. You know where the meet is."

In the end, Bryce had to take it and stow it carefully in the back of the van. Dylan couldn't bring himself to touch it. Without further conversation, the man and the woman climbed back into their vehicle and rolled off. Bryce waited until they were gone before firing up the van and heading out in the opposite direction, toward the road that would take them back into Cheyenne.

The tiny rotodrone that soared up out of the debris and set a course to follow them flew high and made no sound in the night sky. They never noticed it was there.

I.

Lena George fumed. *Holy drek, Bryce, if you're gonna make me wait in your ride, maybe you could clean the thing occasionally? It smells like sweat and old soyburgers in here.*

Sighing, she scrubbed at her face with her hands. It wasn't their fault. No point in getting annoyed with them, just because her own day was going thoroughly down the drekker.

It was just after midnight. The van she sat in was parked behind a squat abandoned building in the middle of a lot going to seed; most of the lights were either burned or shot out. Lena scanned the street off to her left, watching the cars roll steadily past. A fading sign out front read "Singing Rock Restaurant and Grill." The place had closed a couple of months ago and hadn't found a new buyer, which made it a good place for the business they needed to conduct. Without its usual complement of bright AR iconography, it looked tired and decaying.

Bryce and Dylan were due back any minute. She knew about their extracurricular activities, even though they'd tried hard to keep them hidden, and they knew that she





knew. Her brothers could never hide anything from her. She smiled, remembering how she, little Lena, always seemed to turn up in the middle of their games, eliciting boyish “Eww!”s from them and their friends. Now, at seventeen, she was no less adept at ferreting out their schemes, though she was a little better at keeping her mouth shut about what she discovered.

“Just stay here and keep the doors locked,” Bryce had told her. “We’ll be out in a couple of minutes, and then we’ll drop you off at the club.” He was the older of the two; at twenty-two his handsome features, shining black hair, and SDF-honed physique guaranteed that he was never wanting for female companionship. Dylan, two years younger, was more like Lena: small and wiry, his long hair normally pulled back in a ponytail.

Yeah, sure. I’ll just sit here like a good little girl while you drop off the latest shipment—which I could help you with, if you didn’t insist on treating me like some precious little princess who needs to be protected from the world.

That wasn’t fair, not really. It didn’t have anything to do with the fact that Lena was a girl. She’d seen plenty of hard-bodied, hard-eyed young women stopping by her brothers’ apartment when they didn’t think she was looking, and she knew they weren’t there for romance. One of them, an ork named Tanya Walker, even worked with them regularly, and Lena was surprised she hadn’t seen her tonight. No, it had to do with the fact that Lena was their sister. *Well, half-sister, anyway. Half-Anglo sister who doesn’t look like she shares even a single twig with the George family tree.*

She jammed her hands into the front pocket of her oversized hooded sweatshirt and made a frustrated noise in the back of her throat. Up until earlier today, she’d been counting down the six months until her own stint in the SDF started, when she turned eighteen. She figured that maybe once she proved she could handle herself, Dylan and Bryce might cut her in on the action, and she’d have her ticket to something bigger than this dead-end life in East Bumfrag, the ass end of Cheyenne. Too bad she’d managed to delude herself into forgetting about the way things worked around here: skinny blonde half-Anglo girls didn’t get to join the SDF, no matter how well they’d performed in their Scouts training. Sure, technically they were supposed to be able to, since her Lakota half gave her full citizenship, but the message she’d received today had informed her that something had turned up in her last physical to disqualify her for service. *“We regret to inform you that ...”*

She’d flung her ‘link across the room in frustration, sobbed into her pillow for ten minutes before she got herself together, yelled an assortment of choice and decidedly un-princess-like curse words at the Universe, and didn’t even bother to worry about the fact that they hadn’t told her what the “something” in her physical was.

Because it wasn’t anything. Even in her deluded state, she knew it.

They just didn’t want her.

That was why she was here now. She’d gone to her brothers and poured out the whole sad story. They’d raged with her, sympathizing and promising to see what they could do, but she could see in their eyes that they knew it was a lost cause. For consolation, they’d promised to take her to a hot late-night warehouse party they’d wangled an invitation to, which surprised the hell out of her. They’d never done that before—reluctant as they were this time, she figured it was their way of demonstrating that they considered her an adult, even if the SDF apparently didn’t. She just had to wait in the van while they made their delivery.

She hadn’t said anything about the fact that this job was different. Their usual cargo, delivered to various small independent contractors around the Cheyenne area, took up a lot more room in the back of the van. Sometimes it was liquor, sometimes tobacco; she didn’t ask about their connections. Some things were better not knowing, at least until she was part of the team. This time, they’d gone in with a much smaller container, about the size of a large toolbox. Being near it had made Lena’s skin crawl a little, but she figured that was probably just nerves. Even so, she was glad when her brothers hefted it between them and hurried it inside the Singing Rock’s back entrance.

She glanced at her commlink. *They’re late.*

Something caught her peripheral vision: another car, pulling into the lot. Lena dropped a little in her seat even though she knew that nobody could see her through the van’s tinted windows. Bryce and Dylan didn’t like unwanted attention.

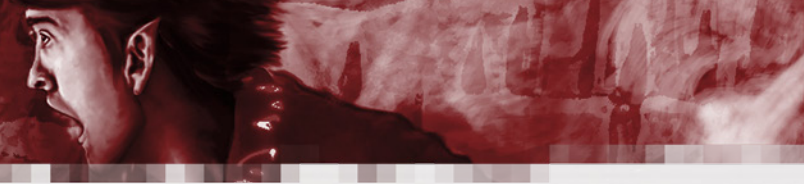
Two people got out of the car and moved with purpose toward the back door. Both were big—orks, maybe, or bulky humans—and both wore long, billowing dark coats. One carried an oversized briefcase, the other a backpack. Lena’s eyes narrowed, but she made no move to get out. Despite her brothers’ efforts to the contrary, she knew full well what kind of place the defunct Singing Rock Restaurant and Grill was. Strange people going in and out at odd hours were probably a lot more common than real customers had been when the place was running. Maybe these two had something to do with the special shipment in the toolbox.

The two men went inside. Lena resumed her position in her seat, continuing to watch the door. Cueing up her commlink with the latest Urban Renewal download she’d bought yesterday, she focused on the lyrics and tried to quell her impatience.

Five more minutes passed.

A crash startled her. The Singing Rock’s back doors slammed open and two figures hurried out. Dylan and Bryce? No—she knew her brothers’ silhouettes. It was the two men who’d gone in, and they were moving fast. The one with the briefcase still carried it, but in the other hand he held some kind of long gun. The one with the backpack had swapped it for a large box—





Lena stared. It was the same box she'd seen Dylan and Bryce heading inside with.

What the frag was going on?

The two men passed under a light on their way back to the car, and Lena got a good look at their faces: one ork, one human, both Amerind. They glanced around fast, and Lena ducked down again to make sure they didn't see her. Their car roared as they made a fast retreat from the parking lot.

Okay, that was it. Something was up, and Lena was tired of waiting around for things to come to her. She buzzed Dylan's code on her 'link.

No answer.

How could that be? Even if he'd silenced it, she knew he had a special silent code for calls from her. So did Bryce. And Bryce wasn't responding either.

The hairs began to stand up on Lena's neck. Something was going on, and she was going to find out what it was. If she got inside and nothing was up, she'd just sheepishly apologize, act the part of the impatient little sister, and everything would be fine. If not ...

She opened one of the hidden compartments in the van (something else she didn't think the boys knew she'd seen) and pulled out the old Browning they kept hidden there. Stashing it in her jacket, she eased open the passenger door and stepped out. Movement caught her eye again and she almost went for the gun, but she realized it was just a mangy coyote slinking across the lot toward the scrubby bushes. It stopped a moment, gave her a reproachful look, and then moved off toward the street.

Her commlink buzzed as she approached the building, indicating a message received. She reached for it. Maybe Bryce or Dylan had—

The explosion went off when she was barely ten meters from the door.

A loud *whumph!* split the silence of the night, followed by an even louder *BOOM!* Before she knew what was happening, Lena was tossed back on a wave of warm air and debris—she tumbled over and over and slammed into the side of a car, stunned.

Reeling and disoriented she scrambled to her feet, heedless of fear or injury. Already smoke was rising up into the night sky while flames licked at the building's roof. All around her a cacophony of car alarms added discordant shrieks to the scene.

"Bryce!" she screamed into the darkness. "Dylan!" She glared wild-eyed at the wreckage of the Singing Rock. The back doors were blown off their hinges, and past them she could see more flames, more smoke. There was no sign of movement, of anyone trying to get out. She took a few halting, staggering steps toward the building. *I have to get in there. I have to help them—what if they're still—*

But even through her haze of terror and grief, she knew they weren't. They couldn't be, not at ground zero of that explosion.

Off in the distance she heard sirens.

What if they find me here? What if—oh, spirits, I saw the guys who did this! The images of the two men, the ork and the human, rose in her mind. If they knew I was here—

She ran.

II.

Lena stumbled into her apartment, her heart still pounding. The lights were off, which meant that her mother was still working. That was good. The last thing she wanted to do right now was answer questions—questions she couldn't even answer for herself. She flung her jacket over a chair and headed to her room.

Her thoughts spun as she tried to make sense of what had occurred. Her brothers were dead. Her mind shrieked guilt and grief at her for not even trying to go in after them, for running away, but she knew there was no way they could have lived through the blast, and no way she'd have survived the fire if she'd fought her way into the club in the vain hope that there would still be someone there to save.

Closing her eyes, she forced herself to take a series of deep breaths, willing her body to calm down. The grief could come later, and it would—oh, how it would. But right now she had to think, because whatever decision she made now was quite probably going to change the course of her life. Pulling out her commlink, she cued up a file to view again.

The file her brother Bryce had sent her before he died.

She'd watched it the first time in the cab on the way home, with the sound turned off so the driver couldn't hear anything. It was only a few seconds long and chaotic, but she could make out two details: the faces of the two men who'd gone in after her brothers. They weren't clear, but she could tell that both of them were Amerind, hard-eyed and muscular. One was an ork, the other a human. Thugs. She didn't recognize either of them. This time she turned on the sound. There were voices, but she couldn't make out what they were saying. Maybe if she could find someone to enhance them.

A voice inside her nagged her about what she should do. *You need to turn that over to the Snipes so they can find these guys and put them away.*

Yeah, right. Like they'd even listen to me. A half-Anglo girl whose brothers were killed while delivering cigarettes from a smuggling run? They'll probably be glad to get more smuggler scum off the street.

She got up again, pacing in the confined space. She didn't need to do anything tonight. Waiting until morning wouldn't change anything. Even if she decided to turn in the file to the Snipes tomorrow, she could just tell them that what happened had freaked her out so badly that she'd needed time to get it together.

And what was she going to tell Mom? Dylan and Bryce had always been her favorites, not her skinny blonde tom-boy of a daughter who refused to take any of her drek. She





had to tell her something, but then she'd have to admit she was there when it happened. She scrubbed at her hair and tried to think.

The creak of the front door opening made her freeze. Was Mom home from the Thunderbird already? This was early for her—she usually didn't stumble in until nearly sunrise, if she came home at all. Had she already heard about what had happened? Moving on silent feet, Lena slipped down the hallway and peeked around the corner into the living room.

The light came on, revealing the tall form of a man dressed in jeans and a leather jacket. *Great.* The last person she wanted to deal with right now was Cal Harlan, Mom's current boyfriend. He sometimes came to the apartment alone to pick up something or just to hang out, since she'd given him the code to get in. At least he wasn't there often. Usually he was with Mom at the Thunderbird. Lena knew she considered him quite a catch, since he was the favored lieutenant of Ezekiel Jarvis, the Lakota mob boss who ran the club. Frankly, Lena wondered what Cal saw in an aging stripper whose life was arranged around where her next bottle was coming from, but she supposed she wasn't the most objective judge.

She watched Cal for a moment. Unaware of her presence, he moved like he owned the place, tossing his jacket over the same chair where Lena had put hers, crossing to the fridge to remove a beer, then dropping down into the recliner and flipping on the trid unit. *Make yourself at home,* Lena thought in disgust. Wanting nothing to do with him, she drifted back down the hall and gently shut her bedroom door. She wished it had a lock, but it had been broken since they'd moved in. She'd just wait for Cal to leave—he'd probably have to go pick up Mom at the club in a couple of hours. Odds were he was probably already buzzed on something and didn't even realize she was here. He'd probably fall asleep in the chair. She sat back down to wait, too wound up to do anything, mind still whirling with the events of the night and fighting back the crushing grief as it kept reminding her that she'd never see her beloved brothers again. A few tears slid down her cheeks and she angrily swiped them away.

She wasn't even aware that she'd nodded off until something nudged her awake: a kind of warning pressure on the inside of her head. A shadow had fallen over her. She straightened from her slumped position, eyes going wide. "Cal. What are you doing in my room?"

For a moment it seemed to her like there was something wrong with Mom's boyfriend. Tall, broad-shouldered, with longish dark hair and craggy features that kind of milled around "attractive" without ever quite getting there, his eyes held an odd light for a second. Then it was gone and he was just the same old Cal, smiling down at her. "I heard a noise, so I came to check it out. Didn't realize you were here. Sorry I scared you."

She pushed herself out of the chair. *Did he know? Had he heard something about what had happened?* "Uh, that's okay.

Where's Mom? Is she still at work? Why are you here?" Something like claws probed at her brain, making the tiny hairs on the back of her neck stand up. For the first time she realized that Cal was standing between her and the door. Behind her, the tiny room's only window was covered with decorative, but quite functional, metal bars designed to keep the local lowlives from getting any ideas. She forced down any sign of fear.

Cal's smile widened. "Your mom's at work. She won't be home until I go pick her up. We're all alone." He drew out the word *all* in a most unsettling way.

Lena took a step back. The weird look was in his eyes again. "Do you need something from me?"

"I do," he said, his tone almost contemplative. His gaze took her in, starting at her face and then sliding down her slim body as if he were examining a piece of property he'd just bought.

"Cal, get out of here," she said. "You're drunk. Just go back to the club where you belong, or I'll tell Mom you've been creeping me out." She thought about her gun, but she'd left it in her jacket in the front room. She moved to put the bed between herself and him.

He didn't make any attempt to stop her; he only shifted so he was still blocking the door. He grinned. "I am where I belong, baby. Your brothers aren't here to protect you anymore."

For a moment the implications of that didn't sink in, but when they finally did she stared at him, stunned. "My brothers? What about them?" Her mind was moving fast, considering plans. Unfortunately none of them were *good* plans.

"Don't play dumb. I know you were in that van when the Singing Rock blew sky-high. And I know you saw the guys who did it. Which is why you're gonna die."

Lena stared, stunned. "You killed my brothers?" Her backward progress stopped as her legs hit one of the mismatched nightstands next to her bed.

Cal moved with an unhurried grace. "Nah, I didn't kill 'em," he snickered. "You don't even know what they were into, little girl. How much over their heads they were. They should've stuck to cigs and booze like good little smugglers. Too bad they fucked up."

She had no idea what he was talking about. "You're crazy. Get the hell out of my room, you perv!"

Cal smiled. "Ah, well. I tried. And I gotta get going to meet some people after I take care of you. But first, I got time to get me some of what I been wantin' ever since I took up with that skank of a mom of yours—a little tender young white meat." He advanced on her again, tall and looming.

She tried to scramble up and over the bed, mind spinning, heart pounding. He was a head taller and probably fifty kilos heavier than she was. Cold sweat trickled down her back.

His smile turned to an ugly leer. "Come on, honey. I promise it'll be fun. But you can go ahead and struggle if





you want. I like it when they struggle.” Before she could respond, he lunged forward and clamped one meaty hand around her wrist, using the other to cover her mouth. He flung her sideways and back, sprawling her across her bed and straddling her with his own body. “Don’t bother screaming,” he growled. “Even if anybody hears, they’re too scared to do anything about it.”

Lena knew he was right. Screams and yelling were nightly occurrences here at Casa Derelict, as a good percentage of the residents got drunk or high and took out their frustrations on each other. The Snipes didn’t even respond half the time unless somebody got killed. Fighting panic, she flung her body back and forth to throw him off her, but he was too big, too heavy. Her feet didn’t reach the floor, and the sagging bed provided no leverage. She could smell the cheap beer on his breath, the grease in his hair, the hideous cloying after-shave lotion that always announced his arrival into a room a couple of seconds before he actually entered it. She tried to maneuver her leg around so she could drive it up into his crotch, but he only slapped her hard across the face, still grinning. “None of that, baby,” he advised. “Just lay back and enjoy it. You might even like it. At least you’ll have one real man before you die, yeah?”

Lena clamped her mouth shut around the half-scream, half yell of rage that threatened to erupt from her throat. The bastard would probably get off on it. *Think, Lena! Think!* He was fumbling at her sweatshirt now, trying to get at the button on her jeans without giving her room to move.

And then, without warning, her whole body felt like it was on fire, her head swelling with some kind of weird pressure. Her brain felt tight, crowded, like something inside was shoving it aside as it fought to get out. Images flashed through her mind: Blood. Claws. Teeth. Feral, intelligent eyes—animal eyes. A howling sound rose from deep within her. Rage grew—rage, along with indignation and a profound sense of *wrongness* at this attempted violation. She struggled anew, but now it had nothing to do with what Cal was doing. She struggled because the thing, the *presence* inside her head wanted *out*, and she knew that if she didn’t let it out it would overwhelm her.

Cal leaned down, his hot breath on her face as he attempted to mash his beer-smelling lips down onto hers. He was moaning with anticipation, his hands locking her arms down on the bed, his body pressing on her hips.

The rage exploded, a howl rising to a crescendo that Lena was sure the entire apartment complex, the entire town, could hear. Her brain lit up in violent reds as she let the pressure explode over her. She shook, knowing it could destroy her, but feeling that was preferable to letting Cal Harlan get what he was after. The howl shrieked with triumph and anger, and for a moment Lena wasn’t Lena. Instead of her arms and legs, she had powerful haunches, huge clawed paws, a shaggy mane of fur, and teeth. Not just teeth, but wicked sharp fangs that could rip the throat from prey as easily as thought. She let the feeling take her

and didn’t fight it. It was *wonderful*.

Like she was finally what she’d always been meant to be.

It was over in a few seconds. Lena opened her eyes and took a tentative look around, terrified of what she would see, terrified of what Cal might have done to her while she’d blacked out.

Dead weight pushed her down into the mattress. She turned her head to the right and nearly screamed again. Cal’s head lolled on her shoulder, his eyes wide open, nearly bursting, blood oozing from the tiny roadmaps of blood vessels that nearly obscured their whites. More blood ran from his nose and oozed from his mouth where he’d bitten his protruding tongue. His face was frozen in a rictus of surprise and horror.

What have I done?

Using strength augmented by disgust, she slid forward a bit to get her feet under her and then shoved with everything she had. Cal’s body flopped over and she scrambled from beneath it, staring down at him and barely breathing.

He’s dead. I killed him. But—how?

It didn’t *matter* how. She had to get out of here. There’d be time to think later, but right now she had to get out, before anyone found Cal.

Had anyone heard the screams, the howling? Were the Snipes on their way to the apartment now?

She forced herself to remain as calm as possible as she hurried around her small room, gathering items. The strange heat that had gripped her body was gone, along with the pressure. All that was left was a dull, grinding headache. She could deal with that. She snatched up her backpack, tossed in a few spare clothes and her commlink, two boxes of ammo for her gun, and as an afterthought she grabbed Cal’s commlink, switched off the wireless so it couldn’t be traced, and stuffed it into her pocket. The whole time she avoided looking at Cal’s grotesque, contorted dead face as he sprawled across her brightly colored bedspread. At least he hadn’t managed to do anything to her before she’d done—what?

No. Can’t think about it now. Later.

She couldn’t do anything about the body, so she left it there, closing the door on it as she left. In the front room she grabbed her jacket from the chair and made sure her Colt and her brothers’ Browning were still in the pockets. Pulling a dark cap down low over her short blonde hair, she slung her pack over her shoulder and left the apartment barely five minutes after she’d started packing.

She’d reached the end of the block before the question smacked her between the eyes.

Where am I going?

III.

She slumped down onto a bench and realized she had no idea. Normally whenever she had a problem, she went to her brothers’ place. She couldn’t call her mother, even





if she'd wanted to. She had a couple of friends from the Scouts, but they were more of the school-chummer variety, not the sort of people she'd trust with something big like this.

Pulling out her commlink, she scrolled through her list of contacts. She'd almost come to the conclusion that she had nobody she could risk calling when the name "Tanya" popped into view. Of course! Tanya Walker was a friend of her brothers, the one Lena had been surprised not to see along on the job tonight. Glancing around to make sure nobody was paying attention to her, she stabbed the button to make the call.

There was no answer for several seconds, and when the other end picked up Lena could hear loud music in the background. A dark-haired ork woman's face appeared on the screen, yelling to be heard over the noise. "Hey, Lena. What's up? I thought you'd be at the party by now."

For a moment Lena wasn't sure what she was talking about, and then she remembered: the club! She didn't realize Tanya would be there too. She stared at the phone, momentarily rendered speechless as she tried to figure out how to tell Tanya what had happened.

The other woman obviously saw something on Lena's face. "Hey," she said, concerned. "What's wrong? Did something happen?" She did something that dropped the volume of the background music to a more manageable level. "Are the guys with you?"

"I—" She took a deep shuddering breath. "I need help, Tanya. Something—happened. Bryce and Dylan are—they're dead."

"What?" Tanya's voice came through so loud that Lena feared someone on her end would hear it. "Frag it!" Then she visibly pulled herself together, a hard mask dropping over her features, all business. "You know where my place is? Meet me there and you can tell me the rest. The comm's not secure. I'll be there as soon as I can."

Tanya's doss wasn't far from the boys', a klick or so away from Lena's place. Afraid to risk being recognized on a bus and with no cabs in evidence, Lena set out at a steady lope that covered the distance quickly. She didn't look around to see whether she was being followed—one of the first things people in her part of town learned about surviving on the streets was that you had to look like you belonged there. She was skinny, but with her cap pulled down low over her short hair and the baggy coat covering her slim frame she looked like any other gangly teenage boy on his way somewhere in a hurry. A couple of times she passed small groups of loitering on corners, but they paid her no attention.

She didn't have to wait long: Tanya's jacked-out old Westwind screamed up only moments later, skidding to a stop in front of where Lena huddled in the shadows. The door sprang open. "Get in!" Tanya ordered. "Hurry!"

Lena scrambled into the car and it took off again before she even got the door closed. "Is somebody after us?"

she demanded, head swiveling around as she scanned for anyone following.

"Not taking chances." Tanya's face was grim, her hands gripping tight on the wheel.

"Where are we going?"

"Someplace where we can talk."

Lena subsided into silence as they drove, willing her heart to finally stop pounding. She noticed that Tanya's silvery cybereyes were moving constantly, watching not only the mirrors and the windows but also the series of AR readouts that danced and scrolled across the Westwind's dash. She drove a circuitous route, twice doubling back and once zipping up an alley when she thought she'd spotted someone paying them too much attention. By the time she swung the car into a tiny rear lot behind what looked like an abandoned bakery, Lena wasn't sure where they were anymore. Tanya hustled her out and inside.

Lena looked around. Whatever this place had been before, it had clearly been repurposed into some kind of safehouse. The floor was littered with mattresses and old furniture, the rickety, graffiti-scrawled plywood covering the windows from the outside supplemented by far more substantial armor on the inside, and a formidable lock secured the door. The whole thing smelled like unwashed clothes and stale fast food. The only evidence of the place's former function was the counter separating the front area from the rear, along with the twisted and rusting remains of some of the ovens and work surfaces in the back. Tanya moved around checking the place out, then dropped down onto the arm of a battered brown couch and regarded Lena with her eerie silver eyes. "Okay," she said. "Talk. What happened?"

Lena swallowed. She wanted to tell Tanya everything at once, but for a moment nothing came out as the words crowded themselves in her throat like a bunch of frantic clubgoers trying escape a burning building. Tanya touched her arm. "Calm down," she said. "You're safe here, at least for now. Just tell me what's going on so we can figure out what we need to do."

Lena told her everything. *Almost* everything. For some reason, she didn't want to reveal what had happened with Cal. Mainly because she still wasn't sure herself. Instead, she told Tanya that he had attacked her and she'd managed to get to her gun and shoot him. Same effect either way—the man was dead and she had killed him. This way she didn't have to admit to being some kind of freak.

Tanya listened, her jaw tightening and her eyes growing harder. "Those sons of slitches," she muttered when Lena finished. "Those fragging—"

"What?" Lena demanded. "Who? What do you know about this?"

Tanya got up and began pacing around the room, hands locked behind her back as if she were afraid she'd start putting her fists through the nearest solid objects. "I knew something was up when Bryce and Dylan wanted to do this one alone. They tried making it sound like nothing,





but I could tell it was different, something in Bryce's voice. He always was a lousy liar."

"Different?" Lena twisted around on the couch where she sat, following Tanya's caged-cat progress around the room. "Like how?"

Tanya shook her head. "Fragged if I know. I don't know how much you know about what your brothers were into—"

"They ran booze and cigarettes for Tom Ironhand, I know that much. Probably a few other people too. Guys that weren't in with the mobs." At Tanya's look of surprise, she shrugged. "They didn't tell me that, but I keep my ears open."

Finally, Tanya nodded. "Yeah. They did, which was always potentially a problem, since your mom works at the Thunderbird. And this time, whatever it was, they were scared about it. I think they were afraid she'd find out."

"Mom wouldn't rat them out," Lena protested.

"Are you so sure?" Tanya's tone was bitter. "Listen, kid, I ain't gonna sugarcoat it for you. Your mom's a joygirl and a drunk. And she was boffing Cal Harlan. It wouldn't take much to get her to turn over, especially if he threatened to cut off her booze supply. And if the guys were running something hot, Harlan's enough of a greedy bastard he'd put pressure on your mom to get his grubby hands on it and make time with his boss."

Lena started to protest but realized Tanya was right. Wasn't her frustration with her mother's lifestyle one of the main reasons she herself was so bitter about her failure to get into the SDF? "Mom didn't know what they did," she mumbled.

Tanya rolled her eyes. "Get with the real world, Lena. This stuff is big money, and dangerous as hell, especially when you run for the independents like Ironhand."

Lena considered. "You said you thought this was different. What did you mean by that? You think they were running something else?"

"I got no idea. All I know is that if it was biz as usual, they had no reason to cut me out. Either they didn't want to split the take with me or else they didn't want anybody else in on it."

Lena got up because she could no longer sit still and began her own round of pacing. "What could it be? Drugs? BTLs?" Were her brothers involved in that? She never had a problem with them smuggling cigarettes and booze: the NAN had weird hangups about them, but to the rest of the world they were biz as usual. This was just a little income redistribution. But if they were running the harder stuff ...

"Nah," Tanya said, shaking her head. "They've run those before with me. No reason to cut me out now."

Lena stopped and stared at her.

"You need to grow up fast, kid," Tanya said, shaking her head, eyes hardening again. "This is reality, and it's fraggin' ugly. No place for those little-girl ideals if you ever want to pull yourself out of the drekker." Before Lena could respond, she sank back down onto the stained acrylic couch. "Tell me again what you saw. Don't leave anything out."

Lena did, once again only omitting the bit where she'd apparently fried Cal Harlan with her mind. She knew she was going to have to figure out what to do about that soon. If she had some sort of wild magical talent, she'd need to get training before she hurt somebody, but this wasn't the time. Besides, with her newfound knowledge of what Tanya and her brothers had been up to lying unquiet in her mind, she wasn't convinced that she should trust Tanya any more than she had to.

But was there *anybody* she could trust anymore? Right now, Tanya was the best resource she had.

She remembered the file on her commlink, the one Dylan had sent her. She cued it up and passed it across. "I think Dylan turned on his 'link right before the guys left. I can't make much sense of it, but maybe you can."

Tanya watched the tiny screen, her face morphing into a cold anger as she examined the file once, then ran it back and watched it again. "Yeah," was all she said.

"Yeah what? Could you understand any of that?"

Without asking permission, Tanya pulled out her own commlink and made a copy of Lena's file. "This'll take more processing than I can do, but I have friends who can handle it. I can't tell what they're saying, but I recognize one of the voices. The ork's name is Max Yelloweyes. He's one of Ezekiel Jarvis's hired thugs. Well, Cal Harlan's, since Jarvis doesn't get his hands dirty on this kind of street-level stuff."

Lena let her breath out. "So Jarvis is behind this. That explains why Cal already knew that Bryce and Dylan were dead."

"Yeah. But it still doesn't explain what they were running that was so hot."

Lena thought about it. "How are you so sure it's something like that? Couldn't it just be, I dunno, some kind of rare cigarettes or something?"

"Doubt it," Tanya said, shaking her head. "Why would Jarvis blow up the club and kill them over that? It's not his style. Sure, he might have 'em shot if he caught 'em, but that's just biz. Whatever this is, he wanted to make sure that there was no chance anybody found out anything about it, and that meant making sure the boys were silenced. He—" She stopped, looking at Lena. "What?"

Lena wasn't listening to her anymore. As she'd been talking, a strange sense of foreboding had been slowly rising in her head. At first she'd written it off as simple nervousness and continued to focus on Tanya, but as the older woman continued it grew until it reached a level of annoyance that she could no longer ignore. It felt like something was prodding at her skull from the inside. She whipped her head around to look behind her, but nothing was there.

"What is it?" Tanya demanded, her gaze following Lena's to the door. "Did you hear something?" She pulled out her gun and moved toward it.

And then suddenly Lena knew. She had no idea *how* she knew, an idea just planted itself in her brain and re-





fused to leave. “There’s somebody out there,” she said, her voice sounding to her like it was coming from far away. “We have to go. Now.”

Tanya didn’t waste time asking how Lena knew this. She snatched up an old armored jacket from the back of one of the chairs and flung it at Lena. “Put this on and stay low. Keep your gun out. You—”

She didn’t get a chance to finish her sentence. The booming sound of gunfire erupted outside the building, thumping against the armor on the boarded windows. “Holy drek! Down!” Tanya yelled, shoving Lena toward the floor.

Lena, terrified, scrambled down behind one of the couches, grabbing her gun from her pocket before shrugging into the coat Tanya had tossed her. It was several sizes too large. “What do we do?” she demanded. “Is there another way out?”

More gunfire, louder now, split the night. The armor on the windows was holding, but barely. It wouldn’t last long: it was never meant to withstand this kind of assault. How many of them were *out* there?

“In the back,” Tanya yelled over the din. “There’s a trap door leading to a storeroom and a hidden exit. But they might be watching that too.”

The door blew in, hitting the floor with a sound like a truck slamming into the side of a building. The resulting open space revealed not a truck, but a troll, a huge and ugly specimen of armored Anglo troll carrying an assault rifle that was dwarfed in his vast hands.

Tanya scrambled behind cover, raising her own gun and popping off shots at the troll. She was a good shot; two of her rounds tore into unprotected spots under his arm and where his armor met at his waist, but the troll barely seemed to notice. “They’re in here!” he yelled, his voice echoing around the room almost as loudly as the gunfire.

Lena, huddling behind her couch, heart thudding like it wanted to break free of her chest, tried to force her mind to calm. Should she try to shoot the troll? Would he even notice? Her brothers’ Browning and her own Colt were both even smaller than Tanya’s gun. She clamped her eyes shut, trying to will that feeling of pressure to rise again in her head. She was scared drekless of whatever she’d done to kill Cal, but right now that didn’t matter. Doing it again might be the only way they could get out of here alive. *Please*, she thought in desperation, directing her plea to anyone out there who might be listening. *Please help us!*

And then, instantly, the pressure was there in her head again, and there was a new sound in the room, a strange whooshing whistle that seemed to originate somewhere between Lena and the troll. Fear still gripping her, she rose up a little behind the couch to look.

Something was happening. In front of the troll, the air moved, whipping around like a miniature tornado, picking up trash and dirt from the floor and spinning it into a vortex that was growing even as she watched. “What the

frag—?” the troll barked, swinging his assault rifle around and trying without success to fire into it.

More figures were coming in now: a human and a dwarf, both Amerind, both armored. They surged around the troll and tried to get past him, but the mini trash tornado was growing steadily, pushing all three of them back toward the door opening. It was almost as tall as the troll now, the rush of wind growing so loud it was hard to hear anything else. Lena’s brain lit up with rage, with blood, with a compulsion so strong it frightened her: *Protect my pack.*

Tanya, it appeared, was more than ready to take advantage of the sudden good fortune, no matter how inexplicable its source. “Go, go, go!” she yelled to Lena, making shoving motions in her direction. Rising up from behind her cover again, she squeezed off three fast shots at the dwarf, which were followed by a roar as he staggered back, clutching his gut and dropping. “Go!” she yelled again, keeping low as she backpedaled toward the rear door—

—and screamed as a round from the human’s gun tore into the side of her head, standing her up and spinning her around in a kind of grotesque dance move. Blood plumed from the exit wound, splattering Lena’s shocked face with warm wetness. And Tanya was down. Just like that.

“NO!” Lena shrieked. The rage, which had been strong before, took her completely, and she let it have its head. The feeling of being something more than human, of having fur and claws and sharp fangs, settled over her mind again. They had killed Tanya, perhaps the only person left in the world she could trust. Then a thought came that didn’t seem to be entirely hers: They had murdered her *packmate!* She had no idea where that had come from, but she didn’t care. Operating on sheer instinct as she had done with Cal, she pushed outward with her mind, concentrating hard on her desires. She wanted to stop them. She wanted to hurt them. She wanted to *destroy* them. Her teeth bared in a snarl of hatred. *Help me! Protect me!*

Whatever the power was, she didn’t have any control over it. It wasn’t a directed attack. If it was magic, it wasn’t the kind she’d seen in the trids, where confident shamans directed the universe’s energies with a sure hand against their foes, aided by mighty mentor spirits. Instead, it was raw and unfocused and went in every direction at once, blowing the three attackers back through the door and sending them reeling. The mini-tornado surged out of the doorway and followed them, flinging them this way and that as they made feeble struggles to rise. They weren’t dead—they weren’t even truly down. They must be made of tougher stuff than Cal Harlan was, or maybe it was because she was spreading it across three instead of one, but they were down, for the moment.

She didn’t think it would last long.

With one last regretful look at Tanya’s blood-soaked, still-twitching form on the room’s filthy floor, Lena snatched up the other woman’s larger gun, jammed it in her pocket, and took off toward the rear of the shop. She hoped there weren’t more of them back there; if there were, she was





dead. Already her head was throbbing again. She didn't think she could repeat the attack without a lot of time to recharge.

The trap door was right where Tanya had said it would be, hidden behind some old boxes. Lena flung it open, trusting in her strange sense to let her know if anything lay in wait for her. She hurried down, closing it behind her. It was pitch dark, so she pulled out her commlink and used the glow of its screen to light her way. She hoped it wasn't far. The tunnel smelled like garbage and dryness and old wood.

When she emerged at the other end and cautiously opened another hidden trap door, she found herself in an alley overrun with more garbage. One feeble streetlight flickered to her left, and to her right a devil rat scrambled reproachfully over a pile of fetid rubbish where it had been foraging. She paused a moment with her head barely poking out, listening, but she heard no gunfire or shouts. If they were waiting for her, they were being damned quiet about it. Trying to do whatever she could to stay receptive to the powers that were helping her keep safe, she emerged from the trap door, pressed herself against the wall, and allowed herself a moment to calm down and assess her next move.

She didn't even see the figures before they were on her. Two of them appeared from the shadows nearly on top of her, moving as silently as ghosts. Not the troll or the dwarf or the human from the bakery—these were different. *Oh, frag, there were more of them waiting for me!*

She wrenched Tanya's gun from her pocket and tried to get a bead on one of them, but her hand lit up with pain as the gun suddenly grew red-hot. She dropped it, yanking her injured hand back. Taking quick stock of the two and identifying the smaller off to her right, she put her head down and lunged forward, lowering her shoulder and trying to bull her way past. She'd played enough childhood lacrosse with her brothers that she'd learned a few things, but before she could take two steps her body began to feel strange, uncoordinated. Her feet didn't want to move properly, her head swirled with flashing lights and colors. In front of her, the dirt and garbage strewn the parking lot began to whirl and take on almost humanoid shape, raising arms formed of old screamsheets and stuffer wrappings. *Wait, her sluggish brain protested. Am I doing that? What the frag is—?*

In her peripheral vision she saw one of her other attackers making strange gestures, and then the ground came up to meet her.

IV.

Lena's head throbbed. Her arms and legs throbbed too, and her mouth tasted like she'd been chowing down on roadkill burgers. She moaned and tried to stand, but that didn't work out so well since she was zip-tied to a chair.

"She's coming to," came a voice. Male, deep.

"About time," responded a female voice. "Open your eyes, cub. We know you're awake."

Lena didn't see much point in trying to fool them. Instead, she opened her eyes and glared. "Who the frag are you?" she demanded. "What do you want?" She struggled against the bonds, even though it was mostly for show. They'd taken her coat, which meant her guns were gone. Probably her commlink too.

"We'll ask the questions," the woman said. She didn't sound angry, but her eyes were chips of black ice and her face was carved in an implacable mask. She was human, maybe mid-30s, but looked like she'd been through a lot in those years. Her lined features marked her as Amerind, her clothes festooned with feathers, bits of knotted leather, and other fetishes.

Lena's eyes shifted between her and her companion. He too was Amerind, a massive young troll in jeans and a T-shirt that barely contained his bulging muscles. His arms, crisscrossed with scars and tattoos, were folded over his chest. "So ask," Lena said, with more bravado than she felt. But she couldn't keep the demoralized resignation from her tone. She didn't know how much more of this she could handle before her brain simply shut down and refused to process anything else.

The woman paced back and forth between the silent troll and Lena. "Where is the package your brothers were to deliver to the Singing Rock tonight?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." She glared harder. *Holy drek, there's the package again. Are they in with Cal? Do they know he's dead?* "Who the frag are you guys? Do you always grab people off the streets?" She continued to worry at the bonds securing her wrists, but they remained steadfastly snug. *These guys killed Tanya*, she reminded herself. "And where are those other guys who were with you? You fraggers killed my friend!"

"Nahi, this is drek!" came another voice. From the shadows behind Lena another young man, also human, came forward. His face was wreathed in rage. "She's mocking us! Let me—"

"No," Nahi said, and in the one word was enough authority to quell the young man instantly. "First we need to find out the truth."

"But she knows. She has to know," he protested, though he made no more move toward Lena. "She's their sister!"

"Maybe," Nahi said, motioning him aside. He joined the troll against the wall, and the two of them watched the proceedings—the troll impassive, the young human fuming.

Nahi turned back to Lena. Her face still held no warmth. "There are two possibilities here: either you knew what your brothers were doing, or you didn't. I know about you, Lena George. You might be half-Anglo, but I have heard that you follow the Lakota ways."

Fat lot of good it's done me, came the unbidden bitter thought. "Yeah, and?"





She leaned in. “No true Lakota would condone your brothers’ path. I am not certain that even *they* knew what was in that delivery.”

“Wait a minute,” Lena yelled. “What do you people *want*? I told you, I don’t know anything about any package. My brothers had a box with them. They took it inside the club. That’s the one your thugs took, isn’t it?”

Now it was the woman’s turn to look startled. “Thugs?”

Lena rolled her eyes. “Yeah, thugs. You know, the two goons who blew up the Singing Rock? You guys all work for Cal, right?”

Nahi’s cold eyes bored into Lena’s. “You’re talking about Cal Harlan, Ezekiel Jarvis’s lackey.”

“Yeah, who else? You work for him, right? Well, you’re outta luck, because he’s dead.”

She nodded. “I know.”

“You—do?”

“Yes. We found him at your apartment. In your bedroom, in fact.”

Uh oh. Sweat broke out on Lena’s forehead. “That’s—how he was when I got home,” she lied. “That’s why I ran away.”

“Indeed.” Nahi didn’t sound like she believed her. “Who could have killed him, then? That kind of magic can be traced, you know.”

Lena froze. So that *was* what she’d done. She’d known, of course—what else could it have been? But having it confirmed still made her feel strange, like her life had just veered off and plummeted down a rabbit hole. “M-magic? But—”

“Want to change your story now?” the young human man asked with a sneer, moving forward.

Nahi shot him a look, and he subsided back into the shadows. “Listen,” she said, turning back to Lena. “Time is short and I don’t have time to dance with you, so I’m going to tell you straight. Your brothers were smugglers. You know this much, yes?”

“Yes ...” Lena’s tone was tentative, but she supposed she couldn’t do them any more harm now. “So?”

“So, whether with or without their knowledge, the item they were delivering tonight had nothing to do with bootleg cigarettes or alcohol. And we want that item back so it can be treated with the respect that it’s due, instead of defiled like common merchandise or used to aid sacrilege.”

Lena looked back and forth between Nahi, the troll, and the human. Her brain spun, trying to make sense of any of this, but it wasn’t happening. What the frag were they talking about? Had the world gone crazy? “You want *what* back? And how the hell am I supposed to be able to help you? They didn’t tell me anything about what they were doing.”

Nahi was about to answer when something shimmered into existence inside the room. It hovered indistinctly for a moment, then it resolved into the shape of a large, semi-transparent shaggy wolf. It appeared to Lena as if some sort of communication passed between the two, and then Nahi rose swiftly. “We’ve been traced.”

“Jarvis’s men?”

“Unknown. Come on—we have to go.”

“It’s the kid,” the human man snarled. “They’ve tracked her.” He took a menacing step forward, raising his hands and advancing on Lena.

“No!” Nahi snapped. She turned to Lena. “You have to make a choice now, Lena. Trust us. Help us, and let us help you. Or we leave you here.”

Lena’s heart pounded. If they left her here and it truly was Ezekiel Jarvis’s men out there, they’d kill her. And that was the best she could hope for. But she had no idea who these people were, what they’d do to her.

Past Nahi, the shimmering wolf met her eyes. The connection was instant. It wasn’t a fearsome creature—its eyes were at the same time soft and fierce, protective and savage. In the space of mere seconds, Lena realized that this creature would protect its pack with its life.

And maybe she could be part of that pack.

“Make up your mind, *chica*,” the troll rumbled. There was no sound outside, but the urgency in his voice was mirrored by his two companions.

“Tell me *something*,” Lena demanded, facing Nahi. “I need something to make sense in this whole mess!”

Nahi paused for only a second, and then she said in an even voice: “Your brothers were smuggling a powerful magical item. A hide cut from a slaughtered white buffalo. You, shaman, should find this unconscionable.”

V.

Lena huddled in the back seat of a nondescript dark van that wasn’t so different from the one in which she’d started this whole unreal night.

The sullen human male was driving, with Nahi in the front seat. The troll took up his own entire bench in the second row. None of them seemed terribly worried about Lena bailing out the back door. They didn’t need to be. That was the last thing on her mind at this particular moment.

She closed her eyes, bowing her head. Her hands were shoved hard into the pockets of her coat, which her erstwhile captors had given her back along with both of her guns. The whole night had been nightmarish, beyond horrible—losing her brothers, Cal’s fate, the ambush, and watching Tanya die in front of her eyes—but what Nahi had told her had taken her personal nightmare and amplified it.

The white buffalo! Every Sioux child learned about the sacred creatures, an Awakened form of the vast herds of bison that roamed freely over the plains of the NAN lands. Born of normal buffalo parents, it was a magical mutation that occurred in only a tiny percentage of births. Each arrival of the calf—bigger, stronger, and more intelligent than a typical specimen, and gifted with the power to control the activities of the other herd members—was heralded by Sioux as an important event to be celebrated, treated as an omen of good luck and



prosperity. White buffalo existed before the Awakening, when they were revered due to their extreme rarity, and though they were more common in this time of magic, fewer than a handful of them existed in the wild. Shamans in particular treated them as sacred creatures, seeking to touch their spirits and emulate their qualities of strength and wisdom.

Naturally, this meant that there were people out there who wanted to slaughter them and sell their parts to unscrupulous magicians for use in dark rituals. That meant that this was an extremely lucrative line of business. It was also an extremely dangerous one; Lena had once seen a bootleg trid broadcast showing two men who had been caught poaching a white buffalo being roasted alive over a bonfire. Even though she'd firmly believed they deserved their fate, she could still hear their screams with very little work spent on recollection.

A little involuntary moan escaped Lena's throat. They couldn't have done it! Dylan and Bryce were full-blooded Lakota, not half-Anglo like her. They always prided themselves on their heritage, ever since they'd been boys. To think that they would commit the unspeakable crime of trading in sacred objects, reducing them to nothing more than a marketable good, was horrible; to consider how they got the hide, and how much they had contributed to the creature's death, was worse.

She remembered how uncomfortable she'd felt around the box they'd had in the back of their van, and how the feeling had lifted when they'd taken it away.

"They didn't do it!" she said aloud. "They didn't know. They can't have known!"

The troll swung around in his seat. Nahi had introduced him as Tomás, a mystic adept who followed Wise Warrior. "It doesn't matter now," he said, his voice gentle but firm. "It's done. Now we've gotta clean up the mess."

"What do you mean, it doesn't matter?" She leaned forward. "Of *course* it matters!" She blew air out loudly, sinking back into her seat. It had been nearly an hour since they'd left wherever they'd been holding her. For the first half she didn't even pay any attention to where they were taking her. She didn't care. "They just wouldn't do it. I can't believe they would. Not on purpose. There must have been a reason."

Nahi sighed. "I hope you're right, Lena, if only because it will bring you some peace."

Lena didn't answer that, opting to slump further down in her seat and watch the streetlights flash by. She wondered if they were ever going to stop. After a time, she blurted, "You said I was a shaman."

Nahi turned back around, as did Tomás. "Yes," the older woman said. She frowned. "You didn't know?"

Lena ignored that. "So, that stuff I did, what I did to Cal. That was magic?"

"Yes."

"But, how can that be? How can somebody just do that? I thought people knew they were magical when they were kids."

Nahi's frown deepened. "Weren't you ever tested?"

Lena furrowed her brow. "I was, I think. When I was part of the Scouts. Why didn't they find anything?"

Nahi shrugged. "It happens sometimes. You have the talent, but it stays latent within you until something, sometimes stress, causes it to manifest. Until that point, your aura reads just like any other mundane person's, unless the reader is particularly skilled."

"Well, they got *that* part right." Lena shuddered as she remembered Cal Harlan's hands on her. She remembered the pressure on her head, the bloodlust, the feeling that she was something more, something different, while still simultaneously being herself. She remembered the wolf. "It feels so weird. I thought you just knew."

"Usually you do," Tomás said. "Usually for shaman, a spirit—a totem—will speak to you and make itself known. Of course, it's up to you whether you decide to listen to the call. Some people don't."

Lena's mind went back to all the times in her childhood when she'd felt drawn to dogs and wolves, and how fiercely protective she was of her family and her few friends. "But—I never felt anything magical."

"The talent was hidden within you. You weren't really magical," Nahi said. "Not until now."

"How can it come on so strong? One day I'm nothing, the next ..."

"Yes?"

A little afraid of their reaction, Lena told them others about the bloodlust she felt when her abilities had manifested, and then the repeat performance at the safe house. "Is that normal?" she asked. "Because it freaked me the hell out. Except—it also felt—"

"Right?" Tomás asked. "Like the wolf was just another part of you that wanted to be recognized, and letting Wolf take control felt like the right thing to do?"

"Yeah," she said, relieved that somebody understood. Then she sighed, looking down in her lap. "But none of this matters a damn bit right now. I don't have time to go learn to be a shaman. My brothers are dead, my friend's dead, and if what you say is true, these guys are after some package of white buffalo parts that they were smuggling and are willing to kill anybody that crosses them to get it. What are we gonna do? You said if you took me with you I'd have to help you. But what can I even do? What are you going to do?"

"We're going to find them," said the man in the driver's seat. His voice shook with rage. "And we're going to kill them, slowly and painfully."

"Who are you people?" Lena demanded. "I thought it was the authorities' job to deal with this kind of thing. Are you some kind of special government unit or something?" It seemed unlikely to her even as she said it; government units didn't drive around in old vans and ambush people in firefights. Did they?

"No, nothing like that," Tomás said.

"White buffalo poaching is becoming more prevalent



every year,” Nahi told her. “We know how thinly the SDF is stretched, and we find it repugnant that even one of these slime is able to get away with their crimes. Think of us as a supplemental line of defense.”

“Do you know anything about the people who have the shipment?” Lena asked. “Do you know what they’re planning to do with it?”

“No, and that troubles us,” Nahi said. “It’s possible that they’ve already handed it off to a buyer. It’s also possible that they intend to use it themselves for something. There are a lot of possibilities with an item like that. For example, the hide of the white buffalo has a magical ability to compel compliance with any contract that’s written and signed upon it. That makes it extremely useful to any number of people, and not just magicians. Anyone who wants an ironclad contract and is willing to risk the consequences of obtaining the hide would pay a fortune for it.”

Lena sighed. “Well, you know Cal was behind it, but now he’s dead.”

“If Cal Harlan was behind it, then Ezekiel Jarvis was pulling his strings,” Nahi said, her expression hardening.

“So why don’t you—we—just go after him?”

“How stupid can you be?” asked the human. “Jarvis may not be top of the heap as far as the Lakota Mob goes, but not exactly the kind of guy you can just walk in on unannounced.”

Nahi flashed him a warning look. “Stuff it, Kalo.” To Lena, she added, “He’s right, though. Cal Harlan wasn’t the only heavy hitter around there. Jarvis will be well guarded.”

“Do you know if anybody’s found Cal yet?” Lena asked. “Other than you, I mean? How did you find him? Did you go into the apartment?”

Tomás shook his head. “We checked astrally. It didn’t look like anybody had been home yet.”

Lena considered. “He was supposed to pick Mom up at the club in a couple of hours. If nobody knows he’s dead yet we might be able to get in. It’d be dangerous, but if we move fast we might be able to do it.”

“Your mother works at the Thunderbird Club?”

“Yeah. She’s a dancer.”

Again Tomás shook his head. “No good. Nobody might know about Cal yet, but somebody’s got to know about your brothers by now.” His voice softened. “Even if they couldn’t identify the bodies in the fire, they’ll find their van—unless it burned too, or somebody took it. We can’t take the chance. If your mother got the news at the club, then it’ll get back to Jarvis too.”

Lena hadn’t thought of that. “Great. So we’re back to having nothing.” She sighed. “Are we just gonna drive around all night?”

“Just sit back there and don’t ask questions,” Kalo said, earning him another look from Nahi. “We’ll drive around until we’re sure nobody’s following us.”

Lena muttered something unkind under her breath and shoved her hands back in her pockets. She was the one who had suffered the most through all of this. She was the

one who most deserved revenge. She was not going to just be shoved aside, treated like some kid while the adults did the real work.

Though she supposed she could bide her time, at least for a little bit. Since she didn’t have anything like a plan. Maybe let them think she was being compliant, while she thought for a while about what the hell she was going to do next.

VI.

Lena’s eyelids felt heavy, like something large and soft was bearing down upon them. They fluttered and closed, and then she was no longer sitting in the van.

Instead, she was standing on a vast dusty plain. Above her, the sky was an impossible shade of blue, with a few scattered white clouds. The sun shone brightly over the unrelenting brown below her. As she turned slowly in place, getting her bearings, two figures shimmered into being in front of her. At first they were insubstantial, but as she continued to watch they took on solid form and regarded her silently.

The first—no surprise—was the enormous shaggy form of the wolf she had seen before, the one that had protected her and helped her on her first halting steps toward the discovery of her powers, the one that had convinced her that Nahi and her group were not a threat to her. It sat there now, its golden eyes wise and steady, its grey fur rippling gently in the slight breeze.

The second was much larger. It was hard to tear her eyes away from the wolf’s form, but the other was, if anything, even more impressive. It stood nearly five meters tall at its massive shoulder, and it seemed to grow up out of the earth like it was a part of it, solid and steadfast and radiating a power that was both terrifying and comforting. Its white hide gleamed blinding bright under the sunlight.

For a moment, all three of them simply stood there, eyeing each other in silence. Then Lena spoke, hesitantly. “What’s going on?”

It was the wolf that replied. Its mouth did not move; its voice, deep and rich and full of strength and love, held the echo of every beloved father with whom a child felt absolutely safe and protected. “*Don’t be afraid, cub. You’ll come to no harm here with us.*”

She looked back and forth between the wolf (the Wolf) and the White Buffalo. “How is this happening? How did I get here?”

“*You have a lot to learn, my cub, now that you’ve finally opened your mind to what you are. Don’t worry—I’ll be there to guide you. But that isn’t why we’ve come to you now.*”

“Why, then?” She looked at the Buffalo. “Is there a way I can help you?”

The huge head dipped with surprising grace for a creature so large.

“*He doesn’t say much,*” Wolf said, the strength in his





mental voice tinged with amusement. “*More the strong, silent type.*”

Lena took a deep breath. None of this felt strange to her, which was strange in and of itself. “I’ll do anything I can,” she said. “But I’m not very good at this yet. And I don’t know where to start.”

The Buffalo fixed her with its gaze. Its eyes were brown, big and wise and absolutely calm. Images began to flash through Lena’s mind. At first they came too fast for her to follow, but then they slowed down. She scrunched her eyes closed, forcing herself to see nothing but the visions.

She was inside the Singing Rock, surrounded by the derelict forms of old chairs and broken tables in a cleared-out area near the stage.

Her brothers were there, ghostly and insubstantial in the abandoned space. She nearly kicked herself out of the vision-within-a-vision when she saw them, her breath and heartbeat picking up as the fear and grief rushed back in, but she felt the reassuring furry heaviness of Wolf’s paw settle on her shoulder, steadying her. She continued to watch.

Her brothers looked nervous and uncertain. They’d set the box she had seen them go in with down on one of the few solid tables and were looking around as if expecting someone to be there. After a moment another figure came in from a different door. She didn’t recognize the figure—all she could tell was that it was either human or elf, shadowy and shrouded in a longcoat and a mask. When he spoke, his voice was ethereal and tinny, like it was coming to her down a long metal pipe. “You got the shipment?”

“Yeah,” Bryce said. His tone sounded bitter and beaten. “Just take it and get the hell out. We don’t want any more part of this.”

“Not so fast, kid,” the shadowy figure said. “I gotta check the merchandise first. Make sure you’re not pulling anything cute.” He moved over to the box and punched a code into its locking mechanism. It sprang open.

Instantly, Lena staggered. A jumble of emotions washed over her, gripping her brain with such power that she could barely keep her feet. The emotions—sadness, regret, grief, and a deep sense of rage that felt like it was coming up from the center of the earth—were not her own. That much she knew. Instead of her body being taken over by another force, it felt as if her feelings had been. She felt hot tears coursing down her face, overwhelmed by a sense of profound loss that built a geyser’s worth of pressure in her head.

She couldn’t see anything but what looked like a neatly folded piece of pale, tanned leather resting on a nest of soft fabric, but the waves of revulsion that broke over her were not entirely coming from the Buffalo. The wrongness in that box made her gorge rise, and she feared she was going to vomit right there on the earth of this vision.

“Okay,” said the shadowy figure, satisfied. He shut the box with a snap and picked it up. “You boys be good. You—”

He didn’t get to finish the sentence. Instead, he pitched forward, a neat red hole appearing in the center of his masked forehead. Lena didn’t hear the gun go off, but she did hear the echo of a *thud* as the box crashed to the ground next to the fallen man.

Bryce and Dylan went for their guns, but the shooter was concealed and they didn’t act fast enough. Both of them spun and dropped as two more figures rose from behind cover and fired. Struggling to breathe, Lena recognized them as the ork and the human who had left the Singing Rock with the box. The ork—what had Tanya called him? Yelloweyes or something?—laughed as he kicked Bryce’s gun away from him. “Thanks for the delivery, boys. We got somebody who’s gonna pay us big nuyen for this.”

“I know you,” Bryce snarled. “You work for Jarvis.” He’d been hit in the gut and was clutching the wound now, his ethereal forehead dotted with sweat.

The other one snorted. “Frag that. Zeke Jarvis is an old fool who won’t change with the times. We figure it’s time for some new blood.”

“Yeah. New blood that’s screwing your mom,” Yelloweyes added, snickering. His gun was pointed at Bryce’s head, while the human’s was leveled at Dylan. Lena realized that the cadence of the conversation matched the muffled sounds she’d heard on her commlink but had been unable to decipher.

Bryce snarled and lunged at Yelloweyes, his rage propelling him forward almost fast enough to take the ork’s legs out from under him before Yelloweyes pumped two quick rounds into his head. Lena clamped her eyes shut against the sight. She only heard the other shots, and when she opened her eyes again both her brothers lay still in pools of blood while Yelloweyes and his companion were fiddling with something inside the backpack they’d carried in. This took only a few seconds, after which they hurried toward the exit.

Less than a minute after they were clear, the scene lit up with the roar of the familiar explosion. Lena flung herself back, momentarily forgetting that she wasn’t really there, that none of them were really there. She screamed, throwing her hands over her face as the forms of the Wolf and the Buffalo reappeared again and then faded along with the dusty plain and the jeweled blue sky. The last image she saw was a clear mental picture of the ugly face of Max Yelloweyes. Then that, too, faded.

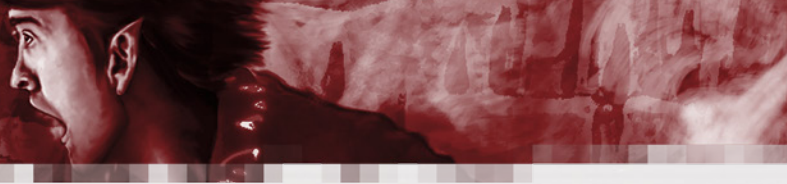
“Lena? Lena!” Somebody was shaking her hard by the shoulder. She jerked back to awareness to see Nahi and Tomás staring at her in concern. The van had stopped now, and the driver, Kalo, was nowhere in sight.

Lena swallowed hard, trying to drive away the vision of Bryce and Dylan lying dead on the Singing Rock’s debris-strewn floor. She was sure that image would follow her until she died. “I had a vision,” she whispered.

Nahi’s gaze sharpened. “What kind of vision?”

She closed her eyes, trying to remember. “I saw Wolf. And I saw the White Buffalo.”





Their wide-eyed stares would have been comical if not for the seriousness of the situation. “The White Buffalo Spirit revealed himself to you?” Tomás asked in near reverence and more than a little disbelief.

“I guess that’s not common?” Lena blinked back tears again, but somewhere in the back of her mind she could still feel the supporting presence of both Wolf and the White Buffalo.

“No,” Nahi said. “It isn’t.” She slid open the door of the van. “Come on inside. We need to figure out our next move.”

“We have to find Max Yelloweyes,” Lena said instantly. “And the other guy with him.”

“Who?” Tomás asked, squeezing out the opening that was barely large enough for his frame. “I thought we had to figure out how to get at Jarvis.”

“Jarvis doesn’t know anything about this,” Lena said. “He’s not involved.”

Again, the two of them looked stunned, but Nahi recovered quickly. “Come on. Let’s go inside. It sounds like we need to talk.”

Lena didn’t know where they were, and that was probably for the best. They led her into what looked like a small apartment; she noticed that Nahi paused to mutter something under her breath before they went in. Once they got inside, they joined Kalo, who was sitting at a table picking at a bowl of Soy Crunchies. He scowled up at them. “So, Sleeping Beauty finally wake up?”

“What is your problem?” Lena demanded, still frazzled and keyed up from the images in her vision.

Nahi shook her head, casting a warning glance at Kalo. “We don’t have time for this.” To Lena, she added, “Kalo has seen more of the atrocities we’re trying to prevent than the rest of us have. It weighs heavily on his ability to be civil sometimes.” She motioned for her to sit down. “Now, tell us about this vision.”

They all listened in silence as Lena described what she’d seen. By then end, even Kalo had lost his scowl and was leaning forward with tense interest. “I wonder why the Buffalo Spirit wants us to find Yelloweyes and his friend,” Nahi mused. “Surely by now they’ve handed off the box to whoever was supposed to get it.”

Suddenly Lena had a flash of insight. “Maybe they haven’t!” Receiving nothing but confused looks in response, she added, “You don’t know Cal Harlan. He was scum. I always felt like I needed to take a shower after being in the same room with him, even before what he tried. If he was betraying his own boss, then maybe he didn’t tell Yelloweyes and his chummer the whole plan.”

Tomás was catching on. “So you’re saying that Harlan didn’t let his guys in on the plan, because he was afraid they’d eliminate the middleman and just take the box straight to whoever was supposed to get it?”

Lena shrugged. “It makes sense, believe me. Cal’s dead, but maybe they don’t know that. He’s not contacting them and they don’t know why. So now they’ve

got this hot box of stuff that will get them burned alive or worse if they’re caught with it, and they don’t know where to take it.”

“But it’s still worth big nuyen,” Kalo added, disgusted. “So thugs like that probably would be too greedy to just dump it.”

“Exactly,” Lena agreed. “So I’m guessing they’re sitting on it somewhere, hoping that Cal will turn up, or whoever’s supposed to be getting it will figure out who they are and contact them.”

“But how are we gonna find them?” Tomás asked. “Do you have any idea where they might be?”

Lena’s gaze traveled around their three faces. “You’re all shamans, right? Can’t you do some kind of ritual to track them?”

“It doesn’t work that way,” Nahi said. “For one thing, it would take too long. For another, we can’t find them without having some kind of link to them.”

“What about the the hide?” Lena asked. “Can you track that?”

“We could try,” she said, “But telesma smugglers are sophisticated. They have to be. That box is almost certainly difficult if not impossible to track magically. Besides, if it weren’t, then the people who are looking for it will already have found it. Even if they aren’t magically active themselves, they’d surely employ someone who is to help them.”

“What about using one of those, what do you call them, watcher spirits to find Yelloweyes? I’ve seen Karl Kombatmage use them plenty of times in the trids to locate people.”

Kalo rolled his eyes.

Nahi had to smile just a bit at that. “Magic doesn’t work quite like it does in the trids, Lena. For one thing, only you could send a watcher to find them, because none of us have ever seen him.”

“So why can’t I do that?”

“Because we don’t have the time to teach you how. You don’t know the ritual, and you don’t even have any basic magical training. It would take days to teach you something even simple like this. We don’t have days. I’m sure whoever wants that box is looking hard for it. Our only advantage is they probably expected to deal with Harlan, which means now that he’s dead, they don’t know who has it.”

Lena sighed, dropping her face down into her hands. “So what now, then?”

“Until we come up with some way to find Yelloweyes or White Buffalo Spirit sends you another vision with an address, then we’re fragged,” Kalo said. He wasn’t scowling now; he just sounded demoralized. “So those drekwipes are gonna get away with it.” He got up from the table, rinsed out his bowl, and tossed it in the sink.

Nahi shook her head. “I’ll call in a few favors and see if I can get more information, but we have to be careful. If Yelloweyes and his friend find out we’re looking for them,





they'll probably bolt to somewhere we'll never find them. Lena, it's been a long night for you. Why don't you grab a nap. If we have to move, it'll be fast."

"And be sure to let us know if you have any more dreams, neh?" Tomás asked with a wry smile. "C'mon, I'll show you where you can sleep."

Thoroughly discouraged, Lena followed him to a tiny back bedroom. After all of this, she could think of nothing else to do. What was the point of having these magical powers if she couldn't even use them? Flopping down on the narrow bed, she put her hands up behind her head and stared up at the cracked, stained ceiling. She'd been half wondering before if, maybe after this whole thing was over, she might be able to convince Nahi to teach her how to use magic. She'd already taken a liking to the shaman as a fellow follower of Wolf and a strong, self-assured woman. What would it have been like to have her as a mother instead of her own, who lowered herself with slime like Cal Harlan just to keep herself in booze.

Her eyes flew open. Before she was even fully aware of what she was doing, she launched herself up from the bed and took off toward the front of the apartment.

Only Nahi was there, pacing around the tiny living room. She looked up, startled, as Lena barreled in. "Lena?"

Lena fumbled in her pocket and flung something onto the table. "Can you do something with this?" she asked, breathless.

Nahi stared at it. "Your commlink? What ... ?"

"Cal's commlink!" she nearly yelled. "I stuck it in my pocket before I left my place. I forgot I had it!"

Tomás hurried in from the kitchen, a questioning look on his face. "What's going on?"

Lena pointed at the commlink. "Maybe there's something in there that'll lead us to Yelloweyes. Cal must have contacted them at some point. Maybe their contact info is in his 'link."

"You have Harlan's commlink?" Kalo demanded, coming in to see what all the noise was about. His scowl was back. "Stupid girl, they could use that to track us!"

Lena glared back at him. "Seriously, do you think I'm that dumb? I turned it off before I took it. But I'm sure he's got some kind of passcode on it. I didn't check—like I said, I kind grabbed it at the last minute. But if he does, do you guys know anybody who can crack it?"

Tomás snatched it up in his large hand. "Let me make a couple of calls," he said and hurried out.

The other three were left to wait impatiently. It didn't take long. Tomás returned in a matter of minutes.

"Let's go," he said. "I set up a meet with Spud in twenty minutes at Kafcade. He should be able to crack it."

Lena didn't bother to ask if they could trust this Spud guy, whoever he was. She didn't have any other options, so she had to figure her new chummers knew what they were doing. She gathered up her gear and, after all three of the shamans did a sweep to make sure nobody was nearby

with hostile intent, followed them back to the van. As she got in, Tomás touched her shoulder. "Great idea, Lena," he said, giving her tusk smile. "Maybe after this is all over, you can stick with us for a while. We can teach you how to use your powers, if you don't have somebody lined up."

"I'd like that," she said, and was surprised at the warm feeling his words gave her.

VII.

The Kafcade was, ostensibly, a hole-in-the-wall twenty-four-hour coffee shop in the No Boundaries area, sandwiched between an apartment building and a clothing store that catered to trolls who favored the classic Amerind look. Spud was a rat-faced Amerind dwarf in a backward Lakota Arrows hat, a loud Hawai'ian shirt, and a backpack nearly as big as he was. He looked more than a little grumpy about being dragged out of his bed at close to dawn. "This couldn't've waited?" he growled after stumping in five minutes late and throwing his pack and his squat body into the rearmost booth where the others waited.

Tomás shrugged. "Just callin' in a favor, omae," he said. "Or do you want that poltergeist to find its way back to your doss?"

"Yeah, whatever. Whatcha got? And make it quick. I didn't get to bed till an hour ago."

They gave him the 'link and waited, sipping hot cups of soykaf, while he examined it. "Can you break the code?" Lena blurted after a couple of minutes passed.

He gave her a look. "Chica, they ain't made the passcode I can't break. But this here is kid stuff." He switched it on and stared intently at it for several minutes. His eyes, which had been solid black, began scrolling lines of green-glowing text vertically, making for an odd but compelling effect. After about five minutes he blinked and switched the phone back off. "Done," he announced, sliding it across the table. He looked at Tomás, "Really, Tommy, you shouldn't call in favors for such bush-league jobs. I'd have done this one for fifty nuyen."

"We're not done yet," Tomás said. "Sit tight a minute. Go ahead, Lena. See what you can find. We'll keep a lookout while you check. Spud, can you block us so nobody can detect the 'link while she's looking?"

"Yeah, yeah."

Lena switched it on and quickly found Cal's recent-calls list. Scrolling through, she found several from an LTG number that was noted as being from MYE. "This is it," she murmured. Accessing the voicemail, she saw that there were two messages left from the MYE LTG. Glancing around to make sure that the waitress wasn't near, she put the 'link on the table and played the first message through the speaker. It was timestamped around half an hour after the explosion that had destroyed the Singing Rock.

"Cal, where the hell are you?" a growling voice erupt-





ed out of the small speaker. "We got the package and we weren't followed, but you're not answerin'. Call me and tell me where to meet up."

"You were right," Nahi murmured.

Lena switched to the second message, which was stamped another half-hour after the first one. "Cal, you fragger, answer your damn 'link! Where the hell are you, and what's up with making us sit on this thing? Call me back now and tell us what the frag to do! We're holed up until we hear from you."

"That's it," Lena said. "No more voicemails."

Tomás nodded, then looked back at Spud. "Can you track him? Tell us where he is now?"

"Sure," the dwarf said, reaching for the commlink. "Assuming he's still got his 'link on him."

"He's got to be waiting for someone to contact him," Nahi pointed out.

"Hey, can you guys tell if Cal is, uh—" Lena glanced sideways at Spud "—still where you think he is?"

Nahi picked up on what she was getting at instantly. "A moment," she said, and slumped back in her seat. After about five minutes, which Spud spent muttering about how freaky shamans were, she returned to her body. "It appears that the scene is undisturbed," she said.

Lena nodded. "Good, good. Spud, can you go ahead and find where they are?"

It only took the dwarf decker a few minutes to get the information they were seeking: "They, or at least the 'link, is at the Pinto Hotel."

"That's only a couple of clicks from the Thunderbird," Lena said. Despite all the horrific things she'd witnessed and been through this long night, she grinned in triumph. Taking the 'link back from Spud, she dictated a text-only message, and soon her companions were nodding in agreement. "I think it's time for these drekheads to get a little surprise."

VIII.

Twenty minutes later they waited, crouched down in the van parked across the street from an abandoned auto-repair shop on Running Horses Street. The sun was coming up and the streets were quiet; the only other living being they'd seen was a middle-aged elf walking his dog. He'd gone his way without even seeming to notice the van, let alone its hidden occupants. Lena had to admit that this whole shaman gig was looking pretty sweet. Nahi had summoned one spirit to conceal them within the van, while Kalo had sent another off to wait inside the auto shop in case Yelloweyes and his chummer tried anything funny or unexpected.

Lena watched the street, keeping her eye on the alleyway that included a side door. They'd broken the lock on this door, and Lena had instructed Yelloweyes to come in that way. She was getting nervous now, flashing back to

waiting in Bryce and Dylan's van for them to come out. She wondered if things would ever slow down enough for her to get her bearings, or if Yelloweyes and Co. had figured that something was up and were now preparing an ambush. "You don't think they're on to us, do you?" she murmured.

"Just be patient," Tomás said, but he too was looking up and down the street.

Five minutes later, an old grey Ford Americar with tinted windows rounded the corner at the south end of the street. It crept along, almost as if it were looking for something. "It's an ork and a human, both male," Nahi said from the front seat, her gaze unfocused as she directed a clairvoyance spell at the car.

"Do they have the box?" Lena leaned forward in anticipation.

"I can't tell, it might be in the trunk."

The car cruised up the street until it reached the alley and then turned into it. Nahi held up a finger, watching them. "They're getting out, but they aren't taking anything with them."

"Maybe they want to make sure the coast is clear," Tomás said. "Tell us when they go inside."

There was another pause, and then Nahi nodded. "Okay, they're in. The spirit says they're looking around in there and starting to get suspicious. Let's go."

The four of them hurried across the street and ducked around the alley. Lena pulled her pistol from her jacket pocket, since she couldn't count on her magic working.

Yelloweyes and his human chummer didn't even see them coming. The human yelped and went for his gun as the door slammed open and the four of them poured in with Tomás's bulky armored form taking point, but Nahi behind him was faster with her spell. The guy got off one wild shot and then dropped to the floor with a shriek of pain, clutching his head.

Next to him, Yelloweyes took in the scene. "Holy drek!" he yelled, and attempted to make a run for it. Lena took out his knee with a well-aimed shot and he screamed and fell, clawing at his injured limb. "What the frag?" he yelled. "Where's Cal? Who the hell are you people?"

Lena moved over closer as Kalo magically shoved Yelloweyes's gun out of his reach. She pulled out Cal's commlink and held it up. "You're pretty fraggin' stupid, Max," she said, voice dripping with contempt and hatred. "You should never trust text-only messages from dead perverts." She aimed her Colt at his head. "Now, where's the box, you murdering drekwipe?"

"What box?" the ork demanded. "I don't—"

She kicked him hard in his bloody knee and he screamed again, writhing. "You guys killed my brothers, you scumbag!" she growled. "You do not want to screw with me. Now, I'm gonna ask you one more time, then I'm gonna shoot out your other knee. Then your elbows. Then your guts. Then maybe I'll ask my friends here to heal you up so I can do it again. Scan?" She leaned in, taking careful and precise aim on Yelloweyes's uninjured leg.



"It's in the car!" he howled. "In the trunk! Don't kill me! I was just doin' what Cal told me to! This whole thing was his idea! He was the one that wanted 'em dead! I—"

"Just shut up," Lena ordered. "You better hope that you're not lying to me, Max."

The four of them headed back outside. This time Tomás brought up the rear, dragging the thugs along by the backs of their jackets. The human was unconscious or dead; Yelloweyes simply whimpered in pain and looked like he would pass out any second.

Kalo opened the American's door and popped the trunk, and they gathered around. Just as Yelloweyes had insisted, the heavy box was there, nestled in a pile of old blankets. It was still locked up tight. As soon as the trunk was open and the box was visible, the familiar uncomfortable sensations began to grip Lena, just as they had when she had been with the box in her brothers' van. Next to her, she could see that her companions were suffering the same discomfort. "Okay," she said. "Now what?"

"Now," said a silky voice behind them, "You hand over the box. You won't be needing it anymore, but thank you so much for leading us to it. We were having a bit of trouble finding it on our own."

Lena whirled. Standing at the end of the alley were several figures, none of them Amerind. The speaker was a tall male Aztlán elf, slim and elegant, clad in an expensive suit and overcoat that were both embroidered with subtle magical symbols. He raised his hand in a languid gesture, and Lena's head instantly began to feel swimmy. Next to her she could see that her friends were struggling against it as well, sagging as they attempted to maintain their balance.

"No!" Kalo's voice came to her from far away, and it looked to her like slow motion as he tried to ready a spell, only to be cut down from two sides by the chatter of SMG fire from two of the elegant man's companions. He hit the ground and didn't move.

This can't be happening! Not now! Lena fought to bring her muddled thoughts under control, to send out a desperate plea for help to Wolf or White Buffalo or whoever would listen, but her brain wouldn't cooperate. The uneven, trash-strewn ground of the alley swam in her vision as it sped closer, and her last thought was *At least I got the guys who killed Bryce and Dylan. That's something, right?*

IX.

Lena didn't even have to open her eyes to know that she was in a world of trouble.

Her head felt strange and disassociated, her thoughts stubbornly refusing to come together properly. She could tell it was dark through her closed lids, but an occasional flicker of light suggested flames. The air was filled with a strange, cloying aroma, sweet and coppery. She risked opening her eyes.

She was right. She *was* in a world of trouble.

She lay on the ground, the black, star-dotted canopy of sky above her immediately telling her that she was no longer in Cheyenne. There was far too much light in the city to see this many stars. *It's night already? That means I've been unconscious all day. Or longer.*

They'd taken everything but her basic sweatshirt and pants, so her guns and jacket and commlink were gone. It didn't take her long to find the metal shackle clamped around her ankle; the chain attached to it snaked along the ground and fastened to a heavy post driven into the rocky earth. Two other chains led to similar manacles locked around Nahi and Tomás. Both of the shamans appeared to still be unconscious. Beyond them, not chained but definitely out, were the slumped forms of Max Yelloweyes and his fellow thug.

She turned her head slowly, trying to figure out what was going on without drawing any attention to herself, but she needn't have worried. Even her involuntary gasp of shock at the sight of the scene before her went unnoticed by everyone else in the area, all of whom were focused on—
—Oh spirits, what are they doing?

They were in a wide clearing surrounded by jutting rocks that leaned in over their heads, giving the area the aspect of some sort of outdoor cathedral topped by a velvety black ceiling. There were eight people that Lena could see from where she was. Five were arrayed around a large and complicated diagram that looked as if it had been carved directly into the ground. Even Lena, with her limited knowledge of magical processes, could tell that it was a powerful magic circle. Even looking at it made her feel nauseated, edgy. Wrong. This circle, she was sure, was created for no wholesome purpose.

Around the circle four robed figures, two men and two women, stood equidistant from each other, alternating with the flickering flames of tall torches. All four of the figures faced inward, their attention on the fifth and final member of the ritual group.

It was the Aztlán elf. He stood in the center of the circle, his arms outstretched toward the sky, his thin lips moving in a chant. His robes were much more elaborate than his companions': deep red silk, the magical symbols embroidered on them in gold thread fairly radiating with mystical power. In one hand he held a staff with a glowing red gem; his other rested on something that had been laid out on a small wooden table in front of him.

It's the hide of the White Buffalo, Lena realized. She remembered what Nahi had told her before, and her whole body went cold. *Who, or what, is he going to make a contract with?*

She forced herself to look away from the scene for a moment to identify the other three people. They were all large males, two orks and a hulking human, and all wore armored jackets and carried assault rifles. They patrolled outside the circle, looking both outward, as if they expected to see someone approaching the area, and inward, toward the



prisoners. Lena noticed they didn't look at what was going on inside the circle; in fact, they seemed to be deliberately avoiding doing so. Some distance away, well out of the circle of light provided by the torches, she could see the dark bulky forms of at least two vehicles.

Lena, still watching the guards to see if they would react, reached over and tapped hard on Nahi's ankle, the only part of her she could reach. "Nahi! Wake up," she muttered urgently. The guards glanced at them but continued to patrol.

The other woman moaned and rolled over. "Lena—?"

"Wake up! Something's going on, something bad."

Nahi's eyes fluttered opened, but she still looked out of it, like she'd been drugged. Immediately, her brow creased and her expression changed to one of mingled fear and disgust. "What's that smell?" she began in a muddy tone, and then she saw the circle. The chanting grew louder, and Lena thought she could see faint dark energies beginning to coalesce above the circle, obscuring the brightness of the stars. For a long time Nahi simply stared at the circle, her glassy eyes growing more horrified as the moments passed. Even in the dim light Lena could see her go pale. "Oh, great Spirit..." she breathed.

Lena struggled to move closer to her. "What? What's going on? What's he doing?"

It took Nahi a moment to compose herself. "He's summoning something. And from the look of that circle, something very big, and very dangerous."

"How do you—?"

Nahi shook her head. "That circle is an abomination, Lena. I don't know what he's trying to bring forth, but whatever it is, it means well for no one."

"Then why would he summon it at all?" Lena fervently wished she knew more about magic.

Nahi didn't answer, because something was happening in the circle. The elf mage in the center lowered one of his arms and gestured directly toward where Lena and the others lay. Lena stiffened, bracing herself against whatever he intended to do, but she and her friends were not his targets. Instead, Yelloweyes' unconscious body lifted up off the ground and floated toward the circle. The two mages closest to him made small gestures, and then the ork's body crossed into the circle, flipped over, and hung suspended face-down in front of the elf. He was still chanting, louder now, in a language that Lena didn't understand. As she and Nahi continued to watch in horror, the elf removed a knife from within the folds of his robes, cried out some harsh syllables to the skies, and slit Yelloweyes' throat with a decisive slashing motion.

Lena couldn't help yelling in shock, but no one paid her any attention. Even the guards had glanced toward what was going on in the circle, looking resolute but nervous.

As for Yelloweyes, he made no sound. The slice had been a powerful one, the single stroke nearly decapitating him. Blood spurted, and the Aztláner elf directed its flow with deft gestures. Not a drop sullied his robes or the pristine white hide on the table. Instead, it sprayed downward.

As Lena continued to watch, fearing she was going to vomit, the dead ork's blood channeled itself into the etched sigils forming the circle. The elf's voice rose, its cadence more like a harsh song now, and everywhere the blood touched, the circle's lines lit up in brilliant red like the whole thing had been cast in neon. Sweat began to break out on the elf's forehead, and around the circle his fellow ritual participants were shaking with the effort of holding the magical energies in place. Above them, the shifting dark energies were beginning to take on a form, though it was impossible to identify it yet.

"It's too much for him," Nahi murmured. "He won't be able to control it."

"What's that mean?" Lena demanded, unable to take her eyes off the scene. "He won't be able to summon it?"

Nahi shook her head, also without looking away. "No, he won't be able to control it once it's come through. Unless ..."

"Unless what?"

"No," she whispered.

"What?" Lena glanced at her, then quickly back. The older woman had gone dead white.

"That's why he brought us here. Why he wanted the hide ..." Nahi shook her head, terror in her eyes.

"Why?"

"We're sacrifices," she whispered. "That's why he kept us alive. This is blood magic, Lena. It goes against everything shamans believe, against anything anyone decent believes. It's blight on the Earth. He's going to use us, to appease that thing when it gets here."

"Appease it?" Lena felt herself shaking. She yanked at her leg, trying to pull the post from the ground, but it didn't budge.

"To guarantee he can compel one service," Nahi said numbly.

Lena was confused. "One service?" Of course she knew about how shamans summoned spirits and asked them for help, but this was something new. "Why would that—"

And then she knew. She stared hard at Nahi. "He wants to make it sign the contract," she said, and her voice was as numb as the other woman's. "On the hide, so it can't go back on it."

Nahi nodded.

"He wants to enslave that thing."

Again, she nodded. She looked ill.

Lena took a deep breath, still struggling against the chain. "Can't you do something? Can't you go to the astral plane and get help, like how you checked on Cal?"

"I've tried. These manacles prevent astral projection. I don't know what else to do."

Lena slumped, watching the elf. His voice was still strong, but she could hear a faint edge of stress in it too, a slight shaking. His head was thrown back, his eyes fixed on the gathering dark form above him. Its shape was now vaguely humanoid, but only just. Lena could barely stand to look at it directly. Her eyes slid over it, and her brain conjured images of blood and flayed flesh and the dark things





that lived in the cracks of the world. Whatever this thing was, wherever it had come from, she wanted no part of it.

And then, suddenly and with no sound, two other forms shimmered into existence outside the circle, shrieking an alarm. "What the frag?" Lena yelled.

Then everything went crazy at once.

Behind the shimmering forms, several more substantial ones appeared at the far south end of the clearing. Most of them were moving so fast that Lena couldn't count them, their swift forms darting with inhuman speed. They had guns and were firing them at the two new spirits, which had moved in their direction. Closer in, the three guards dove for cover behind the vehicles and leveled their assault rifles, firing off staccato streams at the newcomers.

"What's going on?" Lena demanded to nobody in particular, ducking down to stay as low as possible. Nahi didn't answer. She looked like she was trying to form a spell, but nothing was happening. Beyond her, Tomás struggled to awaken from his drugged stupor.

The group in the circle had clearly noticed the new arrivals, but just as clearly could not abandon their posts at this crucial point in the ritual, not when the dark bulk of the thing they were summoning was nearly fully opaque now. The elf mage barked commands in the strange language, waving his hands and the staff, obviously making a desperate bid to finish what he had started before the newcomers cut through his line of defense. He made a harsh gesture toward Lena's group, and the manacle dropped away from Nahi's ankle. The shaman screamed as she was lifted telekinetically from the ground and dragged toward the circle.

"NO!" Lena lunged forward and locked both hands around one of Nahi's wrists, but her strength was not sufficient to withstand the pull of the mage's power. Nahi's hand slipped free and, fighting to marshal her own magic to stop her progress, she was dragged into the middle of the circle. Lena shrieked as the mage bellowed more words of power and plunged his knife into Nahi's chest, then flung her body upward into the shifting miasma of the thing he was summoning.

And her body simply disappeared.

One moment it was there, spraying blood down like rain over the circle, and the next it had vanished, swallowed by the dark shape. Slowly, the thing began to lower itself down toward the center of the circle. Lena, nearly mad with rage and grief at the loss of yet another friend, nonetheless could see that its downward progress was reluctant—whatever the mage wanted it to do, it was not in agreement.

Outside the circle, the elf's guards had taken down two of the new group but they continued to surge forward toward the clearing. Gunfire rang, ricocheting off the rocks and joining its echoing blasts to the cacophony forming within the circle.

Another figure was approaching with the new group, one that, though it wasn't moving as fast as the others, instantly claimed Lena's attention. It was a female human, pale and dark-haired, surrounded by a glowing nimbus of

energy. She approached at a walk, appearing unaffected by the chaos around her. Her voice rang out: "This is your only chance, Mendez. Return what you've stolen from me or you will die." Two of the elf mage's men opened fire on her, but their rounds bounced harmlessly off her shield. Inexorably, she moved toward the circle.

For a moment, Lena had no idea what she was talking about. What he had stolen from her? But then she realized who this woman had to be. Of course! More than one person had been after the hide! Yelloweyes and the other thug had killed the courier who'd come to claim the box from her brothers, and that person had represented someone. Now, it appeared, all the players had joined the game.

Hot tears of rage and pain streaking her face, Lena glanced over at Tomás. He would be no help. Whatever drug they'd given the shamans to make them tractable as they waited their turn to be sacrificed was working. In fact, it appeared they'd erred on the side of giving the big troll too much. He seemed completely unaware of what was going on around him.

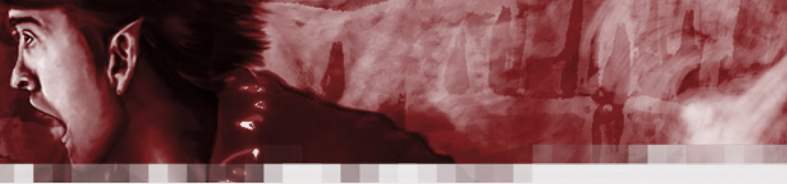
Inside the circle, the elven mage, Mendez, ignored the woman's words. He stood with one hand pointed at the hide and the other, the one holding the jeweled staff, aimed at the dark form. Lena tried to look at it again, but she got only the briefest impression of thousands of staring eyes and mouths roiling in a black viscous substance before her stomach clenched and she was forced to look away. Instead, she focused on Mendez, trying to block out the sounds of the gunfire and the fear that any moment now she would be drawn into the circle as a third sacrifice.

The mage had picked up a black knife from the table next to the hide. His arm shaking and his jaw quivering with the exertion of maintaining the energies in the circle, he slashed his palm and, gritting his teeth, allowed his blood to flow into a small bowl. Keeping the jeweled staff pointed at the creature, which seemed to be fighting him harder now as it caught on to what was happening, he dipped an old-fashioned quill pen into the blood and moved it toward the blinding whiteness of the White Buffalo Hide. The creature shrieked, and Lena was sure that as long as she lived, she would never hear a more horrific sound. Even the other mage paused in her forward progress for a second.

Think, Lena! Keeping herself low to avoid stray rounds, she watched as one of the female mage's forces cut down one of Mendez's guards, and on the other side of the clearing, one of Mendez's two spirits dashed a screaming ork into the rock walls of the canyon. Panting, heart thudding, she tried to force her brain to function, for whatever part of her that was magical to return and bring that feeling of pressure indicating that Wolf was going to help her. *Please, she begged. If you're ever going to help me, please do it now! Don't let them do this!* She formed the image of the wise golden eyes of Wolf in her mind, picturing his claws and teeth rending flesh and stopping this whole insane production before it was too late.

Nothing happened.





No pressure, no feeling of taking on the aspect of Wolf, nothing. She slumped in a heap, letting her breath out, crying in frustration. "Help me!" she yelled aloud.

The other spirit grabbed one of the female mage's men and spun him madly up toward the sky, ripping his body limb from limb as he shrieked out his agony. His body and his gun plummeted back and landed on top of one of the vehicles. Inside the circle, the four ritual assistants were barely standing now, their bodies shaking, dark rivulets of blood running down from their noses and their ears. The dark thing in the middle was still resisting, but the mage seemed to be gaining the upper hand. The quill pen dipped in blood, its tip quivering, moved closer to the surface of the hide.

Please, Lena whispered.

The tip of the quill touched the hide.

The dark thing roiled and screamed, trying to move backward, but it was held fast by Mendez's will and the bonds of the sacrifice that had compelled it.

No! How could Wolf fail her now? After he had helped her before, gotten her this far, how could he—

And then a presence was there with her. She could feel it, strong and protective, its massive power settling around her like a blanket. In her mind she could see eyes ...

But they weren't golden. Instead, they were deep, brown, wise. Eyes filled with a rage as deep as the ocean, as vast as the sky. She could sense the power of the Earth straining to be loosed. A sense of near-infinite patience that had finally reached its end.

And then she knew what she had to do. She closed her eyes. *Help me, she begged. Take back what's yours.*

This time there was no sense of pressure in her head, no feeling that she was brimming with power that she must release. Instead, a massive rumble rose up from the ground, so loud that the sounds of gunfire and the screams of the dying and Mendez's chanting cry were nothing more than the faintest babble in the background. Lena struggled up to a half-sitting position, trying to see what was going on.

At the far end of the clearing, something was coming—something big, and white, and surging. One by one, those left alive turned to look at it. All except Mendez, who continued to scribble his bloody words onto the white hide. Even his fellow ritual members glanced in the direction of the sounds, though his bark of order brought them quickly back to focus as the dark thing fought to break free.

Lena didn't blink. She didn't move. She couldn't. She watched in awe as the white form drew closer, and she realized that it wasn't a single form, but many, hundreds of translucent white forms, glowing with a radiance that lit up the night sky. Shoulder to massive shoulder, proud heads lowered, eyes blazing with rage and vengeance, hooves thundering on the earth that raised no dust under them. And at the rear of the pack, standing taller than all the rest, Lena saw him. For just a second, their eyes met—hers wide, awed, and frightened, his steady, brown, and unwavering.

And then they reached the group.

It was all over in a few seconds. The herd of spectral white buffalo overran the small camp, tossing their heads, stamping their hooves, crying out their defiant bellows. As Lena watched, wondering if this was the end for her and Tomás, they stampeded past and through the vehicles, catching both Mendez's and the female mage's forces on their horns, tossing them up into the air, crushing them under their hooves. The screams tore the fabric of the night like a dull knife sawing on tin.

The female mage tried to cast a spell, raising her hands and flinging magical energy at the herd, but she might as well have been trying to stop a burst dam from flooding a valley. Her glowing shield held for perhaps three seconds, then flared and died. She went down under the crush of white bodies.

The circle lasted slightly longer. Lena couldn't count the number of white buffalo in the herd—she wondered if there was one spirit for every one of the creatures that had been unjustly murdered by poachers and hunters. If that were true, there must be many indeed. The unearthly glow of their white hides made it difficult to differentiate them. As they breached Mendez's circle, they seemed to be nothing more than a vast, bellowing white sea.

The four assistants went down first, falling under the spirits' hooves as the female mage had. Mendez, clearly panicking, darted his gaze back and forth between the herd and the dark shape of the thing he had summoned as if trying to determine the lesser of the two threats. He shrieked a command at the spirit, pointing at the herd. It hesitated for a moment, then turned and threw itself into the churning mass of spectral buffalo.

For a moment, it actually seemed as if it might affect them. Near it, a couple of the buffalo spirits reared back, screaming in pain as it contacted them, and winked out. But the others, their rage redoubling at this affront against nature, flowed over and around the thing, enveloping it in radiant white light. Lena screamed in triumph as the white light took the black void to pieces, shredding it and casting its components wide until they simply shriveled and disappeared. The thing's shriek as it died echoed with such intensity that several more of the buffalo spirits rose up and disappeared, adding their own piercing cries to the din. Lena clamped her hands to her ears, but it did no good. The scream was not strictly physical. As it spiked into her spirit, she felt her mind begin to slip.

The leading edge of the herd reached her and passed harmlessly through her own body and Tomás', like so many phantoms. The last sights she saw before she passed out were Mendez's face stretched in a rictus of pain and madness as he was pulled down into the stampede, and far up on the top of the rocks, the large rangy form of a wolf crouched in a pose of observance. For a moment she met its eyes, and it nodded.

In approval, she hoped.



GAME INFORMATION

LENA

Lena is a young shaman who has had a rough upbringing and an even rougher introduction to the streets. Without a family she can rely on or any living allies to speak of, her road is going to be challenging. But with Wolf and Buffalo on her side, she may end up accomplishing more than anyone would expect.

B	A	R	S	W	L	I	C	EDG	ESS	M
3	4	4	3	3	3	4	3	5	6	1
Initiative	6 + 1D6									
Astral Initiative	4 + 2D6									
Movement	8/16/+2									
Condition Monitor	10/10									
Limits	Physical 5, Mental 3, Social 5									
Armor	12									
Skills	Athletics skill group 3, Negotiation 3, Outdoor skill group 2, Perception 6, Pistol 2, Unarmed Combat 1									
Qualities	Bad Luck, Mentor Spirit (Wolf), Spirit Affinity (air)									
Spells	Clout, (Wolf) Form									
Gear	Armor jacket, Sony Emperor commlink (Device Rating 2)									
Weapons	Browning Ultra-Power [Heavy Pistol, Acc 5(6), DV 8P, AP -1, SA, RC —, 10(c), w/ laser sight, 2 clips regular ammo] Colt L36 [Light Pistol, Acc 7, DV 7P, AP —, SA, 11(c), w/ 2 clips regular ammo]									

MENDEZ

A less-than-charming individual from Aztlan, Mendez is a representative member of that nation's Awakened elite. While Mendez's fate is currently unknown, his stats are included here for gamemasters who desire to include a menacing, Aztlan-based threat for their group.

B	A	R	S	W	L	I	C	EDG	ESS	M
3	3	4	3	5	5	4	5	2	6	8
Initiative	8 + 1D6									
Astral Initiative	8 + 2D6									
Movement	6/12/+2									
Condition Monitor	10/11									
Limits	Physical 5, Mental 7, Social 7									
Armor	6									
Skills	Arcana 5, Athletics skill group 3, Banishing 5, Binding 6, Negotiation 3, Outdoor skill group 3, Perception 5, Pistol 3, Sorcery skill group 7, Unarmed Combat 3									
Initiate Grade	3									
Metamagics	Centering, sacrifice, shielding									
Spells	Armor, Control Thoughts, Detect Life, Heal, Ignite, Increase Reflexes, Invisibility, Lightning Bolt, Mana Barrier, Manabolt, Mass Agony, Resist Pain, Stealth, Stunball,									
Gear	Armor clothing, athame (Force 5, with 4 Blood Magic Points stored, 1 day old), Erika Elite commlink (Device Rating 4)									
Weapons	Browning Ultra-Power [Heavy Pistol, Acc 5(6), DV 8P, AP -1, SA, RC —, 10(c), w/ laser sight, 4 clips regular ammo]									

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