

The Saga Of
The **Seven Stars**

Cycle One: The Anshadar Effect

featuring Two Complete Novels

by:

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The Seven Stars

&

VoidSpawn

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SENZAR™

Scene

“Tatternorn!”

who?

“Move it! Move it! Get your ass in gear!”

me, move? but i'm comfortable and warm and...

“Go!”

Race of six amber flies, buzzing by.

...who the hell are those guys?

Black shadow-fog... cloying, grasping.

waitaminnit... how can i go if i can't feel my feet?

“Go!”

screw you... this is a dream... i'm dreaming... this is only a dr—

“Tatternorn! Look out!”

i'm not—

Blast of molten blackness. Heat, vibration. Sensation.

holy... I felt that...

“Tatternorn!”

...her cry chills ...it chills...

“He’s okay, Silverdancer! It’ll take more’n that to bring *him* down...”

thanks for the vote of confidence, Sammy...

Sammy? what the hell are you doing here... this is my dream...

Nervous laughter, hard to pick out over the dull roar in my ears.

“Dream? Did that magma blast fry your brain or something, Tat? This is *real*...”

no...

“C’mon, mon! We gotta go kill the bad guys!”

Luther? you’re here, too? but why...

Cold shock, so warm, as the black fog breaks for one pale moment. And I see...

he’s got four arms! he’s got blue skin! Christ!

I laugh, despite the growing sense of all-damning horror in my soul. Luther Gates is not blue.

Luther Gates does not have four arms. He plays drums like he’s got four, but...

Now, I know it’s only a dream. Now, I can control it. I can control—

At the edge of the blackness, something draws my attention: a flash of purest silver. I turn to face it in the frustration of dream-time slow motion. And I see her...

Samantha? not you, too...

Samantha Teale, covered in noxious black blood; a predatory, feral light gleaming wickedly in her green eyes. At her feet sprawls the shriveled form of an ornately armored jet black-skinned warrior, whose dead eyes shine with a pale silver light.

this is only a dream. only a dream.

The sudden flash of a wicked smile, and I know her for who she truly is.

Silverdancer?

“Silverdancer...” her voice sings in my head before she bounds away to claim more souls.

no... this is no dream... this is real

The black curtain descends again, but not before the horror, the truth, of the moment stains itself irrevocably into my soul. And with that horrific stain of truth comes the damning realization that this is how we died...

...that this is how I damned us all.

oh, god, no...

Shouts... echoes... sibilant hisses of hatred.

A'NAHL NATHRAK...

no...

Death in D-minor.

Sympathetic pulse inside my soul.

no...

what the hell is in my hands?

don't look...

Skurge.

Hate/Pain/Death-Brother!

Fly-spawn mind-burrow.

Mindtouch...

“Tatternorn! The Void calls!”

sword/bladetalk?

“Yes. As never before...”

Resistance—no avail. Here, in DruusDome, in the deepest bowels of the Midnight Realm, there is no such thing as resistance. Here, the Shadar rule supreme. Here, for the glory of the Dark One, we all shall die.

“Time to die, Tatternorn!”

fuck you and fuck that!

“See me and see *yourself*, VoidSpawn...”

Words of hate in hell-tongue.

Vision: Death-blade raised to eyes... purple runic rows twisting, pulsing in time to heartbeat, three beats to one.

Realization: Hate/Pain/Death-Brother... The Pact of the Impossible Blade!

omygodthisisrealwakepwakepwakep!

Rush: mad, rampant death horde; a sea of black Shadar steel in danse-macabre, weaving the counterpoint to the D-minor thrum of Death.

“Don't just stand there, Tat! Kill him!”

“C'mon, Tatternorn!”

“Do it, mon!”

“...too many of them to...”

my friends... my god...

Mocking denial Mindtouch as I am forcefully reminded of the truth.

no, no gods any more. there never were...

“Fulfill the pact, maggot! Face him! Face the only *god* that *you* know!”

damn you, Skurge...

Lurch-lunge-stumble-curse up the nine stairs of blackest obsidian to face the Lord of the Dark, Lord Valthrustra: the demon god of the Shadar, absolute King of Hate!

Madness beckons with skeletal claws.

His dead eyes gleam, my soul mirrored within.

Recognition. And with it, sardonic rictus sneer.

heknowsheknowsheknows

“Kill him now, Tatternorn! Spill his black blood with Skurge before he completes the Dragon's Breath!”

...who said that?

Death-smile from the fiend.

heknows...

Urge. Hate. Fulfillment.

Strike and kill the Dark One.

but he knows...

He smiles and whisper-screams:

“Heed my thrice-damned brother’s last words, VoidSpawn. Strike me! Discover for yourself his betrayal. Set the wheels in motion and learn the price of immortality...”

liar!

“There is but one truth! Strike me now, or be forever denied it!”

i hate you...

“You hate yourself, VoidSpawn.”

no...

“Strike me, false soul!”

no.

“Face me!”

no. deny Him three times...

Mindtouch Skurge mock-laugh.

He does not give us a choice, Tatternorn!

Screams. Time: wounded by mortal blow. Space: ripped apart by power-not-meant-to-be.

Mindscream.

“Where are you, Silverdancer?”

Down, down, down... into the Electric Angel of the Void.

...into the Void.

Scene

“Where are you now, Silverdancer?”

Soul-scream. Then, the lying silence of cold rain drizzling outside.

“Samantha?” I finally managed to choke out. But my lady, my love, was far away, and my silken sheets were cold with my own sweat, not hers. An occurrence most common as of late.

To sleep, perchance to have nightmares that scare the hell outta you and whoever’s in bed with you... If only Ol’ Bill would have known the current irony of his words, he would have gone swimming in the Thames with a ton of bricks. “Perchance to dream” my ass!

Cursing the benefits of my so-called college education, I took a peek over at the night stand, hoping that I wouldn’t see what I thought I’d see. Alas (thanks, Ol’ Bill), my vintage Rocky and Bullwinkle alarm clock betrayed me. Its baleful red LED glow read 4:44 AM, the precise time of my previous nightmares.

Et tu, Bullwinkle? Well, at least I was consistent in my madness. Three nights in a row now. Same time, same Bat Channel.

As quietly as I could manage, I got out of bed, then staggered over the hardwood floor until I made it to the bathroom. Once there, I closed the door, hit the lights—which I instantly loathed—and stared at myself in the mirror. A faint twinge of something blue arced across my eyes, a bloom of electric blue light, and this subtle threat to my even more subtle sense of sanity caused me to look away.

For a brief, terrifying moment, I was totally alone. Then, my soul shaking, I was back in the here and now, and I was forced to consider what had only so recently seemed to become my focus of existence.

One hell of a nightmare. Again. Three nights in a row, the same damn dream. That did not bode well. Superstitions and Old Wives’ Tales speak of horrible fates for such poor, doomed fools.

Superstitions? Dreams? Omens?

Sure, *let* it be an “Omen.” Damien Thorne—Antichrist or not—didn’t scare me one bit. I’d happily shove all seven knives of Megiddo into him and not even bat an eye while doing it. But that reject from Creature Feature—Lord... Valthrustra, was it?—now *that* was an entirely different matter. Just *thinking* about that name made me shudder all the way down to the small of my back.

As I rubbed my temples, trying my futile best to rid myself of another migraine, I noticed that the throbbing in my head was in perfect synchronization with the crash and bang of the approaching thunderstorm, which had begun to announce itself with gathering ferocity. Leave it to a musician’s habit: always in time, no matter how bad things around became. I thought about taking out my contacts, which had been in for about a week, but I quickly decided against anything that had to do with looking into my own eyes. I’d just as soon let them rot out—contacts *and* eyes—before I was forced to cross *that* electric bridge again.

Besides, a handful of Ibuprofen from my convenient economy-sized bottle of generically-labeled “Ibuprofen” would knock the pain out about as well as a Quaalude. Sort of.

However, since Luther wasn’t here at the moment, I was stuck with taking the generic over-the-counter “good-good.”

Hmmm...

“Good-good.” That’s what Luther Gates, Rastamon Supreme, called all species of

reality-blurring substances, legal or not. Too bad this candy-assed version of the “good-good” *was* legal. What I really needed was some prescription-strength medication. And the “prescription” part didn’t matter as much as the “strength” part did. I knew Luther would forgive me this one slip, though. Considering the day’s possibly supernatural circumstances, it would be the least that he could do. Besides offer me some *real* “good-good,” that is...

“C’mon, mon! We gotta go kill the bad guys...”

“What? Luth—”

I did a double-take. Avoiding eye-contact with the mirror, I gave the bathroom a thorough look-see. No Luther. Nothing. No one. Feeling totally paranoid, and now somewhat silly, I laughed once, nervously. Hollowly. Possibilities stumbled through my mind. It had definitely been Luther’s voice that I had heard. Definitely. But Luther wasn’t here. No way you could hide a seven-foot one-inch monster like that in my little bathroom—even from an idiot like me. Luther definitely wasn’t here. But Sammy... Had it been only Sammy, messing around with me or something? Some tape-recording, or digitized sample of Luther’s voice, channeled into the bathroom in some lunatic Sammy-engineered way—say, perhaps, like through the toilet bowl? No, not even a Total Loon like Sammy would have...

Hmmm...

Maybe it *had* been Sammy. After all, Sammy *was* enough of an instigator to rub some salt into my wounds, and he definitely *could* imitate Zaar’s voice fairly well, and... and...

Who the hell is “Zaar?”

Distant thunder crashed. An invisible rat seemed to tap-claw-dance up my spine.

Something, some alien, searing force, seemed to suck my face toward the mirror.

“No way...” I mumbled, shaking my head spastically from side to side like Eddie Vedder at the end of the “Jeremy” video. “I’m not gonna look,” I promised myself as I turned away from the waiting mirror by sheer force of will. “At least,” I snorted, feeling ridiculous, “I’m not gonna look till it’s time to see the hate in my eyes give me away...”

Too damned much for one day. And too damned many song lyrics floating around up in that oatmeal brain of mine...

I laughed nervously. A sound like a muffled cough issued from my throat. Poor Sammy. I wondered how loudly I had screamed *this* time. Bad enough that my nightmares were jeopardizing my relationship with Samantha, but my roommate Sammy didn’t have anywhere else to go to avoid the noise.

Quickly tying off a handy black silk kimono around my waist, I crept out of the bathroom, flicking off the light in afterthought, then made my way to the bedroom door. I carefully opened the bedroom door, stepped out stealthily, then closed the door as quietly as I could manage, still hoping that I had not awakened my poor roommate yet again.

Then, another dose of Reality vs. Surreality: I turned, suddenly staring into the half-light of the creepy old hallway, and red light filled my left eye...

heknowsheknowsheknows...

“Shit!” I yelped in instant, paranoid disbelief. Then I blinked, despite my wide-eyed fear-response, as the laser-light from Sammy’s Glock nine mike-mike filled my left eye (and probably burned a hole in my contact lens, too, in the process of blinding me).

“Shit and double-shit!” Sammy squeaked right back at me in his best Curly Howard voice. It was *very* good, for it was *entirely* natural. Total Loon. “What are ya tryin’ to do, Logan?” Sammy whispered excitedly. “Scare me to an Edgar Allen Poe premature burial or something?”

Sammy, my dull brain noted. At least it wasn’t Curly, for chrissakes...

The red haze left my eye as Sammy Joseph—all four-feet and some-odd inches of

him—rattled his Glock in his hands with a nervous-sounding *snik-snik-snik*. Then he cleared his throat. “Another one, huh?” he stated flatly. “As if Saturday morning and Sunday morning weren’t enough. Now you’ve added Monday morning into the mix. I can almost hear that silly old song right now: ‘Monday, Monday—blah-blah, blah-blah-blah-blah...’”

Sammy’s voice, normally lively and lilting, sounded like the canned, tinny music from an AM radio to my dream-blasted ears. There were, however, no deranged farm-animal noises from him, which was a welcome relief. A tense moment followed as we eyed each other through the gloom, the pale half-light of the creepy hallway our only source of illumination now that his laser-sighting was out of my eye. Maybe I wouldn’t get glaucoma after all.

“Yep,” I gritted, still happy as sin. “You got it, Sammy. And this time I got a couple of new names, not just shadows and weird noises. They—whoever the hell ‘They’ are—obviously aren’t content to leave it at just shadowy figures and gruff voices,” *or at calling me ‘VoidSpawn,’ which was just wicked enough to sound cool by me*, I didn’t say aloud. No need to blow Sammy’s mind any more than necessary. At least, not like this. “This time somebody called me ‘Tatternorn,’” I admitted, the very name itself sounding too *familiar* to keep at bay any longer. “And that scares the living hell out of me.”

Sammy smiled at this, his teeth flickering in the dim light. I heard a soft *thunk* from the floor as he lowered the tip of what had to be his katana in order to holster his pistol in his shoulder-rig. Damn scary and damn ambidextrous he was. If not a bullet, then a blade. I almost snickered at his extreme preparations until I realized that, if the situation were reversed, I probably would have done the same damn thing. There is no such thing as paranoia, after all. Still, with the Glock out of the way, I breathed a little easier for the first time today.

Muttering something about “an early breakfast” under his breath, Sammy scampered spastically down the hall, humming merrily to himself. I followed the familiar trail of Sammy’s merry humming, negotiating the old hardwood floor like an automaton. Not even the shock of the cold hardwood floor on my bare feet shook me from my stupor, though. I was like that, at times. So I shuffled along, content in my discontent, still following the sound of Sammy’s eager-beaver humming. I barely noticed as the hallway gave way to the den, then the den to the kitchen. Focus returned, however, as soon as I saw Sammy perched upon a small stepladder in front of the sink, combating a small army of filthy dishes with a Brillo pad in either hand, a neon-green apron his most curious battle fatigues.

Praying that he was too busy to notice a stumbling zombie out of the corner of his eye, I turned sharply around and scooted back down the hall, then into the den at double-zombie speed, wondering if his notorious all-seeing eyes could have seen me. I *hoped* not. I hated doing the dishes with a passion.

Thinking as fast as I could in my zombie-state, I shuffled over to the holy shrine of the “Cathode God”—Sammy’s pet name for his big-screen television set—and frantically began searching the hazardous den area for the remote control. I thought that if I could get the TV up and running in time, I could actually fool him into believing that I had walked in *here* first and not the kitchen, where doom in the shape of plates and glasses lay waiting. *At least, that was my plan, if I could find the damned remote thingie!*

“It’s underneath the *Penthouse* on the coffee table,” Sammy blared over the noise of running water and furious scrubbing. His all-seeing eyes never blinked.

“Uh... thanks!” I replied, at last finding the blasted thing with Sammy’s clairvoyant directions. “Uh, do you need any help with those abominations?” I asked, a little quieter than necessary. Even though he had “busted” me, I’d be damned if I’d go willingly into Dish Hell.

“Nope!” came my salvation, and that was that. Now he knew that I knew that I owed

him, in the Way of Slovenly Men. Or something inane like that.

Relieved, I sank into the plush, heavy pseudo-leather couch (the holy shrine of the Cathode God, that is) and flicked on the tube with the remote, deciding to zombie-out with the latest ram-it-down-your-throat CNN newscast. Such was my habitual, vicarious absolution. My personal demons were *nothing* compared to those of the news. Seriously: How could a nightmare, no matter how insane, compare to a terrorist bombing, an earthquake, or even the latest Third World Bus Plunge? I was already starting to chomp at the bit and foam at the mouth once I considered the insane shit that the Talking Heads on the tube were about to tell me with their hilariously straight faces and their preprogrammed Disneyworld Animatronic movements.

Much to my disgust, though, once the Cathode God roared to life, I got nothing but static. Jittery, creepy-crawly white ant-static. Not good, that. Feeling disconnected from my cable-umbilical chord, I scanned the channels, only to get more and more and *more* static.

Dammit, Sammy! I fumed, wondering how close the Kremlin was to red alert because of his latest mad scientist experiment.

“What in the hell’s wrong with the TV, Sammy?” I complained loudly over the hissing static. “Have you been down in your ‘lab’ again?”

“Innocent on all accounts, whatever they be!” was his instant, snappy reply.

“But there’s nothing but static on every channel!”

“Still innocent, boyo! I haven’t caused any electromagnetic pulses lately!” Sammy’s hyena laughter denied his denials. But, before I could get my zombie-self in gear to get up and give him a swift kick in the ass, he added, “But knowing our cable company, Logan, I’d bet that whatever it is isn’t just an isolated occurrence. Hell. Most of southern Louisiana is probably disconnected even as we speak. If they weren’t already disconnected before, that is...”

I considered that no-brainer for about half a second, even as the little lunatic started belting out the raunchy lyrics to the Fear song, “Disconnected.” Right as rain he was. Those crazy cable guys. They never could get it right, whatever “it” was. Knowing how they operated their brainless monopoly, those cable bozos were probably using their satellite dishes for woks even as we spoke.

Hmmm...

Wheels turned in my mind as I considered this ridiculous notion. Woks to Chinese food; Chinese food to martial arts; martial arts to my old sparring partner, Michael Reese. Funny how those wheels turned in that mush that I called a mind.

Michael was coming home today, if good fortune prevailed, which it rarely had lately. He was up for some leave-time from the Navy for a couple of weeks according to our phone conversation last week. And, according to our tight-knit little group’s infamous Mardi Gras custom, he was going to spend *most* of it getting as toasted as he could with his best friends, in the finest of naval traditions.

Ahh, I considered, already tasting the Southern Comfort, *good friends reuniting and old drinking ways renewed...* And if David had somehow managed to get his long-overdue vacation from his slave-driving superiors at China Lake, then we were gonna have one helluva Brüe Crüe reunion, one that no one would *ever* forget!

I *heh-heh’d* at that prospect. Had to. Mardi Gras, you know? Besides, our band, Electric Bard, was finally in position to showcase its collective weirdness/talent before the electric eyes of the world, with a hootin’-hollerin’ hometown crowd to boost our appeal.

The Place: the French Quarter, at that infamous watering hole known as Bad Streets. The Time: 11:00 PM tomorrow night, which just happened to be Mardi Gras night as well. We had “confirmation” from three labels’ representatives, who had supposedly fallen over backwards and foamed at the mouth after hearing our self-produced EP, that they would be in attendance at

the gig. We also had “assurances” that an MTV crew would be there to broadcast periodically, as they always do from the French Quarter during Mardi Gras. To top this line of hokum off, we also had “promises” that Electric Bard would be featured for at least a couple of seconds during the live MTV telecast.

Our turf, our crowd!

And, if only *one* of those “possibilities” came through, we were as good as signed. If the bigwigs could even catch a *glimpse* of us, we were signed. Hell, how many three-member bands in the world could boast a *seven-foot one-inch* Jamaican-born drummer/octopoid percussionist from hell/vocalist who had a *white mohawk* instead of the traditional dreds, a stunning green-eyed and *naturally* white-haired *goddess-virtuoso* with Juilliard training on both bass *and* keys (*and* vocals), and a maniacal demon-guitarist/vocalist with an *eight octave* vocal range to run the show? (Not to mention a Total Loon by the name of Sammy Joseph running the computerized sound and light shows for us, too!) Electric Bard *couldn't* lose, if only because of our sheer shock-value! We all sang. We all wrote. We all contributed. We were *tight!*

And here I am, dreaming of being a star...

Then, the wheels turning again, I muttered an expletive about not getting my MTV and turned the TV volume down to nil. Those little creepy-crawlies parading across the face of the Cathode God had just inspired me to try something. I got up off the couch and, after working a kink out of my left knee, sat down before the mute god and crossed my legs, tucking them into each other, assuming the “lotus position,” which Luther, in his decidedly Rastafarian way, was always trying to get me to teach him. I guess he thought that he could get more of a buzz from his *ganja* if he smoked it while meditating. Nirvana, ascending from the lotus petal...

I allowed myself to sink into a state of concentration, in the same fashion that Michael had taught me so many years before. There was no humming of mantras, or any of that hokey stuff. There was only a calming of thought, then a concentration upon a single line of thought. Next, the idea was to get the single line of thought down to a single word, then get that single word down to a single infinitesimal point which could then be focused fully upon, with no waste of energy. Finally, from this point, the adept could draw upon inner reserves of mental energy called *ki* or *chi*, the name depending on if you studied Japanese or Chinese martial arts, respectively. Still, they amounted to basically the same thing: concentration.

Soon, I was flowing along, destructuralizing the components of the things that confounded me, slipping deeper and deeper into my concentration state.

Down, down... *...down into the Void!*

“Whoa!” I started, shivering and blinking furiously, as if that would really help.

What in the hell is wrong with me?

The chills reintroduced themselves to my vertebrae. That feeling of everlasting damnation from my nightmare returned to my conscious thoughts, leaving a foul taste in its wake. Suddenly, I had the feeling as if someone were tap-dancing on my grave. Turning my head quickly to the side, I could almost see... something?... moving at the edge of my peripheral vision. But it was gone before I could decide that it had even been there. *Geez...*

Wheels turning, twisting, burning.

My alleged “mental training” was a joke! Not even those years of one-on-one hard-ass martial arts training with Michael had prepared me for the onslaught of my recent nightmares. Nor had nearly two years of postgraduate training in psychoanalysis and dream interpretation with some of the best instructors in the south. True, Ol’ Jung had never dealt with horrors like “Lord Valthrustra.” Or, at least, he had never *written* about it. He would have been *crucified!*

What was most frustrating, though, was the fact that I was, as a rule, a “lucid”

dreamer—someone who could *realize* a dream for what it was and *control* it. But this latest series of nightmares had me licked. I felt like one of my case studies, dazed and confused by the horrid, unconquerable fiends of the nightmare world. And, to further confuse things, I kept smelling the aroma of Sammy's Southern-Fried Breakfast, which was sizzling and popping ninety-to-nothing in the kitchen. I should have never started thinking about those damn woks!

Michael would kick my ass for this...

Well, never one to give up the ship, I decided to accept the fact that my mind was a bowl of mush and get on with the main problem, besides hunger, that was plaguing me: the name "Tatternorn."

My name is Christopher Hathorne Logan, not "Tatternorn." My first name was given to me by my mother, who just happened to like the little boy from A.K. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh* books. Given the possibilities, I guess "Christopher" was better than "Eeyore" or "Piglet." And it was fitting, no doubt, that both Christopher Robin and yours truly had trouble separating fiction from reality. Except, of course, that he had stuffed animals and I had Lord Valthrustra, Skurge, and something really nasty called "The Dragon's Breath." Hell, if they made a Saturday morning cartoon about *my* imaginary friends, it would scare the absolute pee-pee out of the little kiddies! *And* their parents, too!

My middle name, with its unusual derivation of "Hawthorne," came from a not-so-distant uncle on my father's side. After a lengthy genealogical track-down, it turned out that this not-so-distant uncle of mine was in fact some sort of faith-healer, one of mixed Native American blood who claimed relation with not only the Choctaw Nation, but also with the Cherokee and Hopi Nations as well. Guess he got around quite a bit. And I guess it was from that side of the family that I got my high cheekbones and long, straight black hair—not to mention my own penchant for getting around and seeing the world. (Playing in a constantly-gigging traveling band can work wonders for that wanderlust, dig?)

My surname, as custom permits, was from my father's side of the family, passed down from some long-ago mountaineer ancestor. I preferred my surname in conversation; and, as such my friends knew me. Besides, "Logan" made a better stage name than "Christopher," which I refused to shorten to "Chris," which was androgynous; or to "Christ," which was, at the very least, offensive to about half of the world, not to mention a bit presumptuous. Well, maybe *just* a bit.

So, to make a long story short, my friends called me "Logan," not "Tatternorn."

Still, it seemed so... so *familiar*, so *right*. Tatternorn. *Shit!*

Names! Damned names!

"Frailty, thy name is..." I paused, unsure how to continue.

What is thy name, cruel Frailty?

...Tatternorn?

Right. And the only "Skurge" I'd ever heard of before was a cat-o'nine-tails.

I exhaled a long breath and rose to my feet. The static on the tube was still going strong, sharply accented by the sound and fury of frying bacon, which sizzled and popped like nothing else in the world. My stomach growled immediately, so I moved into the kitchen, an invisible noose of bacon smoke pulling me onwards to my cholesterol doom. Sammy had toast going, bacon cooking, scrambled eggs frying and a full pot of black chicory coffee brewing. I felt as if I had walked into heaven, although I had trouble imagining Sammy as anything but a misplaced imp looking to stir up some fast trouble.

Sammy Joseph.

Sammy always looked like he had a secret to tell. There was always that Cheshire Cat smile that slid open just wide enough for you to see the tips of his canines. His big brown eyes

held an inner mirth that was reflected in almost everything he did. He was always whistling or humming some old song, always busy with some task or another. Sammy could make the sun shine on a cloudy day, whether by personal magnetism or by electromagnetism.

There weren't many people who would be so happy in his shoes, however, because Sammy's shoes were very small. Sammy was only an elbow taller than a yardstick. He was an adult by age but not by physical development, looking for all intents and purposes like a very young, albeit well-built, eight-year old boy.

Good Ol' Smilin' Sammy.

Throughout the many years of pricking and prodding by the best medical specialists in the country, he always kept a tune on his lips and a smile on his face. They subjected him to tests that were as hellish as Nazi war atrocities, and still the eggheads were baffled. He was neither suffering from achondroplasty—a sanitized name for dwarfism—nor from a defective pituitary gland. He was neither dwarf nor midget, as the eloquent eggheads would bleat, slamming their textbooks in rage. Except for a couple of his DNA bases being garbled (forming, in some very interesting places, a third helical strip in between the two “normal” DNA strands), they could find *nothing* to explain his condition.

(Right. Even the Blind Man could see the word “mutant” glaring in billboard-sized neon green letters at this point. But none of the eggheads could, or did. Strange, that. Or totally incompetent, take your pick.)

Although Sammy seemed frozen in time as a child, his strength was deceptive for his size. Moreover, his physical coordination was simply astonishing for *any* size, and his reaction time was simply amazing. His brain-melting high-scores on video games were testimony enough of that.

Sammy the Enigma. And not just physically. Sammy Joseph was a living, breathing hyper-genius, more intellectually capable than any of the “specialists” who ever studied him. His IQ alone made Einstein look like a retarded wombat, if one placed such emphasis on such a flimsy standard alone. Of my five best friends—the members (besides myself) of the illustrious Brüe Crüe: Luther Gates, Sammy, David Miller, Michael Reese and Samantha Teale—Sammy was the most brilliant by far, surpassing even David, a genius in his own right, who was one of the hottest R&D men out at China Lake. Hell, Sammy was the first person from our small-town high school to ace both his ACT and his SAT—probably one of the first people *ever* to do that.

Anyway, Sammy Joseph could have used his genius to change the world. He could have gone to MIT or Cal-Tech or anywhere else in the world for free, but he chose to stay with his buddies and go to UNO, to raise hell and to have as much fun as possible. Personally, I believe that the *real* reason was that he was too lazy to have to work hard for his degree. At least, that was *my* reason...

“Dinnah is soived!” Sammy rollicked in his best Curly voice, jumping down from the small stepladder in front of the stove, all the while somehow deftly balancing two heaping platters of breakfast goodies in his outstretched hands. The coffee, though, would be for me to serve. After all, fair is fair. Realizing this, I brought the entire pot to the table, along with two large tourist-looking naval mugs that Michael had sent us from Coronado a couple of years ago.

As we ate, Sammy hummed a merry tune that sounded remarkably similar to the song that always played at the beginning of “The Three Stooges” shows. He smacked loudly, crucifying Emily Post, while he used his fork to move pieces of his scrambled eggs into the huge pool of ketchup that dominated one half of his plate. He was definitely hyperactive for someone who had just recently gotten out of bed. That was, however, typical Sammy behavior. Unfortunately.

“So, Logan,” Sammy began with no preamble, “the Dream Police are calling you ‘Tatternorn,’ are they?”

Eerily enough, as he spoke, his eyes fixed calculatingly on a horribly mangled piece of

egg that was slowly sinking in the pool of ketchup.

“Yep,” I said, feeling a strange sense of dread creep upon me. I knew that he was about to spring a “funny” on me in typical Sammy fashion, but that name—coming from someone else’s lips—bit deeper than hot nails.

“Tatternorn, huh?” Sammy commented without looking up from his plate. “You know, I’m beginning to wonder if you haven’t subconsciously been considering switching Electric Bard’s song format to something along the lines of one of those weirdo fantasy novels. Wouldn’t that be a kick?”

“Well, we’re pretty close to that already, Sammy.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right about that,” Sammy admitted. “So maybe it isn’t some warped subconscious projection on your part. Maybe it’s because you’re just too involved with all this upcoming gig stuff and you’re not getting enough time to clear your thoughts before you zoom off to La-La Land.”

“Could be,” I replied, taking a sip of strong, paint-peeling coffee. The Psych grad in me had already considered that possibility, along with a host of other less savory ones.

“Still, the word ‘Tatternorn’ sounds familiar to me,” Sammy said bluntly, his eyes still fixed upon the sinking piece of egg. My breath caught in my throat at his mention of that damning word, *familiar*. “It’s etymology refers to Norse Fates and rags. Tit for Tat; *quid pro quo*. Tatterdemalion. Pieces of cloth and wild, woolly Fate. It could very well mean that you’re fated to become a...” He looked up, the corners of his mouth twitching, fighting back a smile.

“A what?” I asked, urging him on.

“...a bum!” Sammy’s laughter was like Woody Woodpecker’s. Only worse.

“I guess that’s why your eyes are so brown, Sammy,” I said in between bites, trying to disguise my relief, “’cause you’re so full of shit.”

“Ha. Anyway,” he continued, trying not to smile, “I got confirmation via e-mail that David and Michael are both coming in today. Michael’s gonna be flyin’ in, and Samantha and Luther are gonna pick him up at the airport around three or so this afternoon. David should be pullin’ in around four or five—if his crappy old Nova can make it, that is! Looks like the legendary Brüe Crüe is finally gonna make its long-awaited Mardi Gras rendezvous!”

“Hell yeah!” I exclaimed, a fist in the air.

We *would* be together again! All of us! This was the first piece of good news that I had gotten today, and it felt pretty damn good. Far within, I tittered with glee as I considered unique methods of group inebriation...

“Sammy,” I finally managed to gibber, “In just a few hours the Brüe Crüe will be together again for the first time in a *long* time! Tonight, after practice of course, we’re gonna lose ourselves in the madness that is the French Quarter at Mardi Gras! The Brüe Crüe, along with about a million of our closest friends! Oh, the horror! The horror!”

We both started laughing then, spirits high in shared amusement; Sammy’s high-pitched, lilting *hee-hee-hee*’s temporarily banishing from my mind the evil thoughts of Lord Valthrustra, Skurge, and other such fantastic nightmare nonsense.

Right...

Scene

Dusk. Thanks to the efforts of Sammy the Demon Driver, who manipulated the customized controls of his boxy '81 Ford Van like some virtual reality "Death Race" game, we made good time, even through the parade-clogged streets, to Samantha's posh uptown St. Charles mansion, the venerable Teale House. With my Oakleys in place, I chilled out and absorbed the sights and sounds of our merry little hellride: the drunk and staggering college kids who stumbled along the wide "middle ground" of St. Charles; the irritable law officers, who were trying their best to impose some modicum of law and order upon what was, in all truth, an all-out riot situation; and, of course, the sickly orange glow of the sodium-vapor streetlights, which always reminded me of the stupid little popsicles that Sammy and I had greedily devoured as kids.

As kids...

After a while, I had to close my eyes—not because of Sammy's demonic driving, though, for I was used to that. I had to close my eyes because, somehow deep inside, I suddenly realized that this was all a lie. It was all a terrible lie; another nightmare from which I could never wake, for I was living this nightmare as my life.

Suddenly, or so it seemed, all motion of the van suddenly ceased. The engine idled like some massive beast as Sammy hummed some insane tune to himself. I barely heard some sort of whirring noise outside, the distinctive whir of a garage door being opened. The van eased forward into what I knew, even without opening my eyes, to be Samantha's garage. My hands fell from my face as I leaned my head heavily onto the dash. As the engine died, I felt Sammy staring at me.

"We're here, Logan," he said.

From the way he was drumming his hands on the steering wheel, however, I knew that he wasn't going to budge until I asked him The Same Stupid Death Race Question.

Opening my eyes slowly, I fixed him with the most dispassionate glare that I could muster. "So. How many points did you manage to score?"

He just smiled that impish grin of his. "Oh, a few, but no record score today. The old lady in the walker managed to dodge outta the way at the last second. Clipped a few drunk frat boys, though. Big points there."

"Right. Let's go."

I unfastened my seatbelt and popped my door. Then I shuffled like a zombie around the van, almost bumping into Samantha's midnight-blue '91 Grand National, which shared the roomy two-car garage, as I did so. Sammy was parading about, inspecting the side panels of the van and caressing its glossy black hull with his agile little hands.

"Nary a scratch on her, if I may say so!" he laughed, looking at me with a used-car salesman's eager gleam. "Ooops, let me rephrase that," he giggled, pretending to "discover" something stuck in the bumper. "Looks like I bagged one of those stupid little baseball caps that those frat guys wear," he said, smiling as he "produced" (from his jacket, of course) a mangled, bloody baseball cap.

I mumbled some deleted expletives. Then, naturally, I spit in his hat.

The long string of wordy-dirds and long string of extremely gross sputem played out just as Luther Gates walked into the garage. The big gangsta-mon was stooping slightly forward, the better to ease his seven-foot one-inch form through the interior garage door so that he would not whack the

lintel with his head. Or whack the ceiling with his dyed, white mohawk.

“It ‘bout time you boys got here,” Luther growled in his musical Jamaican patois. He crossed his thick, ebony arms and leaned heavily against Sammy’s van. Gleaming like polished onyx, Luther’s mohawked head reflected the golden gleam from the gold gangsta chains about his neck like some sort of new wave/modern art deco. It was the Sun King all over again, except this time in black and gold. His black muscle shirt with the neon green “Gold’s Gym” letters on it looked as if it were about to rip apart from the strain of keeping in his over-huge chest as he breathed. Luther Gates—*island-born, city-bred drummer supreme; big, bad, black and dangerous*—looked like an artist’s cubist impression of Mr. Clean meets Mr. T, with a good dash of growth hormone thrown in to boot. Despite his habitual put-on displays to the contrary, he was maintaining a rock-steady 4.0 at UNO; just a semester away from his MBA. With his combination of brains, brawn, and musical talent, Mr. Luther Gates truly was one dangerous dude.

Barely half Luther’s height, Sammy brazenly walked right up to the towering Mr. Gates and stabbed a finger at him. Or, more precisely, up in his general direction.

“How many times do I have to tell you, you big silly illegal alien!” Sammy wailed. “Contractions! Use contractions, you Maroon! It’s not *it ‘bout time*, it’s *it’s about time*, you big burnt Jamaican plantain! IT IS! Speak American or die!”

Luther smiled wickedly down at him, a look that would have sent starving bears fleeing back into the deep woods. “Make me, lil’ boy,” the extremely dangerous Mr. Gates said coldly.

Once, not quite so long ago, I had seen a gang of pissed-off, drunken bikers get the hell out of Dodge at that tone of voice from Luther Gates. Sammy, though, idiot that he was, charged forward, swinging wildly. Luther shook off Sammy’s lovetaps like a summer sprinkle and scooped him up in his massive arms, holding him at arm’s length like a deranged kitten. Then, of course, the two of them began to laugh like idiots at their typical game.

“Boy, you’re light! Go on a diet recently, mon?”

“Put me down, you big Grape Ape!”

Luther tossed him onto the van’s slightly sloping roof like a ten-pound sack of potatoes.

“You drink your milk, son! You grow up big mon like Poppa Luther.”

Sammy got to his feet, preparing to spring. But he started to snicker as Luther stuck his thick tongue out at him and wagged it. Sammy knelt down on the roof, clutching his sides, his high-pitched “*hee-hee-hee’s*” clanging around the garage. I laughed in spite of myself, right at home with the rest of the Loons.

“Where’s Samantha?” I asked, wanting very much to see my one, sole reality.

Luther, not taking his eyes off of the treacherous Sammy for a second, waved an arm towards the door. I took this opportunity to purge myself of their lunacy and stalked off towards the inner door.

As I walked into the vast interior of Samantha’s kitchen, the scent of patchouli and something else that I couldn’t quite place hit me like a subtle sledgehammer. The one constant in the Teale House was the fact that Samantha always had incense burning, no matter what time of day, or for what occasion. Maybe that’s why the Teale House always reminded me of an ancient Egyptian temple, like the ones in the old Cecil B. DeMille movies. Not that Samantha would have looked out of place in one, either... except for her absolutely white hair and the fact that she was taller than most ancient Egyptian males.

Clearing the kitchen, I came at once into the dining room, which proved to be empty except for two silver censers that were pouring forth thick, oily incense smoke. I stopped for a second to grab an apple from the crystal centerpiece, a proverbial cornucopia that probably could have fed a good-sized family of fourteen or so for a week. Doting on that salient fact for a second, I didn’t hear

Samantha pad softly up behind me.

“Don’t spoil your appetite just yet,” she purred as her lithe arms coiled around my waist. I was certain that she felt me jump out of my boots. My nerves were a little beyond shot. “I’ve ordered some Thai take-out for us,” she added, her crystal clear, lilting laugh at once disarming me.

Although I had heard Samantha laugh more than a thousand times before, in many different circumstances, this time it pierced my fragile senses like a bolt of diamond sharpness with its strange, out-of-place familiarity. It reminded me of what some castaway might hear after a lifetime of loneliness on a deserted isle, such was its foreign-yet-familiar quality.

“You don’t have to worry about *my* appetite,” I laughed, regaining my composure as I leaned back into her, the scent of patchouli ensnaring me. My free hand snaked backwards, grabbing her about her own firm dancer’s waist.

It was typical for us: an inverted embrace, no Kama Sutra necessary. Not that two extremely creative people would ever need instructions to do what just came naturally. Or unnaturally.

“Kiss me, you fool!” Ms. Samantha Teale drawled sensually over my shoulder in her best make-believe Southern Belle accent.

With a nod to Adam, I tossed the apple back into the bowl and pulled her squarely to me, kissing her like that long-ago first time back on the Moonwalk when we were both a little too young and too inexperienced to realize what we were getting into.

After a brief but passionate reintroduction, Samantha and I made our way into the den, which was the only concession in the Teale House to the modern world. As in the style of the Victorian manor, the Teale House gave ample space to each and every room, especially to what was now called the “den.” The ceilings were steeped, at least fifteen feet high, with thick, oaken crossbeams criss-crossing each other about three feet below the slanted ceiling. While not typically Victorian, the crossbeams gave the den a timeless look, somehow ancient yet somehow modern.

Or at least that’s what Samantha’s great-great grandfather had thought when he built it: three levels of architectural juxtaposition, drawing from cultures and times as diverse as feudal Japan and golden age Babylon, with an atrium that would knock your socks off.

Since Samantha’s parents were spending the year in Sarawak on an archeological dig, we had taken the liberty of converting the den into our practice room, carefully removing most of the valuables into the connecting dining room and rearranging the non-antique furniture into a bizarre gallery that favored the “stage” and the Teale’s entertainment center, a concession that Sammy had insisted on, even though he didn’t live here. It was an “improvement” which no doubt would have greatly pleased the eccentric Professor Teale and her equally erudite husband.

Or so we hoped like hell, if they happened to drop in unexpectedly.

Our other “improvement” was the greenery, which occupied every nook and cranny of the converted den that wasn’t *already* occupied by musical gear, speakers, or miscellaneous electronic equipment. What had begun as a ploy to “confuse” Samantha’s parents lest they return too soon had grown into a new hobby for Samantha, who embraced it now with two maniacal green thumbs. She was certain that we had at last proven beyond shadow of doubt that the old, worn-out theory that plants thrived on music was, indeed, no longer a theory.

But, skeptic though I was, I had to admit that the flora had thrived in the few months since we had begun our acousti-botanical experiment, urged along, of course, by Samantha’s budding interest in things green. And, skeptic though I was, even I had to admit that most of the “things green” looked pretty cool.

Especially Luther’s little “experimental” plant. Heh.

“Where are David and Michael?” I asked eagerly, plopping down onto a very incongruous, very ancient bean bag, as Samantha knelt before a large video carousel and began to search for a

video tape.

“They decided to get festivities off to a good start by raiding the nearest liquor store,” she replied eagerly, still searching for a tape.

“Figures. I would have done the same thing.”

“*That* I know all too well!” Samantha remarked with a short, knowing chuckle. She knew it “all too well” because *she* was often the one who instigated such debauchery. “They were really excited about seeing you and Sammy again. Well, I mean, seeing everyone. It’s only been about three or four years since we were *all* together, you know? And you know them. I mean, us. The Brüe Crüe! We just couldn’t wait to get going!”

“I’m already starting to feel a major hangover...”

“Oh, no! Not yet, you fish!” she warned, chucking me on the knee with a swiftly hurled tape. How she always managed to hit me without turning around and looking always rolled me. It was almost as if we were so connected that she always knew where I was, even if I was behind her. And she could *always* pull it off, much to my regret. “We’ve still got to perfect our set for the gig,” she added casually, noting with a playful smirk as she turned to face me that she had, once again, been right on the mark.

“It’s as good as it’s gonna get until we play it live,” I protested, rubbing my knee, knowing fully well that she was right. But I just couldn’t shake the party attitude, despite all of today’s stranger-than-strange happenings. After all, it had been half of forever since all of us had been together, and we certainly deserved to celebrate our impending signing with a major record label. Confidence, I reminded myself.

“Get *Highlander!*” Sammy yelled as he suddenly bolted into the den, Luther right behind him with a vicious-looking banana in each hand.

Sammy, mere steps ahead of a banana-possessed Luther, ran right for me, a wide grin on his face. I didn’t even have time to cringe. All I could do was watch, in not-so-veiled horror as “reality” took another 180-degree turn into “Loon.”

My jaw dropped as Sammy expertly cartwheeled across the den’s slick hardwood floor and vaulted *over* me *and* my beanbag, and then onto the nearby three-sectioned sofa. Instantly, using his forward momentum to propel him upwards some ten or more feet to the lowest level of crossbeams, Sammy expertly mounted the beams like some miniature uneven bar virtuoso. A collective gasp sounded from those gathered as Sammy made an improbable revolution about the beam’s girth and landed a perfect round-out dismount from ten feet up onto the hard, wooden floor. Luther, arms limp at his side, dropped his bananas from numbed hands. Samantha, crouched down before the video carousel, dropped a handful of tapes onto the floor. If it would have been possible, I would have fallen out of my bean bag.

We stared.

First at Sammy, and then at one another.

Then, of course, right back at Sammy.

A wild look of exhilaration was etched upon Sammy’s broad, smiling face. After three ticks from the big grandfather clock in the far corner of the den, Sammy made an elaborate flourish and bowed deeply.

“I meant to do that,” he lied.

Right. Somewhere or somewhen else, maybe...

“Sammy,” I began, words sticking in my throat like cotton candy at the absurd *familiarity* of the scene, “how in the world did you do that! I mean, that was *at least* Olympic caliber.”

Not to mention slightly impossible, I almost added.

“Yeah, Sammy!” Samantha added, regaining her composure. “How long have you been

practicing on uneven ceiling beams? Have you been seeing Mary Lou Retton lately, or what?"

Sammy smiled nervously, something he only did when he didn't have a readily available response.

Or when he was caught red-handed in the proverbial cookie jar.

"Uhh... gee, guys, are we interrupting something?" came a duet of familiar voices.

Much to Sammy's delight, mind you.

Heads swiveled round, and Sammy smiled to himself.

He was off the hook. For now...

David Miller and Michael Reese stood in the doorway, their arms filled with various deadly devices of intoxication. Curious, expectant looks were etched upon their faces. David Miller, red-bearded, hirsute and stocky, had a bizarre, quizzical look on his bespectacled face. He stood in the doorway of the den, slightly leaning against its frame to counter the weight of the several cases of Abita Turbo Dog that he bore. I could almost feel his powerful, engineer's mind calculating the odds that Sammy could have pulled off his virtuoso stunt. Michael Reese, Lt. USN, stood at David's side, filling the rest of the doorway with his powerful, deeply tanned frame. Michael's corded arms were bent against the weight of a case of Boone's Farm Wild Mountain wine, a couple of fifths of Southern Comfort, and, of course, the ubiquitous Black Label Jack.

Although the weather was far from typical, humid Louisiana fare, David, as usual, wore short sleeves, his usual uncaring response to cold weather. Michael, as usual, wore the old, worn flight jacket that his father had given him when he had graduated from high school and won his appointment to Annapolis. It had been several years since last we had all been together, and all of our faces showed it. Not to mention our collective shock.

"All right!" Sammy yelled as he ran across the room and careened into a surprised David, who nearly dropped his beer cases. "Dave! Mike! It's been half of forever! I never thought I'd see you guys again!" Sammy chattered excitedly, hugging both of them about their waists, little arms stretched to their limits.

"Yep, it's been a while, big guy!" David replied, his red whiskers apparently waving of their own volition. "The modem lines just don't cut it, you know!" David laughed as he set the cases down on the nearest table and bear-hugged Sammy.

Tussling Sammy's hair for a friendly moment, Michael smiled a curt smile towards me as he set his own goodies down and strode over to where I sat, looking down at me with an appraising grin.

"Still kickin' ass, Logan?"

Bearing a mock grimace, I slowly stood up, fixing him with a riveting glare. As we locked eyes, I noticed that the corners of Michael's mouth were twitching slightly, as if he were trying to stifle a laugh.

"Them's fightin' words where ah come from, pahdnuh!" I began to reach for imaginary six-shooters at my side, arms held wide like a swaggering badman. Michael backed a step away, his own arms mirroring mine. I could see Samantha and Luther begin to giggle.

"Ten dollars on the marshal mon!" Luther called.

"I'll cover ya, and raise ya twenty on the longhair!" Samantha responded, getting to her feet. Michael looked at me with a long face.

"Well, longhair, looks like the pretty lady is tippin' her hand a little too soon. It's gonna be a cold day for you on Boot Hill before I'm done with you, you polecat!"

By this time, Sammy and David were also watching, whispering mischief to one another. From the corner of my eye, I saw Sammy run to where Luther's bananas had fallen, scooping them up in his hands. With a swift motion of his wrists, the wicked Chiquitas flew towards the middle

space between Michael and me. With an equally swift motion, they were in our hands before they hit the floor. After a quick, understanding glance, both of us sheathed the bananas in the front of our jeans, slinging them in the best spirit of the old gunfighters. Thus armed, the tension immediately began to build as Michael and I grimaced and leered at each other; a comical, western/samurai stand-off.

“But,” Sammy blurted suddenly just as the tension came to a head, “what if he comes at you with a pointed stick!”

All of us, including Sammy, bent double with laughter. The twice-deadly bananas hit the floor, twisting slightly around as if they, too, were laughing. Sammy probably could have saved a lot of lives in the old West, if only Monty Python’s Flying Circus had existed in the nineteenth century.

After the laughter, I grabbed Michael and exchanged consociative accolades, as William Harper Littlejohn of Doc Savage fame would have put it.

Well, sort of.

“Michael, you fuck! It’s certainly been a while!”

“Well, Logan, you know how time flies when you’re having sand!”

“That’s the Persian Gulf for you, man. How are the SEALs doing?”

Silence, as if I had just slapped him in the face.

Now, every single one of us knew that Michael was a SEAL. Hell, *I* knew beyond shadow of a doubt that he was a SEAL, probably on Team-6, too, knowing his reputation as a soldier. But Lt. Michael Reese, USN, would *never* admit it to any of us, though. Not in a million years. Not even if we could figure it out for ourselves, which all of us had by now. And not even if the old “need-to-know” goatfuck *had* sent me and Sammy a couple of souvenirs from Coronado and Norfolk, two places where SEALs were more common than at Sea World. For a long second, Michael looked away, embarrassed. For a second, I thought that he wasn’t going to say anything. For a second, I wished that I could have taken it back when I saw the thousand yard stare in his eyes.

Then, hesitantly, Lt. Michael Reese, USN, my martial arts/Southern Comfort guru, spoke in subdued tones:

“Well, to tell you the truth, man, *we’ve* been pretty busy with all of this bullshit that you’ve no doubt seen on CNN lately.”

Ah-ha! An admission! He was a SEAL! Not like we didn’t already know, but...

“I mean, it’s been nonstop for the last four or five months,” Michael continued. “No rest for the wicked, as they say,” he said with an ironic grin, the stare at last fading from his eyes.

“At least you’ve got one helluva tan,” I said, noting how dark he had become. He looked as if someone had dipped him in a pool of bronze. “I’d kill for that Coppertone one that you’ve got, Michael.”

“It’s kinda funny that you said that...” Michael blurted, which was a rare thing for him to do. Usually, even though he could be just as silly as Sammy if the situation called for it, Michael always had his brain in gear before his mouth went to work.

“What do you mean?” I pushed, more than a tad curious.

“Well, it’s a little weird, but since you brought it up, I...”

“C’mon, Michael,” Luther interjected as he began to tear into the cardboard Boone’s Farm crate, “tell us ‘bout your crazy tan. You’re almost dark as the gangsta mon himself!”

“Yeah, right!” Michael snorted, flipping Luther the bird, which would have brought the Death Penalty to any outsider who had tried it. But Luther was as dark as a shiner, and he knew it. It was just Luther’s way of trying to egg Michael on to some serious partying, perhaps even a drinking match or two to settle who was “darker” than who. Or something inane along that Faustian mode of thought. Tonight, it seemed, we had a room full of “instigators.”

“It’s a little bizarre, Logan,” Michael began, ignoring Luther’s long, teasing tug on a bottle of Boone’s, that distant look surfacing again on his teenage-idol face. “One day, I was on TDY at the base, minding my own business, working out with a couple of Delts—you know, the guys who don’t exist?—exchanging some bullshit karate moves and some old war stories, waiting for my leave to come up. I was my normal old crazy self, pretty good tan, considering most of my duty was night-time-op.” The stare disappeared from his face as he seemed to relive one of his missions. From the half-subdued grin on his face, she must have been a pretty interesting. “Well, one night, after a smuggled bottle of Jack—you know how they are over there—and a shitty poker game, I cruised off to La-La Land. The only problem was, I didn’t have my typical dream of stateside babe-hunting and all-night fun in the Quarter.” His eyes once again clouded over as some powerful memory weighed upon him. “Now, this is really weird, especially for me, but, and I swear to God on this... I had the most insane dream that I’ve ever had...”

Michael paused, inhaling deeply, seeming to take my own breath away with this somehow familiar preamble. “I... now this may sound like I was eating some of that native hash...”

“Way to go, mon!” Luther bellowed, tearing off a fresh Boone’s bottlecap and draining a very large portion of its contents in one huge swig.

“No, you head, I’m serious!” Michael exploded, his usual ease gone. “I dreamed that I was this total badass martial artist guy! Better than Lee, Norris and Seagal put together! I had two awesome katanas... golden ones, I think, ‘cause they shone like sunlight... and each one was like an extension of my own arm.” He held up his arms to show us how they would have looked.

Bizarrely enough, Michael’s confident form struck some distant bell of memory in my oatmeal brain.

Then, before the blasted cobwebs could clear, he continued: “I was standing before this huge, black wall that had squirming, writhing neon green writing on it that I couldn’t read, but that I knew was wrong, really wrong.” My mind began to retreat into a dark corner of itself. “The script reminded me of Arabic, not exactly right-to-left, though. More like up-and-down, with a little sideways thrown in. It all flowed together wrong. Backwards, almost, like mating snakes or something. There was a thick mist all around me, a blackish-grey mist that I couldn’t see through. But I knew that there were other people with me there, because I *felt* them there, like a sixth sense or something very Zen. The feeling of dread was *real*, I’d swear it.”

Real?

“And then there was this big, black *being*—some *thing*—in front of the wall, that I knew I had to kill. No, make that *obliterate*. I had to *obliterate* it, or I knew that I wouldn’t wake up again. But, as I began to charge it, I saw another guy run in front of me—and he reminded me of somebody, mind you,” Michael seared in my direction. For whatever reason, though, this seemed to affect my friends more than it did me.

“This *guy*,” he pressed on, “had a big black sword in his hands—a sword like nothing I’ve ever seen before. Scary. Big, bad, black, and scary. Kind of like you, Luther.”

Luther spewed some wine from his nose, acknowledging Michael’s off-the-wall “Gotcha!”

“Then, the guy with that *thing*—I can’t really bring myself to call it a *sword*, you know?—he struck the big black being before I could get to it, and the world screamed. The whole world *screamed*, man, like Hiroshima and then some. Nuke city. Endgame.” Michael shook his head slowly trying to banish the thought of it all.

“The next thing I knew,” he forged on, his will too strong to bend, “I was bolt upright in my bed, screaming at the top of my lungs. My CO was there in front of me, slapping my face, probably thinking ‘combat stress’ or some shit like that. I remember giving him a grin and telling him that I was okay, which was a total lie. Then I went to take a shower to calm down.”

Now, I could *feel* Michael's pain. All of us could. It was a tangible thing.

It was a *familiar* thing.

"Man," he exhaled slowly, winding down from the pain of memory, "when that shitty desalinated water hit me, it felt like heaven." Michael smiled an ironic smile then, one that reminded me of someone else, *somewhen* else. "Imagine my surprise when I looked down and saw *this...*"

Michael pulled off his flight jacket and set it down on the bean bag. Next, he pulled off his tee-shirt, revealing something so mind-numbing, so familiarly horrible, that I gasped despite my best effort not to do so.

Inscribed upon his strangely golden-hued chest was the solid black tattoo of a hawk, its talons rampant, clutching within them a seven-pointed star.

The room seemed to grow distant. The sounds of labored breathing and the rush of adrenaline shook my heart to the core. That numbing sense of foreboding ran headlong into my brain like a runaway train. I began to hear—no, make that *feel*—that sense of hopelessness that had plagued me in my own nightmares.

For a damning, soul-wrenching split-second I knew *who* I was, *what* I was.

A distant, sepulchral voice called my name.

Tatternorn...

When "reality" had once more anchored me, I was aware that all of us were in front of Michael, staring stupidly like cows at his strange tattoo.

No, his... Honor Crest?

I distantly felt Samantha press against me, an urgency in her being. Sammy's eyes were boring into me. It was then that I felt Luther's bottle against my chest. Luther, the mediator of madness.

"Hey, mon, have a sip of elixir. Calm you down."

It was not a request.

Never one to argue with a seven-foot one-inch drummer's logic, I gulped down a quarter of the bottle's sweet, Kool-Aid-tasting contents and passed it along to Michael, who finished it off eagerly.

Now, we stood in silence, looking everywhere but into each other's eyes. Even the irrepressible Sammy was quiet for once.

I took a chance and looked into Michael's wavering gaze.

Here was someone that I had known for years, a brave man whom I respected in many ways. Michael had taught me more about how the real world works than anyone else ever had. He had tutored me in martial arts for years—needing a punching bag at first to practice on, then later a partner to practice *with*—teaching me first to heal and then to hurt. He was a brilliant source of motivation, of achievement, of winning. Anything he set his mind to do, he did. He had followed in his father's footsteps, entering Annapolis to pursue a career in the Navy. He was a full lieutenant in the USN—an unusual accomplishment for someone his age—a decorated veteran, and a SEAL in addition to that. Nothing could ever get under his skin, or so it had always seemed.

And I knew, without ever asking, that Michael had killed other men in the line of duty; seen things that would probably drive lesser men insane.

But now the mask was gone.

I saw in his wild green eyes the same nagging doubts, the same unanswered questions that plagued me, the inescapable feeling of certain, impending doom.

And from the grim faces of my friends, I was suddenly certain that it was a feeling which all of us in the room now shared.

Shuddering inside, I started as the Teale's ominous doorbell bonged once, then twice.

“Uhh... Samantha?” I asked her, edging slightly backwards as I imagined Death himself knocking on the Teale’s door, a wicked smile on his skeletal, worm-eaten face...

“Oh, hell!” Samantha nervously laughed. “The Thai food. I’d forgotten.”

“Here, let me—” I recovered, reaching chivalrously into my jeans’ back pocket for my wallet. To mask my former retreat, that is.

“Since when do you have any money?” Samantha pointed out to the slow grins of my friends.

“But—”

“It’s my treat, and that’s that!” she said with a finality that only a Teale could manage.

As Mommy Warbucks melted away to the door, tensions eased. Males that we were, just seeing her walk away made us all smile with appreciation.

After she was out of earshot, Michael smiled at me, a curious grin on his face. He was back with us, wherever “back” was. Wherever “we” were.

“You’re one lucky son of a gun, Logan. She’s perfect.”

“If you only knew...” I replied, irony dripping from my lips.

We laughed then, quite fatalistically; thumbing our noses at strange dreams and sinister, black Arabic-mating snake-walls as the spicy aroma of Thai food hit our reality-starved senses.

After several minutes of silently pigging out in front of the TV, David cursed loudly and snapped his chopsticks in a fit of fury.

“Samantha, could I *please* get a fork?” he asked plaintively, his bearded lips pursed in some hairy state that resembled anxiety. “I’m through with these stupid pieces of wood!”

Calmly, Samantha picked through the massive pile of square, white boxes of Thai food on the table and tossed him one of the several plastic-wrapped packets of Caucasian cutlery towards him. Sammy began to snicker to himself as he looked up from his personal box of Bigg Mixx, which he always mixed with any oriental food that he ate, supposedly to “aid in digestion.”

“What are you laughing at, shrimp?” David asked, tearing open the plastic packet with an impatience that was almost comical to the extreme.

“You, O Bearded One,” Sammy leered in between gulps of the spicy Thai food and handfuls of sugar-loaded cereal. “You’ve only eaten with chopsticks about a hundred-dozen times, and you still use ‘em like you’ve got arthritis! Don’t you have the hang of it yet?”

“I’m an American, dammit, and I’ll use *American* utensils when I eat, no matter *what* I eat, not some stupid balsa wood airplane model sticks!”

To emphasize his point, David stabbed a plastic fork into the box nearest him and began tormenting some noodles.

“But don’t you know that you’re robbing yourself of an interesting cultural experience, David?” Sammy chided like some deranged liberal.

“Sure I am, Mr. Bigg Mixx cereal eater!” David snorted, still struggling with the slippery, elusive noodles. “Think of all of those poor saps over in Thailand who just *wish* that they could use forks, instead of two sticks from some jungle tree to eat their rice and fish with. You know, I bet if they used a goddamn fork once in a while, there wouldn’t be so many starving people over there!”

“David,” Samantha said, “that’s mean!”

“No,” Luther interjected, struggling to talk with a mouthful of noodles, “that’s pretty

funny!”

David continued to stare indignantly at a grinning Sammy as the rest of us, including Samantha, let out some much-needed laughter. While it wasn't funny to laugh about starving people, there was a twisted logic in what David had said. Until I had mastered it myself, I'd *always* wondered how anyone could get *anything* into their mouths, especially rice, with two thin pieces of wood.

Still, I wasn't about to lecture David on the proven superiority of the Thais when it came to kickboxing, all supposedly on a diet of rice and fish. David, an avid sports fanatic, already knew that. He was just being a butthead.

Oh, well, the ancient Egyptians were supposed to have eaten with their fingers, and they still managed to build those pyramids. I think...

“So,” I began, changing the subject and initiating the small-talk, “how have things been at China Lake, David?”

“Pretty good, Logan,” David replied, at last getting a load of steaming noodles on his plastic fork. His look of triumph evoked a snooty laugh from Sammy, who was going ninety-to-nothing with his chopsticks in one hand and his cereal box in the other, consuming mass quantities like a Conehead on speed.

“What do you mean, ‘pretty good?’” I asked him, waving my chopsticks like a conductor to elicit some lengthy, tell-all reply.

“Well, you know,” David replied slowly as he munched on his hard-won noodles, “my R&D team is working on some pretty cool shit right now, and I'm getting a bit more leeway with my individual designs. Especially the new Spook stuff.” David's eyes lit up with anticipation as he sought Michael's eyes, seeking some confirmation on the results of his work. All he got for his blatant efforts was a masked smile and a slow nod from the secretive Michael, who could not confirm, even to his gathered friends, that he had some connection to David and his weapons-designing buddies out at the Lake.

As if we didn't know by now.

China Lake—or, the Naval Weapons Research Center as it was officially designated—developed many of the new high-tech gizmos and “black” thingies that the elite forces, such as Michael's SEALs, employed in the field. David Miller, who had graduated *summa cum laude* from Tulane University with a degree in Biomedical Engineering, had shopped his prodigious talents around to the highest bidder until he had at last settled upon China Lake, which, although it had not offered a truly competitive salary for someone of his talents, had landed him because of its more-than-competitive environment of academic competition, along with a fair package of patent-sharing incentives. Sammy nearly had the rest of us convinced that the clean desert air and the twenty-four hour workdays were what had finally convinced David Miller to leave his friends and his spartan Covington roots behind.

Now, the fact was that David was a notorious homebody, almost as bad as Sammy, mind you.

But, in reality, most of us realized that it had been the promise of all the techno-toys that he could *ever* hope to play with that had *finally* turned the trick and convinced the old homebody to spread his wings and fly away.

One *could* almost imagine that Sammy was a bit peeved that his computer buddy and techno-wizard friend had actually gone so far as to *leave* his friends and Louisiana behind. But the true fact of the matter was that Sammy was happy to see his mental sparring partner do so well for himself, although Sammy would probably never mention it aloud to anyone except for David himself to hear.

Then again, even I could be proven a schmuck by that ever-undefinable quantity known as “Sammy.”

“Glad to see you’re doing so well, Dave,” Sammy suddenly said, much to everyone’s relative surprise—mine even more than David’s.

David smiled broadly, his red beard defining the outlines of his heartfelt gratitude. “Well, thank you, Sam,” he said, acknowledging Sammy’s out-of-character compliment. Knowing Sammy as well as he did, he took the too-rare “compliment” at face value, forgetting in his haste that Sammy never gave any compliment for free...

Sammy, smiling sagely, set down his chopsticks along with his box of Bigg Mixx. Then, with a wolfish smile, he uttered a loud, vomitous, glass-shattering belch.

We shared another group laughing spell, a few more moments of pigging out, a few more comments on how spicy the Thai food was, then:

“Is there something going on that I don’t know about?” Samantha asked, setting her Turbo Dog bottle down on the table with a piercing *thud*.

As her emerald eyes shot accusing glances around the table, I turned towards her and half-whispered: “What in the world are you talking about?”

Samantha gave me a curious glare, one which promised a bombshell of things to come.

“I don’t mean to sound like a bitch, Logan,” she said evenly, her agile fingers combing back a lock of white hair that had fallen across her eyes, “but there’s something in the air, something that’s eating away at every one of you guys. I mean, here we are, at long last reunited as the Brüe Crüe, it’s almost Mardi Gras, we’re about to do our biggest gig as a band, and we’re sitting here half-in and half-out of focus! Doesn’t that strike you as more than a little funny, Logan? Guys?”

Sammy nudged my foot under the table as my mouth opened for a reply to Samantha’s strange yet timely inquiry. Biting back my reply, I looked at my masculine counterparts to see who would take the floor to rebuke Samantha’s seemingly paranoid remark.

Paranoid my ass... I thought as I recalled the day’s bizarre events.

The expressions on the faces of my friends was a collectively haunting thing. Sammy was hiding his grim face behind a long swig of wine from one of the Boone’s bottles that was circulating around the table. Luther was pretending to stuff his face with the remnants of a box of chicken and curried peppers. Both Michael and David were sitting with dull, vapid expressions on their faces.

And I was left awash with the soul-damning possibility that maybe things were already far too gone to salvage with any sense of normalcy. Or “reality.”

“What in the world do you mean, Samantha?” I asked slowly, fending-off Sammy’s desperate under-the-table kicks with a shove of my boot that sent him sprawling backwards, much to no one’s delight.

“I mean *that!*” Samantha cried, leveling a finger at Sammy, who was giving me a “go to hell” look as he pulled himself back up to the table. “What in the hell are you two trying to pull?”

Well, with that, at least the others were off the hook.

Now the blame rested solely on the shoulders of me and Sammy, whatever that blame might be. The need to insulate and protect the innocent from what had transpired earlier—my own blatant psychosis, Sammy’s gravity-defying acrobatics, and Michael’s dream-tattoo-thing—kicked into overdrive. If there were some way to protect Luther, David and Samantha from this brewing madness, then I would willingly do anything in my power to see that such would come to pass.

Therefore, I lied.

“Nothing is ‘going on,’ Samantha,” I assured her, giving her a confident grin. “Sammy’s a klutz, that’s all. He’s just getting a rush from all of the MSG in the food.”

“You promised you wouldn’t tell, Black Bart!” Sammy yelled, taking my cue as he hurled a box of half-eaten noodles over his left shoulder and halfway across the Teale’s den, straight into the wicker planting pot of one of Samantha’s big, green and leafy philodendrons.

“Dammit!” Samantha yelled in disbelief as the relief of laughter once more filled the room. “That’s gonna cost you, you little imitation Bilbo Baggins!”

With that most profane pronouncement, Samantha rose to her feet and took a swipe at Sammy’s bobbing, giggling head. And, with the sound of a coconut being hit with a ball-peen hammer, she connected.

Now, normally, she would have had a snowball’s chance in hell of tagging Sammy with a “nuggie,” as catlike as his reflexes were. But tonight was very special indeed, for Samantha tagged him so hard that he made a complete revolution to his left and wound up three feet from the table, listing to his left with a look of absolute shock on his cherubic features.

“Ouch...” was all that Sammy could mumble as he cradled his head in his hands, rocking slowly in place.

Samantha, not pausing a moment to witness the incredible results of her Babe Ruth swing, was already leaning over her prized philodendron, retrieving the take-out box from the confines of the wicker planting pot with a grimace of contempt on her face.

“Holy shit!” Luther whispered carefully, not wanting Samantha to suddenly stalk over and take a swipe at him, too. “She tagged Sam-I-Am!” Luther’s wide, expressive features were drawn up into a dark mask of absolute shock. He would have made a perfect double for that illustrious radio commentator who had described so eloquently the ill-fated destruction of the Hindenburg. Except Luther would’ve eventually marred the gravity of the scene by laughing heinously at all the cool fire.

David was already over at Sammy’s side, hoisting him up to a sitting position while Michael and I exchanged blank looks.

“You okay Sammy?” David asked, bending down to examine his computer buddy.

“Ouch...” was all that Sammy could say, still rubbing his head.

“Samantha,” I asked her more calmly than I ever thought that I could, “do you realize that you just nailed Sammy for a loop?”

“The little asshole deserves it!” she rejoined, turning around and tossing the slightly bent box onto the tabletop, the sticky contents spilling forth into a pool of runny, brown sauce. Placing her hands on her hips in righteous indignation, Samantha fixed us with the cold glare of Good Housekeeping and bade us, in not so many words, to “clean this shit up.”

Never one to deny the request of a lady—especially if the lady was about to bury her foot in my groin—I at once bent to the task of clearing the table of white take-out boxes and the various empties that crowded the perimeter. Following my silent example, my friends did the same, cleansing their respective places of any and all debris. David took the stunned Sammy’s slack, picking up after him, even down to the point of using some elbow grease to wipe up the pool of runny brown sauce. I picked up after Samantha, who was busy dealing with the Thai food contamination of her precious greenery. The remains of our meal now filled the cardboard delivery boxes in which it had been delivered, precariously balanced in several stacks of four or five boxes apiece. All the while, bruised male egos were trying to sort out what had just happened.

Quietly, mind you.

“What the hell is eating her?” David asked me tightly.

“Nothing, so far as I know,” I admitted, stacking the empties in the center of the table.

They would, of course, remain behind, a trophy collection of sorts, an unwitting offer to Dionysus for a (hopefully) cheerful celebration to come.

“Maybe that’s the problem,” Michael said snidely under his breath, earning himself a frog in the arm.

“And maybe we’re all just a little thatched, me buckos,” Sammy chuckled, finally overcoming the noggin-thumping that Samantha had delivered to him. “And the solution for that is Fear!”

“Brain damage, but it’s only permanent!” David cheered lustily, waving a fist in the air as he quoted lyrics from his and Sammy’s favorite punk rock band.

So, now that the mood was set, Sammy at once got up and ran over to the soundboard and threw a few switches, one of which caused the compact, yet extremely *loud* PA system to roar to life.

Giving a “thumb’s up,” Sammy, looking for all the world like a demented Mr. Scott trying to beam the entire lot of us up to Venus or someplace equally hazardous to our health, cued the CD carousel that surmounted one of his effects racks and the... Fear... began.

The hair on my arms started to blow in the stiff breeze that followed. David ambled over to Sammy’s soundboard, a bottle of suddenly conjured Bass Ale in his hand and a contented smile on his face. Between sips of wine, Luther began to sing along at the screeching top of lungs, drowning out the music in a small radius about him. Michael took his cue and produced the Southern Comfort, which he dangled before the goggling eyes of Luther, more than likely bribing him with the “good-good” to shut up and get down to some good old fashioned, down home, shit-kickin’ partyin’. It did the trick, too.

Through all of this, Samantha kept staring at us, roving us with her eyes, shaking her head back and forth as if to disbelieve and thereby dispel the entire scene. Finally, realizing that nothing could be done once the booze and the music were in effect, she shrugged her shoulders and gave me a conciliatory grin.

“C’mere,” I mouthed to her, motioning her towards me.

Then, time did a funny thing.

In slow motion Samantha approached, every step a fresh, new line of freeform poetry.

She was, to my muddled brain, a white-furred tigress stalking her prey; a personification of the silver moon in its ever-changing yet constant phases; an ice dancer in calculated, provocative pose.

In that moment I knew that I had seen her somewhere else, *somewhen* else, before...

“Silverdancer?” I found myself thinking aloud.

And then she was before me, a question in her eyes.

“What?” Samantha asked, her voice barely audible over the crashing power chords of the music.

I could almost feel Sammy kicking me in the leg again as a wave of cold washed over my head, snapping me out of my confused reverie.

“Nothing,” I lied, adding a half-smile and a wink to cover my tracks.

Accepting it with another shrug, Samantha pointed to the table at the boxes of Thai food.

Realizing that a trip to the kitchen was in order, I hauled up an armful of debris, careful not to stain my sleeves with duck sauce. Samantha tended to the rest, and we made our way into the kitchen, tossing the paper and plastic into their respective recycling bins and scraping the few edible scraps that remained into the “doggie bowl,” as Samantha liltily called it—all for her “puppy,” Lobo. He was, as the name implied, half-something big, furry and mean, and half-wolf.

While I waited for Samantha to deliver the goods to Lobo, who was enjoying the cold weather out in the Teale’s spacious back yard, I chanced to see my reflection in the polished black surface of the towering economy-sized fridge. For the fraction of the second that it took me to look away, I could plainly see a blue nimbus of light around my eyes, centered mainly upon the iris of each eye.

“Screw this!”

I really wanted to take a look, as horrible as that may seem. The Spirit of Perversity was whispering into my ears, saying “Do it! Do it!” while the Spirit of Preservation was begging “No! No! No!” Such was my state of mind that I *almost* took another look, if only to conquer

my fears. But Samantha's return quickly killed that particular notion.

"C'mon, Logan," Samantha urged playfully from the doorway, fog-breath curling from her lips. "Come on out and get a load of this! Lobo's having one heckuva time with those hot noodles!"

"No, I don't think so," I said, laughing weakly. The very image of Lobo having fun eating *anything* was a bit beyond me at the moment.

"Aww, c'mon!" she pouted, poking me with a long-reaching finger. "Lobo misses you. C'mon out and see him."

"Not while he's eating."

"Don't be silly. He knows you, Logan."

"He damn well better know me! I was the one who found him!"

"I know. I was there, too. Don't you remember?"

"Yep. Last Christmas, up in Seattle. Don't think I'm so brain-damaged as not to remember our little group-promo 'skiing trip.' And don't forget what Sammy and Luther said about finding the dismembered sheep carcasses, either."

"Those idiots! Lobo didn't do that! He's just a puppy!"

"Just a wolf, you mean."

"Like you, huh?" Samantha breathed as she moved into the kitchen like the Queen of the Pack herself, stalking me with a strange light in her twinkling green eyes.

"Maybe. Maybe not."

I let her back me into the nearest corner, then, as she was about to pounce, I lunged forward and caught her arms, backing her up against the fridge. Fortunately, she was tall enough to block any view of my reflection. And, fortunately, she was more than eager to allow me my "way" with her. She was also sneaky enough to maneuver us over to the wall, so that she could kill the lights.

And, for a while, things were right.

Soon, as we both came to the same disappointing conclusion that this was neither the time nor the place to continue—after all, we still had rehearsal to labor through—we reluctantly broke our embrace and started off arm-in-arm down the long hallway to the den.

As we made our half-inebriated way back towards the den, the sound of Sammy's blaring punk rock music once more dulled our ears, leaving nothing but the soft, shared sensation of our sashay and the libido-teasing scent of Samantha's patchouli.

But before we made it to the den, something tugged at me, deep within—something about Samantha, about *us*; something so distant, yet so damned hauntingly *familiar*.

So, there, in the still of the darkened hall, I stopped Samantha, out of earshot of the others. I *had* to know, whether or not it would damn me—or all of us—straight to hell.

Thus did my pride doom us all, as it did once so long ago before we knew this world...

"A penny for your dreams, my dear."

Samantha regarded me for a moment, in silence. Tension stalked between us, weaving an invisible yet tangible wall of suspicion in its wake. Her green cat-eyes were distant, almost clouded in the semi-darkness of the hall. Still, they were guarded, and both of us knew it.

Then, a flicker of something flashed across her eyes.

"I didn't—" she began defensively.

"Yes, you did..." I cut her off. "I *know* you did." I nearly had myself convinced that Michael and I were not unique in our nightmares. The voices in my head were starting to whisper an unholy chorus, compelling me to take the leading role in this Passion Play. It was a schizophrenic, inexplicable feeling. But it was a feeling that was so sudden, so strong, so powerful, that it felt as if *I* had suddenly lapsed into another nightmare myself.

Samantha drew in her breath, then crossed her arms, pulling slightly away from me. She

looked as if she were debating whether to talk to me, or whether to knock me silly.

“Since you *seem* to know something you’re not saying,” she said, shaking her head slowly, her eyes downcast, “I’ll go ahead and tell you, as crazy as it sounds. I... I *saw* you last night, in a very disturbing, very vivid dream.” She paused for a second too long, then bit back a clipped laugh. “You’re gonna think I was partying with Luther...”

We both chuckled at that. Some of Luther’s parties, as hardcore and far-out as they were, *could* influence your dreams, sometimes for many weeks afterwards.

Remembering some of those wild after-gig times, we both bit back hedonistic grins. It was a full ten seconds before Samantha could regroup and continue.

“Well—and I *was* straight last night, by the way—you...” Samantha trailed off, hands animated in her frustration. “I only say *you* because whoever it was just *seemed* like you. You know how it is in dreams? Assimilate the familiar, etc.?”

I nodded an affirmative. I knew only *too* well about that lately.

“Well,” she continued, her eyes fixed on the memory of her dream, “*you* were dressed in black; a cloak on your shoulders that the wind was tossing about. A hell-wind, worse than a hurricane could possibly be. But, somehow, there was a mist that defied the wind; grey and forbidding, like a storm cloud. And it clutched at us with invisible, skeletal hands.”

“Us?” I interrupted.

“Yes, *us*, dammit!” From the glare that she gave me, I decided not to interrupt her again, in spite of what the erudite practicing shrinks had taught us budding psychoanalysts. “I was there,” Samantha continued, “dressed in a jet-black outfit with silver fringe that felt like biker shorts, or Dacron, or whatever they call that aerobic workout stuff. It was like a second skin, but it was really tough—tough like a bulletproof vest. Don’t ask me how I knew that. I just *did*. Next, there was a throbbing, a pulsing, all around us, like we were caught in the heart of some giant beast. I noticed that both of us had swords. Mine was a silver katana, curved like the crescent moon, as light as a baton. It was horrible, the way that it pulsed. Almost as if it were alive, or something. But yours... yours *was* alive. Alive, and scary. *Scary*, Logan.”

She shivered for a second before continuing. “It wasn’t that it was so horrible to look at it. It was actually quite beautiful, in a... I guess, *sadistic* sort of way. I just got the chills knowing that it was yours.”

Mine?

Hate/Pain/Death-Brother!

“And, just like Michael said, I got the distinct impression of others being there with us. They were shadowy, hidden in the mists, but I’m certain that I knew them, shared their fear. And like all dreams, everyone else was there, too, in some sort of unconscious fashion—you know, dream-assimilation stuff? Luther and Sammy were definitely there. I heard both of them cussing up a storm. I think David and Michael were, too, even though I couldn’t hear them. And, like Michael said about his dream, I knew that we had to stop something bad from happening. I think that’s where that weird guy started saying things about some dragon or something.”

Dragon?

“But before I could do anything, you ran past us, that black blade in your hands, and you slashed at a huge, shadowy figure who screamed. He sounded like a dragon, too. Or at least what a dragon’s *supposed* to sound like, if you believe the movies. Still, it was hard to pick his scream out over everyone else’s. Especially mine...”

I saw Samantha’s eyes cloud over with a thin mist.

Reaching out, I pulled her to me, crushing her to me with a surprising fierceness. I felt her chest heave slowly as she fought back tears.

“We died, Logan!” Samantha cried, her eyes brimming with hot tears as she relived the

pain of her nightmare. “We died, and there was nothing we could do about it! *Nothing!*”

As I stroked her long white hair, my hand trembled uncontrollably. Things were already out of hand and getting steadily worse. I’d heard of shared dreams, collective Jungian unconsciousness, group psychoses, and the whole nine yards.

But this... this was too much, too close to home to ignore. I’d bet my eyeteeth that David, Luther and Sammy had dreamed the same dreams, but just weren’t ready to say anything about it. David would never admit to something like that unless backed into the proverbial corner and confronted with it. Luther would gladly laugh about it and dismiss it—if he were high enough. Sammy, well, he *knew*. I don’t know how I knew that he did, but I did. Hell, I *knew* that he knew. That little acrobatic stunt of his was enough to make anyone question sanity.

And now, Samantha.

Even in the face of such evidence, I had to ask myself—as a supposedly rational, late-twentieth century man who had seen disco come and go on its evil way only to have even suckier music come and take its place—if we were all going stark, raving mad.

The voices started taunting me again, beckoning me to follow them down the Roads to Madness.

“You know, Samantha,” I said, my voice calm, guided by my mind, a million miles away, “I’m really starting to feel as if I’m slowly becoming lucid in the face of damnation.” My next words came out on their own, unbidden. “But before we all hit the padded room, I really want to show you something...”

I raised her head to look into her eyes.

Instead of green, I saw blue.

Electric blue.

Blue sparkling light arced between us with unbridled, lightning fury. My brain caught fire as brilliant, unfettered essence poured out of my being, a numbing fear combining with purest ecstasy. I saw Samantha’s eyes grow wider and wider as she held my gaze, my communion.

“I... *I know you...*” she whispered, strange realization filling her.

The sparks flew as she spoke, kindled by our embrace of their maddening, electric ways. Purity, her essence flowed into me, a warmth that I freely accepted. “I” knew now who “I” was. It was only now, with the union of our being, that I realized how empty my soul had been...

“*And I know you, Silverdancer,*” I said, not speaking in words of this world. Her eyes became the world; her soul, eternity.

“*We made it, Silverdancer,*” I whispered, pulling her to me for a kiss that I’d waited a lifetime for.

My Silverdancer screamed then, shattering my selfish illusions.

As the sparks began to fade rapidly away, I realized that Samantha was standing still, her hand over her mouth, a glazed look in her eyes. I saw the terror written plainly on her face. She slipped out of my grasp, edging backwards to the wall until she was pressed firmly against it.

“Saman—”

“Shut up!” she hissed, turning her head away.

I began to move to her, palms upwards, trying to calm her down.

“Stay the hell away from me!” Samantha groaned through gritted teeth. She began edging further down the hall, still pressed against the wall.

“Look, it’s okay! Try to understand it, go with it! If you fight it, you’re just denying yourself—*who you really are!*”

“What the hell do *you* know?” she accused. “Huh? How in the hell can you explain something like that? We all had the same dream, didn’t we? *All of us, including you!* That can’t

happen in real life! That just can't happen! And look at what happened to Michael's chest! He's wearing a tattoo from his *dream*, Logan! *His dream!*"

Samantha was almost hysterical now, tears pouring down her face as she fought for breath in between sobs. If I could've just gotten a grip on things myself, instead of standing around, mired in slow-motion platitudes, I could've helped her. But I was feeling that sickening nausea again. The temporary euphoria had faded away, leaving behind that same mind-numbing doubt and the urge to retch my guts out. I wanted to shake her, make her understand and accept it. But I was lost, just like her.

Samantha collapsed into herself, sobbing, slowly folding up against the wall and sitting there cross-legged like a confused, hurt little girl who'd just lost her favorite puppy. Or her soul.

"Is she okay, Logan?" Michael asked softly as he appeared from nowhere.

I was too numb to be embarrassed by his seeing us like this. I hadn't even noticed him in the hallway, not that I would have if he didn't want me to. Not that I *could* have with all of those blue sparks jumping around between me and Samantha. Michael padded over to me, making no noticeable sound on the old hardwood floor, although he was wearing cowboy boots.

"Logan?"

"No, she's not," I said under my breath as Samantha clumsily began to wipe the tears away, reminding me once more of the sad little girl. "None of us are, Michael. Not any more."

"I didn't mean to interrupt," Michael said a little louder, "but I thought that I heard you... uh, ask for some help with the mess. It was pretty hard to hear over Sammy's loud-ass music, you know." Lt. Reese fidgeted awkwardly for a second like a nervous schoolboy, torn between concern and good manners. Then he looked over at me, a sheepish look on his deeply tanned face. "I had to check it out, you know?" he confided. "Training! *We've taught them not to feel...* or so the song says. I've been in the goddamn desert too long!" Michael turned away from the bad scene and walked on down the hall, looking like a great golden tiger in the dark.

Sammy's music began to blare loudly, pounding the walls of the Teale House like a giant snare drum. Only now, after all of the fireworks, did I realize how loud it truly was. Good. Maybe only Michael had heard us, I wished to myself.

"Logan..." Samantha whispered, her voice choked with emotion.

"Yes, love?"

"Hold me. Please? Just hold me for a little while. Let me know that you're real."

If the eyes were really the windows to the soul, then she had just had hers torn apart.

"Everything's gonna be okay," I soothed as I pulled her up into my arms, assuring her that everything *was* going to be okay. "I promise," I lied, knowing in my heart-of-hearts that nothing between us was ever going to be the same again.

Scene

Rehearsal.

A word in the same perpetually hated league as “taxes,” “death,” and “condom.” Words that we hate to hear, let alone abide, if only because we *have* to for some stupid reason or another. We hate taxes. We don’t understand death, so we hate it, too. And the last... well, suffice to say that we *especially* hate that one.

Rehearsal, on the other hand, we could *almost* tolerate, if only because we got to polish and hone our varied musical talents and have a good time while doing it. One could argue that a good time could be had while obeying hated thing number three above, but we’d be laughing at them too hard to hear them say anything.

Electric Bard was starting to hit a groove by the second song, despite the heavy-duty shit that we’d all been through today. Samantha was still refusing to look at me directly, using her keyboards and her bass like Perseus using his shield to keep away the gaze of the dread Medusa. Luther, who was already working up a good sweat where he sat encaged behind us on his great throne of drums, seemed to be unaffected by what he had seen tonight, which had been limited to Sammy’s improbable acrobatic stunt. I think. Whatever the case, Luther still showed no inclination to share his dreams with us, and no one here was going to press him to do so if he really did not want to. None of us was that crazy.

And I... I was glad to have my guitar in my hands, a mike in front of me and a song on my lips. Already the adrenaline was flowing, along with the sweat, washing away my iniquities and cleansing my sin. We were ripping into our eclectic set of songs, careless and carefree to those who looked upon us, but not quite feeling the same way inside. To me, that was the most awesome aspect of making music: the mood and mind-altering effect it always conveyed, especially to those who listened to it with open ears and open hearts, through any and all such distractions of the soul. Such things merely added fuel to the all-consuming magickal fire of music. And, tonight, we were burning.

Things always seemed a little bit more concrete when the three of us, along with the manic soundmaster Sammy, were burning together, jamming together and feeling the music as if it were a living thing. Things seemed a little bit more *real*.

Almost familiar! I taunted myself as I crunched down hard on an ascending octave solo run, mimicking note-for-note a bar from Jimi Hendrix’s badass solo on “All Along The Watchtower,” warping it into the segue of an off-kilter harmonic minor sixty-fourth note assault. A wide grin bloomed on Luther’s face as he caught himself laughing into his headset mike. Shaking his head in utter disbelief that I could have blasphemed “The Master” in such a heinous way, he added a whacked-out cowbell paradiddle as we headed back into the refrain that totally caught me off-guard, sending me stumbling back into my mikestand like a spastic child.

This brought the smallest of flickers to Samantha’s eyes, which made me feel so damn good inside that I just broke into a spontaneous version of Steppenwolf’s classic tune, “Born To Be Wild,” to which I substituted the lyrics of “Petticoat Junction.” And, surprisingly, it fit.

Yes, there was no longer any doubt from the demented looks on the faces of the Loons in the room: we were determined to make ourselves “number one with a bullet” on the Loony Tunes Hit Parade.

Luther, our rhythm anchor, was, as always, right on time, despite the laughter; driving us along whether or not we wanted to go. That was his main gift: consistency. Luther was like a human metronome, an octopus with a rhythmic brain. His drum kit—a cyclopean hodgepodge set pieced together from several different smaller kits—was like a great cage around him, from which it seemed that he was trying to pound his way out. As big as he was, it was difficult to see him behind the fifteen Zildjian cymbals that surmounted his double-bass kit, not to mention the double bell trees, chimes, crotales, and a row of synthesizer-slaved trip pads for those really bizarre electronic percussive effects. Behind him there were also two sets of congas and a well-worn set of steel drums, which he could grab in a second and swivel around in front of his drum throne, which Sammy conveniently had mounted on a lazy-susan type construction that could revolve 360 degrees like Neil Peart's, if necessary.

Samantha, recovering from her hallway shock, was taking out her frustrations on her Hamer bass (the 12-string one, too; not her normal 4-string beauty), shredding with an intensity that surprised everyone in the room. Not that we *should* have been surprised: Samantha had transcribed over two hundred pieces of *extreme* music ranging from Bach's *Tocatta and Fugue in D-minor* to Paganini's *Caprices* to Billy Sheehan's and David Harbor's most insane heavy metal bass solos. Two terms as a child prodigy at Juilliard *did* have its advantages. In her "spare" time, which was mainly during the intros and the breaks of our songs, she manned a rack of Yamaha, Oberheim, and other Sammy-warped synthesizers that nearly hid her when she stepped behind them. Samantha performed both bass and keys with equal skill, if not with equal playing time. After all, her piano ability was what had landed her the Juilliard gig in the first place...

The guitars were all mine. My personal hoardings were a host of weird stringed things that included an ESP 6/12-string double-neck, an Alvarez classical guitar, an Ibanez 7-string adorned with one helluva psychedelic airbrush job, a smooth-backed Ovation 12-string acoustic, and my pride and joy: an all-original, mint condition '64 Strat—strung upside down like Jimi's, of course. Add to that one eerie-looking lute, which I had crafted myself one crazed summer from a twisted piece of driftwood that I had found off Grand Isle, and you get the picture. In addition to the stringed things, there was also an ancient set of Taurus bass pedals, which were slaved to one of Samantha's synthesizer sequencers for an array of bizarre foot-triggered special effects that ranged from Star Wars-sounding laser blasts to contrabass choruses that doubled and enriched our own three-part harmonies.

Together, the three of us made enough music for an orchestra, although no sane person would ever draw such a lofty comparison, even if highly bribed.

Sammy's keyboard sequencing and creative use of background video "enhancement"—we had two separate video-imaging screens for the psychedelic fills and thrills that were synched to follow our show in real-time—rounded out the technical end of our little traveling medicine show. Call all of the techno-stuff "cheating" if you will, but at least give us the credit for writing our own stuff and singing it in three-part harmony. We would never be accused of being Milli Vanilli. Never.

Halfway through our set, we had begun to work up a healthy sweat, sinking deeper into the rambling, rumbling groove of things, the night's earlier events lost somewhere in time.

Sammy was working like a madman to coordinate the sound and light boards, running them both from a single, decked-out system that he had customized from the guts of eight—count 'em—*eight* other boards and a Synclavier, the Cadillac of computerized digital systems. David was playing Igor to Sammy's Baron Frankenstein, assisting him with the more trivial things while goggling over all of the shiny lights and pretty electric thingies, some of which I'm sure he had probably worked with at China Lake. Michael slouched happily on the couch, a little to the side of our mega-powerful Crest-amplified PA system, with a bottle of Black Label Jack curled up in his hands and a wide

grin on his face as he sang along with us.

It was magick as we rolled like an out-of-control Mongol Horde into our finale, the one song that WCKW was rotating heavily on its “Homegrown Hour,” our kicking, rhythm-driven iconoclastic “love song,” “Now That You’re Gone”:

**“I see your eyes in every star...
I call your name a thousand times
I hear your voice softly fall like rain...”**

**Long ago I was your lover
Now see my eyes, I am
Another long lost soul, lonely in the night**

**Now I call your name
But the faces all have changed
I’m crying in the rain...**

**Now that you’re gone
You’ve made believe our love was wrong
Now that you’re gone
All the good times shared
Can’t be shared alone...**

**Shattered mirror, broken shards
Each a dream no more
I walk the night, alone**

**Now I call your name
Only memories remain
You’re crying in the rain...**

**Does it matter?
Do you feel the same?
Do you feel at all?
...I see your eyes in every star...”**

Sweating, smiling, and exhausted, Samantha, Luther and I held out the last rousing chords of our finale, exchanging triumphant smiles as we imagined the stunned, slack-jawed faces of all of the music execs who would be chomping at the bit to sign us Mardi Gras night. The three eager pairs of clapping hands, however, brought us back to reality, if only for a little while.

“That’s a wrap, guys,” Sammy announced over the talk-back mike at the board.

And that was that.

See ya, re-whore-sal!

Feeling very satisfied, for once, I shot Samantha a smile and unslung my guitar, tossing my pick over my shoulder, our signal to exit stage left for the nonce. She gave me a grin and a thumbs-up—it made me feel warm to see her eyes alive again—then stepped out from behind her synthesizer rack, a bottle of Guinness Stout already in her hands.

Suddenly, a double-bass kick-drum rumble threatened to knock us all to the floor as Luther cut loose like a total maniac.

“Party! Party! Party!” Rastamon bellowed through his headset mike like the Delta House version of John Belushi. Sammy took the cue and, with a flick of the switch, blared “Low Rider” through the PA, peaking the meters. For the duration of three repetitions of our favorite party tune, we formed an impromptu conga line and cavorted about the den, acting like a den of fools, singing at the top of our lungs, spilling cheap wine on priceless antiques.

After our “low ride,” we decided that it was in the best interest of the Teale House to move our party elsewhere; preferably the French Quarter, where our lewd behavior would fit right in with everyone else’s. Sammy suggested “The Van.” Figuring that the police would probably have better things to do than harass a van stuffed with a drunk midget lunatic and his twice-drunk band of fellow Loons, I reluctantly acquiesced to Sammy’s nagging. Besides, if it did come down to it, we could always claim that we were a float or something, considering how weird we looked as a group.

Gathering up the last of our goodies, Luther took the last of the Boone’s Farm while Sammy and David shut off all the lights. Since Samantha was going to be out of the scene for a time while she changed clothes, Michael and I hatched a plot. Under my direction and without Samantha’s approval, Michael stealthily made his way to the Teale’s well-stocked wine cellar like the highly trained SEAL that he was and procured a bottle of ‘66 Dom Perignon, securing it in his flight jacket, while I made it my highly untrained, un-SEAL-like duty to procure a corkscrew. Champagne for the celebration of the Lizard King. We would spring our surprise later on the rest of the unsuspecting Brüe Crüe, and pray that Samantha wouldn’t take it out on our heads.

At least, that was our plan.

Therefore, we tried to get to the van before Samantha, or, for that matter, before anyone else did. As fate would have it, though, Luther, always the first one at any party, spied us giggling like the total idiots that we were as we entered the garage.

“What’s so funny?” Luther asked, eyeing us both like some gargantuan hawk.

“Uh, nothing, you big drummer, you!” Michael said without breaking up. Almost.

As we both began to guffaw at being “busted” by someone more corrupt than any DEA double-agent could ever *hope* to be, Luther, smiling craftily, reached forward and grabbed both of us by the shoulders, clutching us to him conspiratorially.

“You got the good-good, huh?” Luther’s wine-breath hit us like a Mack truck, dulling our senses for a second. A second which he used to frisk us both down for the “good-good.”

“Hey! I don’t do that on the first date!” Michael laughed as he tried to keep his jacket closed over the bottle. But it was too late for him, because Luther already had one of his economy-sized hands around the Dom Perignon bottle.

“Ahh-ha!” Luther shouted triumphantly, drawing the bottle out and holding it high over his head. “The good-good!” he shouted as he began a weaving, drunken dance around the garage.

Instantly, Michael and I were in hot pursuit of the runaway Rastamon. “Luther, stop!” I shouted, reaching for the bottle.

“No way, mon!” he teased, holding the bottle *waaay* up out of reach. “You boys give the tribute to the king, and that’s *moi!*”

I looked over at Michael, who gave me a desperate look right back. There was no getting it wrong: We would much rather take the chance of getting thrashed by a seven-foot tall version of King Kong than take our chances with a pissed-off Samantha Teale. So we both jumped him, securing his arms in double elbow-locks.

Silly us.

Now you have to realize something here: Between me and Michael, we had the

equivalent of seven black belts in various martial arts styles, not to mention some four hundred pounds-plus mass on our side. While it should be noted that the slim majority of the mass and the overwhelming majority of the belts were Michael's, though, *neither* one of us was your average schoolyard pushover, mind you.

But Luther just shrugged us off like fleas, hurling both of us a full ten feet in either direction with a casual flex of his arms, dancing all the while. I was lucky and hit the side panel of the van with my backside. Michael, however, flew head over heels across the garage and thumped into the garage door with a loud clang. And this was what finally snapped Luther out of his mad version of the *Tarantella*.

"Wow!" Sammy shouted from the doorway. "Did you see that, David?"

"Yep," David said slowly, thoughtfully stroking his beard, "but I'm still not sure that I believe it."

Rubbing my shoulder, I turned to see Sammy and David standing at the door, arms at their sides, mouths agape. Luther, startled for once, turned to face them, the bottle still held high over his head.

"What's up, bros?" he asked, his eyebrows arching up to his mohawk. "You don't like the dance?"

"Have you been smoking steroids, Luther?" Michael said as he dusted himself off and walked over to Luther's side. Thankfully, Michael was not wounded in the least. Had it been me, I would probably now be in traction.

But, like I said, the majority of those belts *did* belong to Michael...

Sammy and David walked over, exchanging sidelong glances with each other as they did.

"Yeah, Luther!" David cajoled. "What have you been smoking? Testosterone or something?"

"You know I smoke only the ganja, now, mon! No impurity for I, you know?"

The tone with which Luther delivered his statement of personal Rasta opinion left no room for doubt, either.

"You realize you just tossed off those two like you did me earlier, Luther," Sammy said, his tone even and analytical.

"But you're just a lil' boy, Sam-I-Am," Luther said, a smile creasing his wide face. He loved to taunt Sammy with an endless onslaught of obscure Dr. Seuss references. And to Sammy Joseph, genius nonpareil, Dr. Seuss was *sacred*.

"I know that, you big idiot!" Sammy said sharply, slugging Luther futilely on the leg. "But those two together at least quadruple my mass, and you tossed them off of you like insects. No offense, guys."

"None taken, Grasshopper," I said, smiling at Michael.

"Not to mention that both of them together—*marital* artists that they are—should have been more than enough to hold even you, big guy," David added, rubbing his hands together as he sought to ignore the looks of disdain from both Michael and me. Like Sammy, David was probably calculating the vector forces involved in Luther's action and reaching some fairly high foot-poundage.

Yes, they were both *that* good.

And they weren't allowed to be on the same team when we played Trivial Pursuit.

"I've got an idea," Sammy said quickly, his hand at his temple in concentration.

"Oh, no..." Luther moaned, backing away from Sammy, the Dom Perignon bottle held out to ward off Sammy's evil thoughts.

"Oh, yes!" Sammy said, reaching out in a blur, grabbing the bottle from Luther. I breathed a sigh of relief as Sammy slipped me the ill-gained bottle. Michael wiped his brow in not-so-mock relief, then took the much-abused bottle and secured it again within his flight jacket. Meanwhile,

Sammy was busy dragging a pleading Luther to the side of his van while David was calling out specs on the size, estimated mass, and something that sounded like “moo-static potential” of the van. Sammy only corrected his guesses once, on the mass of “The Van,” adjusting it upwards by a cool four hundred pounds while smiling a knowing smile to David, who just shook his head and mumbled something unintelligible. Sometimes, I just felt like an idiot around those two Monsters of Math.

“Okay, Rastamon,” Sammy said as he placed Luther’s hands under the frame of the van, “lift it up, and I’ll make you some of my special Rastamon brownies.”

“Hey...” Luther foamed, his eyes lighting up.

“Now that’s what I’d call proper motivation, Sammy!” David said, shaking with laughter.

“You lie, runt,” Luther said, rising up and folding his arms.

“That’s for me to know and you to find out,” Sammy said evenly. “But you’ll never know unless you do it.”

Luther grumbled, muttering some choice French gutter-words under his breath as he bent to his task. “Lift the goddamn van, he says, just like I’m some big beast! If I lift the van, runt, I’m gonna throw it on you!”

Reluctantly, Luther bent down, grabbing the frame of the van with his massive hands. As he set himself and took in a series of short breaths, I once again felt that strange feeling of displacement, like I was someone else watching this, somewhere else. There was no doubt in my rational mind that he was going to give himself a double hernia trying to lift a two-ton van, all for Sammy’s cruelly promised reward. I started to feel sorry for Luther, whom Sammy always took for a ride, but that pity was replaced by the more pressing concern that my drummer was going to get ruptured before our big gig.

“C’mon, Luther,” I said, “Sammy’s only teasing. Don’t hurt yourself.”

“Screw you! I want some brownies!” Luther spat through clenched teeth, his habitual patois mysteriously disappearing in his stress.

“Yeah, screw you!” Sammy mocked, shushing me.

The van was rocking slightly as Luther exerted himself. I shook my head, picturing a gig without a drummer. When the van rose a half-foot off of the garage floor, though, my heart skipped a beat. That feeling returned, hitting me like a runaway freight train. This was... too much for one day. My vision blurred, my legs felt weak as the voices started calling again. Not even the shell of alcohol I had submerged myself within could protect me this time as Luther hoisted the protesting van up to his chest, his arms bulging like twin anacondas.

“I don’t believe it!” Michael exploded, echoing the very thoughts that each of us held.

“You better believe it, mon,” Luther gasped as he began to straighten his arms, “‘cause I’m the Mon!”

“Wait!” Sammy started screaming. “Stop, or you’ll crush the Grand National!”

“You gonna pay up, then?” Luther said wickedly, balancing the van on its tortured wheels.

“Yes! Yes! Yes!” Sammy pleaded. “Now, set it down, *gently*. Please, big guy? We all know you’re the Man... I mean, the Mon... now!”

Satisfied that he was, indeed, “The Mon,” Luther set the van down gently, the shocks only bouncing slightly. David let out a cheer, then started dancing a little jig with a smiling Luther.

Without missing a beat, Luther, who probably somehow knew he could do the impossible all along (or so my paranoid mind screamed at me), plucked an exhilarated Sammy right off of the floor and set him upon his broad shoulders.

“Incredible,” Michael said to me, shaking his head in disbelief. “No wonder he tossed us off like little kids. He’s as strong as the Hulk!”

“Michael,” I asked, taking him aside, my voice sounding just a little bit hollow, “what’s

happening to us? What's going on? Are we all going crazy?"

"I've been wondering about that one myself for the past few days," he said, looking me straight in the eyes with that eerie, calm, green-eyed stare of his. "But, I've already made up my mind to go along with whatever *is* going on. To comprehend it, then to conquer it. The best thing that you can do, Logan, old buddy, is to focus yourself. Get a grip on this new reality. Of all of us—even me—only you have the internal strength to pull us through this."

Michael Reese, my old martial arts guru and drinking buddy, placed his deeply tanned hand on my shoulder and gave it a squeeze.

"But how do you..."

"Don't ask," he interrupted. "Just accept it. I *know*. It's that simple, yet that complex."

"And that's the Zen of it, then?" I stated flatly, not allowing my discontent to enter my voice.

"You could say that," Michael said with a haunting, secret smile.

I considered this deeply. For all of three seconds, then:

"Okay, I'm ready guys," Samantha said cheerfully as she entered the garage. She took one look around at all of the idiots, then put on a slightly confused face. "Did I miss something?"

"Only this," I announced, holding up the corkscrew only after the lunatic laughter had died down to a small roar. *Did I miss something...*

The sign given, Michael produced the champagne from his jacket and passed me the bottle, which I quickly opened despite the glare I got from Samantha. "A toast!" I proclaimed, holding up the bottle. Eager cheers greeted my announcement, so, warming to the occasion, I stood front and center, then paused a moment to consider how best to put into words the thoughts that were roiling through my mind. "Well, like Jim says," I offered, raising the bottle high in tribute to the Lizard King, "Try to run, try to hide..." I began.

"Break on through to the other side!" we finished together.

Then, as one, their eyes lit up with something just a shade beyond what most would call anticipation as the irony of my toast struck home. In the curious silence that followed, we passed the bottle around and all but chugged the expensive bubbly. Judging by the knowing glint in their eyes, it appeared that the doors of perception had indeed been opened.

Scene

Finding a parking place was—to put it in terms that someone unfamiliar with parking in the French Quarter at *any* time during Mardi Gras might understand—hell.

Fortunately, we were able, due to Sammy's Death Race-influenced demonic driving, to cut off several less-demonic motorists and find our way into the parking lot between the Moonwalk and the Vieux Carre Riverview, two of the most scenic areas of the Quarter overlooking Jackson Square.

But let me point out the fine print here: Getting into the parking lot and finding a parking place were two entirely different arts. The lot was jam-packed, with cars illegally parked on the small median beneath the Moonwalk, not to mention the motor homes and RVs that were hogging more than their share of the lot. It was enough to make a sane person mad. Consider that, then recall the fact that Sammy was driving.

While the twenty or more cars that sat in line like cattle waited patiently for a spot to open, Sammy gunned his engine obnoxiously and blared some really cool Soundgarden as loud as his system would allow, which was somewhere in the neighborhood of a Concorde taking off. Add to that the fact that Luther was shaking the entire van with his air-drumming, his foot-stomping, and his uncanny reproduction of Chris Cornell's super-cool, super-unbelievable I'm-so-pissed-off-it-that-it-hurts voice, and you could see that we made quite a sight.

Reaching up to where David sat in the passenger seat, I grabbed his bulky shoulder and motioned for him to turn down the stereo for a minute. Smiling, he complied, turning it down to slightly-less-than-earbleed level. Earbleed abating, I reached over the back of Sammy's seat and grabbed him by the shoulder. Then, I shouted into his ears. Loudly.

"Samantha says she saw a car pull out of a spot behind us! It'll be tight fit, but..."

"What?" Sammy yelled insanely, a pseudo-English accent creeping into his voice. "A spot! Why didn't you say so, man?"

With that, Sammy gunned the engine and pulled out of the line of cars, nearly smashing the rear fender of a white Bronco as he did so. Hanging onto the rear of his seat for dear life, I had the inestimable pleasure once again of experiencing Sammy's Death Race as he hit forty miles per hour in a very, very short clip, then slammed into a controlled power-slide, right into the vacant space between a rather nice Ford Taurus and a rather silly Yugo. Now safe once more in his imaginary Bat Cave, Sammy revved his engine to the redline once, then twice, then thrice, then let it idle like the gas-hungry thing that it was.

As Sammy killed the engine, however, a very irate, clean-cut young man and his conservative looking group of male friends with matching Polo shirts piled out of the rather nice Ford Taurus next to us and walked up to Sammy's window. Their faces were flushed with rage.

"You asshole!" barked the clean-cut young man as his knuckles rapped on the tinted window. "Get out of that dope-wagon so I can teach you how to drive like a human being!" His buddies, five more just like him, were starting to bow-up and cat-call as they paraded around Sammy's van, shaking it from side-to-side.

I could understand their reaction at having almost been killed. What I did not like was the fact that, due to Sammy's heavily tinted windows, they were assuming that only Sammy and David were inside, easy pickings for the six of them. Those were hardly fair odds.

And I just hated bullies, especially stupid ones.

Remarkably, Sammy just sat there, shaking his head a few times before finally reaching over and killing the music. Their outraged shouts were really starting to get imaginative. Luther was hooting and hollering like a wild man, waiting for the word to be given. David was trying not to laugh. Sammy was strangely quiet, which I didn't like at all.

"C'mon, Sammy," Samantha said calmly, "just let them get it out of their systems, then they'll go on their way."

"Yeah, Sammy," Michael reasoned, "we don't need to get into any police trouble here, especially with a bunch of drunken daddy's boys."

"Well, okay," Sammy said, a tense edge in his voice, "but—and I mean this—if they fuck with my van, I'll kill them."

For a split-second, I believed every word he said. So did everyone else in the van.

Everyone except for a certain Mr. Gates, that is.

"Dead by dawn! Dead by dawn!" Luther suddenly taunted, egging Sammy on with that horrible line from that horribly cool movie. Instantly, Luther earned himself a van-full of "shush's" for his efforts. Damned instigator. And he knew it, too.

The Polo Gang, apparently having their fill of fun, began to file back into their car. But just as they were getting situated, the driver of the car, the guy who had first got out, suddenly jumped back out and ran around to Sammy's window once more. There was a large deer-knife in his hands.

Oh, no...

As Sammy calmly looked on, the clean-cut Davie Crockett brandished his knife, then plunged it into the driver's side door with a grinding metal-on-metal sound.

"What do you think about that, you asshole?" the clean-cut guy demanded, bearing his teeth like a fiend.

"NYAAA!" Sammy growled as he shoved his door open and leaped for the guy's throat.

A chorus of expletives went out from both vehicles as both sides started to pour out, ready for action. Following Sammy out of the door, I was the second one out of the van. Hitting the tarmac of the parking lot, I landed on the two of them, trying to isolate the knife so that no one would regret the night's fun. But I got nothing except a squirming Sammy, whom I pulled off of the screaming guy just as the first and second of his buddies reached me, arms pumping like crazy.

"Back off, and we can just forget about this whole thing..." I offered as knife-boy got up and took a wide slice at Sammy, who wasn't helping things by wiggling like a greased otter in my arms.

"Get that son of a bitch and his midget friend!" knife-guy screamed to his swinging buddies. They missed their first swings, but one managed to catch Sammy Spastic with a left hook that jarred his hard head into my chin.

"Fuck this!" I shouted, blood welling from the underside of my chin. They had just crossed that thin, red line. And now they would pay for their sins.

I threw Sammy's wiggling form at the nearest Polo guy, catching him at the waist and knocking him backwards into the Taurus. The second Polo guy took a bull charge at me, hoping like hell to knock me into the van with his slovenly, beer-bellied, two hundred and twenty-plus pound mass. Once tonight was enough in my book, so his bull charge suddenly ended with a Dragon's Fist to the collarbone, which, gratifyingly enough, snapped exactly like Michael had promised a collarbone was supposed to snap. I cleared my stance, regaining my ki, then stared at knife-boy and his other four Polo boys. Something gleamed in reflection from their eyes.

Something brief, but something blue.

Needless to say, they stopped in their tracks, staring in open, drunken wonder at me. So I took this fraction of a second to take in the scene. Sammy was rolling on the tarmac with the guy that I

had thrown him into, which made the odds just fine in my book, knife-guy still standing in front of me or not. And I could hear the mad scramble of my friends as they approached. Fine. Were these bozos in for a rude awakening...

“What are you waiting for? Show him some fists!” knife-boy screamed. Panicking, he waved his knife around his head as if swatting gnats. “Get him!”

So eloquently urged on, the four Polo Guys broke from their trances, then broke into two groups; one group circling around to the front of the car, the other group coming straight on from the rear. Just like sheep to the Big Bad Wolf, the fools.

The two racing around to the front never quite made it. Michael, rounding the front of the van, nearly decapitated one of them with a flashy spinning back-fist that dropped Joe Polo in his tracks like a sack of wet sand. David, his glasses off, rushed around Michael and bulled into the other one, slamming him down hard onto the tarmac and pinning him face-down, much the same as he used to do when he was an undefeated light-heavyweight wrestler his senior year at St. Paul’s High School. Such was the same for the two racing from the rear of the car. They met Luther, who introduced them to Pain.

Now, the tables turned in the space of three seconds, knife-boy was suddenly very much alone. And pissed off to the max.

“What the fuck are you people, freaks or something?” he asked, his voice cracking as he looked first at Sammy, who was busy kicking the curled-up form of his fallen foe, then to the towering Luther, who smiled and cracked his gnarled knuckles with a sound like railroad ties being driven. “You don’t scare me, you freaks! I’ve still got a kn—”

The metallic *che-clak* of an automatic’s slide drawing back carried in the murky night air like the toll of doom. Samantha, a Sig-Sauer 9mm in her hands, held a dead bead on knife-boy’s heart from her perch on the van’s roof.

“Lose the knife, or lose your life. You make the call,” she said, clicking the safety back.

Knife-boy’s face turned a sickly shade of green as he finally realized the stakes of the game. Then, like the good little boy that he was, he dropped the knife from his nerveless hands and bolted to his car. Those of his friends who could still function dragged those who couldn’t back to the car, and they beat one of the fastest retreats I’d ever seen, leaving ten feet of burnt rubber behind them as they sped off.

“Pussies!” Sammy said as they sped off. He flew the finger the whole time.

“They met the Mon and his homies tonight!” Luther said loudly, ruffling Sammy’s hair as he did so. And, hopefully, defusing the eight mile long fuse of vengeance that burned in Sammy’s mind. Good Ol’ Luther. He could bring you back as well as take you there, the old instigator.

Slowly, my scrambled senses seemed to return to what passed for normal. Now, with the hue and cry gone, I could hear... laughter? It was David, who was laughing about something with Michael. Slowly, I turned to look at the two of them. Both of them smiled at me, then pointed up at Samantha. I gave in, and swung around to look up at her. For a very dangerous moment, Samantha stared back down at us, a feral green light flickering in her eyes. Then, with a contemptuous sneer, she raised the Sig-Sauer over her head and pulled the trigger, which *clicked* on an empty chamber.

“You trickster! It wasn’t even loaded,” I said admiringly as I helped her down from the van’s slick metal roof.

“Well, *he* didn’t know that, now did he?” Samantha countered with a hollow smile. Try to hide it as she might, though, I could still feel her muscles tense at my touch.

“My van...” Sammy sighed sadly as he inspected the four inch gash in his door panel. It was obviously going to take some repair work.

“Looks like it’s time to move up to Kevlar, Sammy,” David said matter-of-factly, examining

the panel with Sammy.

“Hey...” Sammy’s eyes lit up like little red coals.

“Guys, let’s go party, okay?” I said, trying to downplay what had just happened.

Nothing.

“Okay?”

That did it. At least the slow shuffles and the halfhearted mumbles said so.

“Goddamn Crawfish Circuit all over again...” Sammy grumbled as we gathered round in a loose circle.

How right Sammy was. Playing the so-called “Crawfish Circuit” could lead to things like that. Things like fights. In Electric Bard, we had seen more than our share of them down here in southern Louisiana, where many of your average patrons weren’t so much interested in enjoying the music as in getting ripped and starting drunken fights with “the longhairs.” Remember that old philosophical bullshit line about “no one ever wins a fight”? Well, it’s just that: bullshit. You see, in our band’s unique situation, at least while playing the “Crawfish Circuit,” it was sometimes essential for us to “win” our fights just to get *paid* for the night. Sad, but true. And let’s just say that we never went home empty-handed, either...

But now, despite the apparent similarities, the circumstances were just a “tad” bit different. *Sure they were. Just like then, we won. And nothing else matters.*

We retrieved our requisite bottled goodies out of the van, locked it up, then headed for the nearby Moonwalk. All the while, Sammy and David held a whispering, highly technical conversation, maniacally discussing things like “proximity mines,” “implanted-armors,” and “composite resins.”

“They’re up to no good,” Luther grumbled. He was probably wondering if Sammy was hatching something to weasel his way out of their bet.

“Don’t let it get to ya, Luth,” Michael said, lighting up a foul-smelling cheroot with an old Zippo lighter. “That kinda techno-babble just causes the women to ignore *them*, and *that* just leaves more women for us. So just have a smoke and play it cool, big guy. No composite in *these* resins.”

“Yo, mon!” Luther said with gusto as Michael passed him a gnarled, dried-up cigar.

“Hey, Michael,” I said, looking over at a grimacing Samantha, “why don’t you pass me one, too?”

“Since when did you start smoking, homeboy?” Michael asked, giving me a daddy-scolds-the-bad kid-look.

“I haven’t, really. At least not until you pass me one of those cancer sticks.”

“No, Logan,” Luther said, inhaling deeply from the cheroot, “these aren’t ‘cancer sticks!’ These are just tem-po-rary smokes, if you know what’s goin’ on.”

There was no arguing *that* logic. Or at least no understanding it.

Michael, a slick grin on his face, passed me one of the mangled-looking cigars, offering his Zippo right along behind it. As I held my hands around it to ward off the river wind, I noticed that there was a peculiar insignia on it, some sort of triangle with a sword running through its center. Michael saw my eyes light up along with my cheroot.

“Team-6 it is, then!” I cheered, almost dropping the cigar from my blabbing mouth. I recognized the SpecOps insignia from some of Sammy’s more bizarre underground war literature. “That’s fuckin’ awesome, man! Why didn’t you tell me, Michael?”

“Well, you know, if I told you, I’d have to kill you,” he said, quoting that overused spook line.

“You mean you’d have to *try!*” I said shoving him on ahead of me.

After a quick drag on the cigar, though, I concluded that he wouldn’t have to do it

himself. Now I knew why Clint Eastwood was always squinting in those old westerns.

When we reached the top of the Moonwalk—which was really nothing more than a fifty by fifty foot square of stone with a couple of benches and a few small, raised enclaves that held some fairly scraggly trees—we stopped at the edge overlooking Jackson Square, lost in the moment. The view was commanding. If you overlooked the bumper-to-bumper traffic that clogged Decatur Street, you could almost imagine yourself in another time, almost another place.

...a *familiar* place?

I quieted that nagging thought immediately, blowing out a thin spear of smoke, wishing that my thoughts would go along with it.

Calmer, if not more rational, I allowed myself to view the scene as if it were my first time. Between the towering spires of the St. Louis Cathedral, which dominated the scene, and the Pontalba buildings which lined the edge of Jackson Square, you could almost figure yourself to be in eighteenth century... Paris, perhaps? I always got the Spanish and the French architecture confused, unlike David, who could quote volumes about it. Or Sammy, who knew just about every unimportant piece of trivia in the world. But they were still in Monster of Math mode, and I wasn't about to interrupt them. At least, not as long as I could lose myself in this juxtaposed, almost otherworldly view.

"I give you, my friends," Luther suddenly said, extending his arms in a kingly gesture, "The City That Time Forgot!"

Holding Samantha closely to me, a chill running up my spine, I felt intense déjà-vu as my mind wandered in some darkened, long-forgotten corridor of memory. I felt like something was at the tip of my tongue, ready to come forth, and, with a single word, blast my fragile reality to smithereens.

Where are you now, Silverdancer...

"Did you say something, Logan?" Samantha asked softly. The world of cars, electricity and neon lights came back, piece-by-antsy-piece, like a nitrous oxide buzz in reverse.

"No," I lied, wondering if she had somehow heard my thoughts, "I didn't say anything. Nothing at all, Samantha Teale."

Samantha smiled at the way I said her name, stretching the syllables like some preschool child who was just learning how to talk. What she couldn't know was that it now felt like her name was a foreign thing to me, vague and unconnected nouns with nothing to give them meaning. It was like suddenly waking up one day from a deep Rip Van Winkle sleep, pointing up to the familiar Sun, and calling it "doorknob."

"Cheer up," "Samantha Teale" whispered, giving me a peck on the cheek. Then, strangely, she gave me a stare. Noticing the cut on the underside of my chin, she dabbed her finger to her tongue and began to clean it up.

"Cut it out!" I exclaimed, macho male ego upset by her playing mommy.

"Well, what do you know..." she said, holding my chin in her hands as she inspected the underside of my chin. "The blood's already dried up. Looks like it was only a little nick."

"A little nick?" I barked, incredulous. "More like Old Nick! Sammy's *head* hit my chin! You know how hard that noggin is, Samantha! I could feel the blood pouring down my throat, and now you're saying that it's only a nick?"

"C'mon, you two lovebirds," Michael said, before "Dr. Teale" could rebuff me, "let's get a move-on before we freeze to death."

Before I could even think about how the obvious cut on my chin had mysteriously "healed," we were on the move. The six of us walked down one of the long, inclined walkways, which were crawling with tourists. Crossing Decatur was easy, considering the fact that none of the cars was

moving. We took St. Peter, a cool little thoroughfare that was cobblestoned, for an entire block. Given the time of night, I was surprised to find a couple of painters still going strong, portable lights and all. There were also several groups of promsters, decked out in their rented best, who were desperately trying to enjoy walking around the Quarter in their ill-fitting, rented shoes. Normally, I wouldn't have even looked twice at prom-goers. You could see them every weekend walking around with big, wide eyes, sharing an "illegally" gained Hurricane between the three or four of them. But tonight their stares were just a second too long. I really thought that my stage experience and my walking around with Luther, Sammy and Samantha all these years had prepared me a bit more for all of the attention. I was wrong. Tonight was just... different. It was almost as if they were staring right through me, seeing something that was hidden inside that I couldn't see myself. It bothered the living hell out of me.

The mirror never lies...

Strolling on down St. Peter, we soon passed in front of the ever-crowded Pat O'Brien's. The lines to get in stretched all the way down the block, three or four people deep. The sweat-and-piss reek of the streets combined with the cacophony of several competing bar bands and booming car systems to create an intoxicating morass of sensory overload. It was crowded, rude, filthy, dirty. And we loved it!

"Luther, my main man," I said as I slapped him on the back, a sudden joy filling my heart, "I thank you profusely, from the bottom of my black soul, for your gift of the City That Time Forgot!"

Luther Gates turned around then, a smug, all-wise, benevolent look on his face, and gave me a big Fonzie-style thumb-up. Michael, taking a swig from one of Luther's many hidden bottles, sent a spray of cheap wine onto a passing taxi. The passengers in the back of the cab, who were definitely tourists, started laughing. The taxi driver, fortunately for all of us, hadn't seen it, or he probably would have flipped down his secret Death Race lever (which all taxi drivers have) and run us down like street scum, scoring ridiculous amounts of points in the process. *Yeah, right...*

Soon enough, we hit the infamous stretch of asphalt that was Bourbon Street. The street party was in full force here. There was barely enough room to squeeze through the wall-to-wall crowd of screaming, stupid-drunk people. Fortunately, Luther took the lead and made good headway against the madding throng. However, just as we shoved past a group of some twenty or so intensely chanting fraternity brothers, who were vehemently requesting a mammary display from any and all passing females, one of them did a double take and started bellowing at the top of his already hoarse voice, "Look! Shaq's got a mohawk! Shaq's got a mohawk!" The group of guys turned as one, "wow's" and "no way's" escaping with reverential awe.

I could hear Luther start to laugh in a wholly unwholesome manner as he quickened his pace through the crowd. He was always being mistaken for one basketball star or another, much to his displeasure. Over the past few years, though, especially with the emergence of Shaquille O'Neal at LSU and his subsequent rise to NBA superstardom, it had gotten considerably worse.

Now, they were both seven-footers. That much was true. But anyone could tell, at least at second glance, that while Shaq was right around three hundred pounds and huge in his own right, Luther Gates had him by an easy fifty and a pound of gold. Really. It was just another glaring example of Orwellian *groupthink*.

Seek... locate... assimilate.

Luther was still grumbling when we hit Toulouse.

"Silly boys think I'm Mr. Hoop Mon!"

"C'mon, man," Michael said, "how many seven-foot tall brothers do you see out partying around here? Take it as a compli—"

"But I *never* shoot hoop, Michael!" Luther complained, throwing his arms up in total

indignation. (It went without saying that many local basketball coaches bemoaned this fact. But Luther would have been banned from the game after his first in-your-face dismemberment, so...)

“So why they always gotta say the same damn thing?”

“Well, Luther, at least they don’t think you’re Larry Bird!” I teased.

“Hell,” Michael said, stifling a grin, “they just wish they were in your shoes, my friend. Everybody wants to be a star. When they see you, it just reminds them of how close it all is.”

“A key to a door so wide open,” Samantha added, quoting from Sting, catching Luther’s hand in her own. She then fixed him with a green-eyed stare and batted her long eyelashes.

“T’ank you, Miss Sting!” Poppa Luther said in his thickest patois, accepting her arm and continuing down the street. The Island King and his Exotic Queen, just strolling along without a care in the world, flanked by Tattoo and the rest of the Loons. What a scene we made.

The crowds had thinned out somewhat here on the sidestreets, although they were still what anyone would call *crowded*. If the crowds held out in this number, I could only imagine how tight things would become tomorrow night, when the madness that is Mardi Gras Night would officially transform this place into a scene reminiscent of a painting by Hieronymus Bosch. A gust of wind kicked up, rustling trash and forcing us to bundle up for a second as it passed. Bad Streets loomed ahead, half a block down Toulouse from Bourbon, brilliant in its neon glory. There were the typical wannabees milling about outside, desperately wishing that fate would have given them a jumpstart in the birthday department. Longhairs, punkers and shaggy weirdoes mixed casually with Madonna imitators and Go-Go girls. Truly, it was one of the strangest melting pots in the City of Melting Pots, with the best—or worst—of both downtown and suburbia.

As we moved into the queue, I pointed out with some glee that our promo posters were pasted everywhere. It was good to know that a couple of Lincolns along with a good word or two from Luther had done the work, as good work was so hard to come by at just five bucks a pop. As we came to a relative halt, Luther motioned up to the marquis and smiled that kingly smile of his again.

“Top billing, mon!”

Yep. “Electric Bard” was at the head of the class, the topmost name on the glowing marquis.

That was a relief. In a world in which every little thing mattered, that fact alone could be what made the difference in a “yes” or a “no” from the record execs. The fickle bastards.

As we finally made it to the door, we noticed that there was a cover charge to get in.

“Don’t worry, guys,” I said, stepping forward confidently past Luther, who was just about to fish out his wallet and pay for all of us. “I know the doorman. He might just give us a break on the cover if I can sweet talk him into it.”

“This I gotta see, Logan,” Michael sarcastically muttered.

Ignoring him, I stepped smoothly up to the counter, a bright smile on my face. The doorman, a guy I knew from a couple of the after-gig parties that we had thrown, was busy stamping wrists with a glow-in-the-dark rubber stamp. After stamping a scarcely-dressed girl an additional time between her breasts, he sat back with a satisfied smile, then noticed that I was there.

“Logan! How’s it been, man?” Kurt “The Friendly” Doorman asked, extending his hand. And yes, that was his real name. Kurt Doorman was one of those rare souls who had a job which precisely suited him. Even precisely suited his name, too.

“Not bad, Kurt,” I amiably replied, shaking his hand. I pretended to give the departing girl a quick glance. “I just wish *my* job had that kind of fringe benefits...”

“Yeah, right! And *you* have to settle for Samantha!” Before Samantha could even get a sneer out, Kurt added in between quick gulps from a Dixie longneck, “Nice skirt, that chick I just stamped. Too bad Luther’s already been out with her...”

“You know it, mon,” Luther leered.

We all had a laugh, even though Luther had probably never seen the girl before tonight. Then, Kurt leaned closer to be heard over the house music. Besides the pungent aroma of the Dixie, I also could smell the remnants of the muffalotta that he had for supper. Too much salami, but, then again, that was Kurt.

“The cover’s five bucks tonight,” he explained, wiping his mouth on his jacket sleeve. “That’s ‘cause of the half-price pitchers and the too-numerous-to-mention drink specials.” Our eyes lit up at that good piece of news. “And the band that’s headlining is a real heavy thrash band, not like you melodic band dudes at all. They’re called *Kill ‘Em All!* You know, like the Metallica album? Can you dig it?”

“Sure, man. Aggressive death,” I said, knowing deep in my heart that at least Sammy and David, metalheads that they were, were going to have an extra-good time tonight once they thawed out from their ignore-the-world conversation. It wasn’t that *I* wasn’t, mind you. It was simply that, to me, that name was *blasphemy!* It was like using the Lord’s name in vain, and stuff like that. *They’d better be damn good to use that name*, I promised myself.

“I was kinda wondering, Kurt,” I continued, using my left leg to keep a curious Luther behind me, “if Mr. Snow had put us ‘band dudes’ on the guest list for tonight? Can you check and see?”

Always eager to help out a “band dude,” as he called each and every member of each and every band that he had ever seen or heard of, Kurt nodded quickly, then looked over a crumpled sheet of paper—a foul, crumpled sheet of paper that had the most illegible chicken scratch on it that I had ever seen. I doubted that even Sammy could decipher it.

“Uhh, I don’t see...” Kurt began to fumble around behind the counter for something else, dashing our hopes to get in for free.

“Then we must be on the *other* sheet, Kurt!” I said quickly, smiling again, hoping to at least bullshit him a bit. I had meant for my voice to carry a little bit, to carry over the house music, which was blaring away. But what came out instead was a mellifluous, echoing ringing that sounded as if someone had added a heavy flange effect to it.

Suddenly, Kurt stiffened, then turned back to face me, a vapid expression on his face. “You’re right, man,” he said in a dopey monotone, “they must be... on the *other* sheet.”

With this ludicrous statement, Kurt reached forward, grabbed my left hand, and stamped it. Not being one to question Divine Providence, I waltzed on in; a giggling Luther, a disbelieving Michael, a stunned Samantha, and two blathering techno-lunatics lagging somewhat behind me.

Heading straight for the bar, I flagged down the nearest bartender. A curiously intact twenty my calling card, I ordered a round of cold, cold, cold Dixie Blackened Voodoo for all of us. Still in a state of shock, I left Mr. Jackson’s remains as a tip.

“All right, Mr. Charming,” Michael asked finally as he and the rest of our group settled into the bar stools around me, “just how did you manage that little feat?”

“Yeah,” Samantha said skeptically, her eyes lighting up with curiosity, “did you slip Kurt a dead president while we weren’t looking?”

“You heard what I said,” I said innocently. “I just told him the truth. The truth according to Garp, that is.” I took a long pull from my bottle and looked away, not wanting them to see the strange flicker I’m sure my eyes held.

“I didn’t see a thing,” Luther said, lighting another of Michael’s cheroots. “And I was standing right behind him the whole time! No Babylon biz from Logan, y’all.” He blew out a plume of foul smoke, then added, with a grin: “He’s simply the Mon. Irie, Irie...”

“C’mon, Logan,” Michael said, offering me another cheroot, which I accepted, much to Samantha’s disgust, “you can tell *me!* Did you slip him a bill, or give him a quickie?”

“Oh, you know me,” I said, raising the bottle up to my lips and poking my tongue around in my mouth, causing my cheeks to undulate. Samantha hid her head behind her bottle while the rest of us laughed like dirty schoolboys. The weird mood passed as quickly as it had begun, much to my relief.

Over the next two bottles of brew, we spent a few minutes chit-chatting and analyzing the neo-modern art decor of the place. The first floor was nothing more than a U-shaped terrace, with booths lining the top half with a pit in front of the stage, which actually wound up on level with the terrace. There were pictures of racing cars, dragsters and everything else that burned high octane hanging from every nook and cranny of the place. The waitresses came and went in fishnet pit-crew garb, an idea that Richard Petty was rumored to have envied, according to the local restaurant and bar tour guide. A full-sized black and purple funny-car floated above the main floor, suspended by stout metal rigging. Blacklights and strobes flickered continuously from the dance floor on the second floor. Completely sealed off from the first floor by soundproofed glass, it functioned as the “high-energy” fix for the many eager dancers whose tastes were a little ways removed from slam dancing. Occasionally, the upstairs PA would pipe in music from the live band on the first floor, but I sincerely doubted that would be the case tonight for *Kill ‘Em All*.

After another round, which we drunkenly dedicated to “Breaking On Through,” and some more small-talk, a booth opened up in the corner of the terrace. Seizing the opportunity, we dashed like madmen over to it, seating ourselves just in time for the main act.

Just in time for the insanity, that is...

As the lights dimmed, a horrible noise screamed out from the wall of speakers. Wails of terror followed by the bleating of sheep and the snorting of pigs roared throughout the speaker enclosures, prompting some demented laughter from the gathering crowd in the pit. The sound of automatic gunfire cut quickly through the cacophony, ending Old McDonald’s Greatest Hits. Then, with the blast of some wicked pyros, the band—four grunge-metal looking guys dressed in torn jeans and Saints jerseys—hit the stage, grinding and thrashing at full power. Simultaneously, the pit erupted into headbanger heaven as the kids went wild and started to mosh.

Needless to say, we laughed our asses off. This was pure catharsis, pure Loon. It was almost tempting to join in. If it weren’t for the fact that Luther would probably get carried away and deck someone, that is.

“They look like the Keystone Kops!” Samantha commented, taking a swig from my Coors. She was already finished with hers.

“No, they look like Saddam’s boys in full retreat!” Michael said, laughing so hard that he hit the back of his head on the wall. That prudent remark brought some chuckles from the next booth. I had to admit that it *was* funny looking, too, although I didn’t think Saddam’s boys had been *that* chaotic. Or maybe they had been, if our PsiOps guys had been blaring Metallica or something like that at them.

The broken soldiers started to pile up as we enjoyed the mega-decibel onslaught. We were getting a good earful, between the music and Michael and Luther’s hooting and hollering. They were having a contest, it seemed, as to who could attract the most attention. And both of them were getting a lot. Soon enough it was getting to the point that the waitresses were afraid to come to our table. Generous tips from both Michael and Luther, however, overcame that small stumbling block.

As soon as the band took a set-break, I took a break myself and hit the water closet, eager to take a break from the Loon Onslaught. While drunkenly, forgetfully, and most stupidly tidying up in front of the mirror, I noticed something that shook me. Blatantly staring into the depths of the ill-lit mirror, I noticed that my eyes had a wild, haunted look to them. Dr. Feelgood had thought, up until now, that he had dealt with those particular demons, drowning them in a veritable sea of Dr.

Feelgood's own magickal potions and secret elixirs. From some dimly functional corner of my besotted brain, I hoped that it was just my own paranoid vanity that had brought about this illusion.

Or maybe it's just been my contacts this whole time... I noted dully.

However, as I leaned closer to check out my innocent contact lenses, I noticed a faint flicker of silver-blue light flash across my pupils, then dart to my iris, forming a pinwheel of electric blue energy. Fading softly, it arced slightly, sending a single, laser-like beam of light into the mirror. Even in my condition, the hair on the nape of my neck rose. I leaned back, away from the mirror, feeling uncomfortably numb. Strangely, no one else in the busy restroom seemed to notice what had just happened.

Starting to turn away, I stopped in my tracks, then turned slowly back around to the mirror. Something was calling me back. It was as if some force were guiding me, beckoning me to walk once more the tightrope that men call Sanity. This time, I leaned as close to the mirror as the sink would allow, until there was less than a hand's breadth between my eyes and the mirror's surface. Clearing my throat, I reached up with my right hand and held my right eye open, a static chill coursing through my body. Suddenly, my pupil dilated until the entire iris was black. A rush of adrenaline washed through me, bidding me to fight or take flight.

Setting my mind in stone, I faced the depths of what the mirror revealed: Floating in the darkness of my eye was the image of a seven-pointed star—a star which broke into seven separate pieces and then realigned itself into a chilling diagram of some sort of shining, silver constellation. In each of the seven, shining stars I saw tiny traces of light. Trying in vain to calm myself, I willed some sort of revelation from the stars, some answer from their depths. Then, in the space of a mere mortal heartbeat, the stars grew large, revealing the eyes within them: the eyes of my friends!

I saw Sammy's, Michael's, Luther's, David's, and even Samantha's. They were shining with an intense sorrow. An intense grief, as if they were... dead. My eyes, too, I saw. And I knew them in a millisecond. Knew what they held as their innermost secrets. Knew the grinning spectre of death which they held in their depths.

But the seventh pair of eyes was, by far, the strongest. Strange eyes. Purple eyes. They were *watching* me. They were *alive*. Alive with power—the Power Magick. Alive with the promise of things to come...

Then, I heard the Call:

“Tatternorn, it is time...”

Nausea filled me as my mind began to realize the familiar: I *knew* that voice.

heknowsheknowsheknows...

The world went dark at that moment as I sank to my knees. I couldn't fight it. I never could. *We* never could.

“Shit! What's wrong with the lights?” Distant, behind some door.

Pitter-pat of icy cat feet. Gale-force howl of wind in my soul. Banshee moan.

(It was like this the day we left Zengara, hell-bound on our final mission...)

Knees. I am on my knees in this stupid restroom in this stupid bar...

(We died!)

(We died... Oh, Rel help us all, we died down there in DruusDome, down there in the deepest blackened bowels of the Midnight Realm...)

I am vomiting on the floor, on my knees. I am real... Vomit is real...

Tiny bugs with pointy teeth tearing at my spine. Electric tingle. Static charge at base of back, flitting there like dark moths drawn to soul's light. Pulse-throb, circulation hinged on terror. Small soul-nova gone haywire. Far within myself, I listened and remembered:

Alien words. Expressions. Formulae. Magick...

With a blinding crash of glass and hissing purple sparks, the mirror shattered from within, collapsing upon itself. Excited shouts boomed from within the bathroom stalls as the lights overhead blew out in sequence, littering the restroom with debris. I bolted upright, then stood in place, my arms limp at my side. Suddenly, my mind was racing as the startled patrons raced out of the restroom, completing their respective duties on the way out. In the utter, still darkness that followed, I stood, realizing for the first time that the thin line of sanity had just been irrevocably crossed, then *spat* upon.

My own words haunted me: *Shattered mirror/broken shards... I see your eyes in every star...*

“Logan!” Michael suddenly shouted, shattering my reverie like so many shards of glass.

Pivoting on my heels, I turned to face him. Standing with his arms high on either side of the door’s frame as if he were trying not to be blown back through it by some phantom wind, Michael was dimly illuminated by the lights from the main floor, giving his outline an ethereal, otherworldly glow. Behind him, a worried looking Luther stood, trying to push his way past Michael. I could hear Samantha, Sammy, and David behind them, each one frantically calling my name.

“Everything’s cool, guys,” I said calmly, walking out past them, a glazed look on my face. Each of them looked like the kid who just found out that Santa Claus was really the medieval patron saint of thieves. As I walked past them, still trying valiantly to get a grip on reality, I started to laugh. It wasn’t a very sane laugh, either.

“Bullshit, Logan!” Luther roared, grabbing my arm forcefully. “Don’t tell us everything’s cool! You just did something totally *uncool*!” His patois vanished before his fear of the unknown. Just like my sanity.

I looked up into his wild, dark eyes. All I could see was what I had seen in those damned stars. My laughter trailed off, like the last, dying hiss of death. I looked at Michael. He was standing with his arms at his sides, an expectant look on his face. Samantha was silent, a pained look on her face as she returned my cold stare.

“What the hell do you *want* me to say?” I shouted, feeling my control slip away. I jerked my arm from Luther’s grasp, then straightened my jacket indignantly. “That the whole world is going fucking crazy? That everything we’ve ever known about ourselves is a terrible fucking lie? That tonight, at long last, it’s finally time to face that lie?”

They stared at me in utter silence. I ignored their questioning eyes. If they didn’t all know by now, they never would. Judging from the gleam in their eyes, a reflection of their souls, however, I realized that they knew.

They *knew*.

That was all that really mattered, in the end, wasn’t it?

They *knew*. I *knew*. We *all* knew.

Now, it would just be a matter of time.

“We have to get out of here...” I told them in a very cold voice.

In silence they complied. No remorse, no regrets. They knew, and that was that. The six of us must have made quite a scene. The crowds parted around us like the Red Sea itself as we walked out of the bar, then down the street. By the time we had crossed Bourbon Street, the paranoia had set in. I began to get the feeling that something was about to happen. It was something just at the edge of perception. That nagging feeling was crawling around in my spine again, like a nest of pissed-off ants. You would think that by now I would have had a grip on things, considering the recent turn of events. But, each time something had happened, it had faded away, as if my mind were deliberately blunting the experience, like a built-in self-defense mechanism. So each time there was a new “occasion,” it was like getting doused with ice-cold water. The thought of what that voice in my head had said kept ringing through my head, over and over again, just at the threshold of perception.

It had called me by that familiar name. *Tatternorn*. The same name from my dreams. The same keening voice that had cried out before things went boom. Was it warning me now? Was that it?

Suddenly paranoid beyond belief, I took a quick glance up and down the street. There were easily a hundred people in my line of sight. Most of them were younger, college-types, by their mien. Of the twenty or so that obviously weren't, only a few looked even remotely threatening. Hustlers and a couple of street musicians. Nothing deadly there, at least on the surface. But, then again, Ted Bundy looked like a clean-cut guy, too.

Then I remembered something concerning the art of searching. No one ever looks *up*.

They'll search the ground, the shadows in the alley, all of the conventional hidey-holes. But they'll never look *up*. You would think that would be the first place that a simian-evolved being would look, but it just wasn't the case. So, feeling very Darwinian, I stole a quick look up to the outline of the rooftops.

Much to my surprise, I saw something.

There, but for the merest fraction of a second, was the silhouette of a man's head against the skyline, peering down at the street from the roof of the building across the street from *The Dungeon*, one of our other favorite hang-outs. I saw it. But it was gone so fast, that I wasn't quite positive that it had even been there. My heart skipped a beat. *What the hell is going on?*

As I stood there, silently gawking at the rooftop, Samantha grabbed my arm and shook it.

"Logan!" she clipped, urging me on. "Just keep walking."

"Huh?"

I realize it wasn't much, but you had to realize that my brain had more important things to work on than verbal communication.

"C'mon, dammit!" she gritted, pulling me along like someone taking a cat for a walk.

Dazed—and still trying to figure out just what the hell was going on in my head—I let her navigate me down the street. We continued on like this until we came to Chartres, where we took a left turn and headed towards Jackson Square and the St. Louis Cathedral. We stopped in front of the Upper Pontalba building, milling about nervously on St. Peter's cobbled stones. Even given the time of the night, the street and the courtyard in front of the cathedral were still going strong, as throngs of late-arrivals and late-departures alike filed merrily by the six or seven different street musicians and panhandlers.

What finally pulled me out of my trance was Sammy's singing. The little Loon! All this sudden hell, and he was chanting the theme to "Green Acres," but substituting the happy-go-lucky, catchy music with that of *Purple Haze*. That's what pulled me back to *reality*. No small wonder why I was going bananas.

"So what do we do now, guys?" Sammy inquired eagerly after a particularly moving verse. He was weaving a staggering course through our midst. "Shall we call it a night right now and haul ass outta here, or shall we sing an ode to insanity and seek out some more trouble for tonight? Like some more frat boys with their fucking knives?" he finished quite belligerently.

"Shut up, Sammy!" David urged his buddy. There was an unpleasant edge to his voice, and it had little to do with inciting any nearby frat boys.

While Sammy cantered about like a lost little Shetland pony, the rest of us stood there like a group of Chicken Littles, seemingly waiting in dazed wonder for the sky to fall on our heads. Luther's dark eyes were narrowed as he studied the middle distance. Strangely, his nose crinkled as he seemed to sniff the air for any sign of danger. David and Samantha both wore an agitated-yet-confused look; the same kind of look that you get when someone next to you yells "snake!" then runs away without telling you where the damned thing is. And Michael's face was

set in some sort of blank-faced concentration mode. An outsider might have mistaken his expression for that of a stockbroker pondering tomorrow's NYSE options. However, I knew exactly what he was doing: he was clearing his mind and focusing his ki; preparing not for meditation, but for combat.

"What's up, Michael?" I asked, realizing that I probably wasn't going to like his answer.

"Nothing," he replied, giving me a wicked tiger's smile. Then he started walking over towards the front of the cathedral, his hands shoved into his flight jacket's pockets.

"What's wrong with 'im? Not enough sand for 'im here in the Quarter?" Sammy asked, his speech slurred as he went into his "Arthur" imitation.

"Shut up, Sammy! This is serious!" I blurted. "Lemme go talk to him. The rest of you had better... I don't know..."

As I walked away, Luther, who had caught my tone, nodded in silent understanding, then diplomatically herded the others over to the locked, wrought iron fence that surrounded the square's grassy interior. A cold, stiff breeze began to kick up, blowing in from the river, as I caught up with Michael in the shadows of the columns outside the Cabildo Museum. He was standing with his back to one of the columns, facing the night-black, piss-stained walls of the museum, his chin buried in his jacket. As I stood there in front of him for a silent half-minute, his green eyes never blinked. Instead, they remained focused on some hidden, silent thought.

Suddenly, without preamble, he spoke.

"So, Logan... what did you see back there, on that roof?"

It was as if Michael had just reached out and slapped me. I felt the pinball machine in my head register a silent *tilt*.

"How did you..." I began, then caught myself for the fool that I was. If I had seen it with my civilian senses, then he had definitely seen it, whatever "it" had been, with his heightened, trained senses. Lt. Michael Reese's sixth sense wasn't just a quaint, poetic expression. It was a proven fact, steeped in the fire of combat.

"I've been feeling it all night long," he said as if he were talking shop, still not looking up. "As a matter of fact, I've been feeling it ever since that dream of mine. The moment I stepped off of the plane at the airport today, I felt it: something watching, just out of sight, shadowing every move I've made like some invisible phantom lord."

"You mean you've been trailed ever since you've been here?" I asked, still not getting the full impact of what he was saying. "Why didn't you say anything? I mean, you could have at least told me..."

"...told you what? That the bogeyman's on my ass?" Michael looked up, staring at me with a pained expression. "Do you actually think that I'd share my paranoia with you, make you think you're crazy, too?"

"You could have shared it after what you saw back at the house, Michael! It's not every fucking day you see Luther lift a two-ton van, you know!"

"And it's not every day that you see blue sparks fly around the hallway, either," Michael countered, once more smiling like a tiger.

"So you *did* see it!" I exclaimed, nearly shouting. The wind kicked up again, whipping some litter into a flying fury around the base of the column.

"Yeah, I saw it," Michael said, his tone deadly in its calm. "I saw the whole damn thing, I think. Believe it or not, I was only going to see if you guys needed some help with the garbage. I just happened to get there a little late for that, though. As it was, though, I turned the corner just in time to see the air lit up with shiny, little blue things. All I could do was stand there and gawk. At some stupid fucking blue sparkles. All that training, and I gawk at blue sparkles. I just freeze, and then gawk, man!" Now *that* sounded familiar. "And then, to make matters even worse, I heard you say

something that chilled my shit. You said ‘We made it, Silverdancer.’ And you *didn’t* say it in American, either!” Michael’s hands shot out of his pockets. He began to wring them together, reflecting his doubts.

“Yeah,” I murmured, “I did say that. In what language, though, I’m still wondering.” I laughed, a hollow-sounding thing.

Michael continued: “Whatever it was, it was the same tongue that was spoken in my nightmare, Logan. I’m positive about that. I just don’t know how I understood it.” He stopped wringing his hands together. Together, we stood facing each other like two mannequins. The wind died down suddenly, its silence followed by the distant rumble of thunder. “Great!” he sneered. “First, this weird shit happens, then Mother Nature follows suit with a cold thunderstorm. Typical Louisiana meteorology!”

I craned my neck around to take a look out into the mall area. The musicians were beginning to pack up their things in anticipation of the unheralded late-night storm. Already, a light sprinkle was falling, sending the scattered cliques of partygoers to the shelter of the nearest overhang. I could see the rest of our group heading slowly over towards us, ignoring the cold, sobering drizzle. Luther led Samantha by the hand, while Sammy was bleating loudly about “Singing in the Rain,” punctuating each line with a savage kick at David, who was trying his paranoid best to ignore Sammy’s *Clockwork Orange* torture.

“Look,” I said quickly, grabbing Michael’s arm, “they have no idea what’s following us, Michael! Drunk college kids are one thing, but this is a completely different ballgame. This is for keeps! We’ve got to get the hell out of here! Now!”

“What the hell do you mean, Logan?” he asked, too absorbed to comprehend the tone of warning in my voice. “It’s just some storm. That’s not our problem. Our problem is the bastards who are following us—”

“This isn’t just *some storm!*” I shouted, shaking him as if he were a thick-witted child. “Don’t you understand what’s about to happen? Can’t you feel it coming with the storm? It’s coming for *you*. It’s coming for *me*. It’s coming for *all of us* man. *All of us...*”

Our eyes locked, and Michael suddenly realized what I was saying.

Suddenly, violently, a jagged streak of lightning tore from the sky and struck a tree on the far side of the square, sending flaming branches and bark flying down to the ground. Michael reacted as if a mortar had gone off. He spun around, hit the deck at the base of the column, and cursed like the battle veteran that he was. It took me a split-second longer to decide what to do.

“Everybody get in here, fast!” I shouted, waving to my startled friends, who were in that confused, stunned-looking state that most people assume after lightning strikes nearby.

“Cool!” Sammy shouted as he stood rooted to the spot, pointing with glee at the flaming tree. He was so far gone that he thought that it was *cool!*

“C’mon, runt!” Luther bellowed, scooping up Sammy in one arm, Samantha in the other. By the time he and David had covered the twenty yards between where they had stood and the columns of the Cabildo Museum, Michael had already risen to his feet and pulled a nasty-looking combat knife from somewhere within his flight jacket.

“Get everyone over in the corner, in the shadows, with their backs to the wall!” Michael commanded, waving the evil-looking black anodized Rambo knife at me. How he had managed to conceal that thing on his person without anyone knowing about it was something that I *really* wanted to ask him, but he left no such time for shop-talk. He melted around the column and disappeared into the shadows as the wind kicked up once more with a banshee howl. As Luther barreled into the shelter of the museum’s alcove, he tossed Sammy none-too-gently onto the hard stone floor, then gently set Samantha down. David skidded to a stop right behind him, a worried look on his face.

“What’s going on with Michael?” David asked as he removed his glasses and began to wipe them down.

“Look,” I said, “I’ll be terse, for once. Michael says we’re in trouble. Someone’s after us, and there’s every reason to believe that—no matter how crazy this seems—that this someone or something is... is...” I couldn’t continue. The pinball machine in my head kept registering a *tilt*.

“...is what?” David finished, replacing his glasses.

As he adjusted his glasses, three bolts of lightning struck in the square, one after the other, with such concussive force that windows shattered all along both sides of the square. Screams of terror from the scrambling, fleeing partygoers mingled with the tingle of crashing glass throughout the square, sending goosebumps up and down my arms.

“Look, dammit!” I shouted, losing my control as I backed up against the nearest column. “I *know* you’ve all had dreams about something wicked, something that you can’t explain!”

Truth.

I could see clearly now by their wild eyes that they *had*.

“And now, whatever those nightmares may have meant, they’re coming true! They’re *real*!”

In between flashes of lightning and the roaring, gale-force squalls of freezing rain, I saw disbelief and denial bloom in their eyes. I saw the fear chiseled deeply into them. No longer could the comfort of inebriation deny their imprisoned thoughts. They were stuck in mid-breath, their bodies unmoving as their thoughts raced to the same, unforgiving conclusions that Michael and I had already reached.

“Goddammit!” I shouted, gesturing like a madman. I was trying to jolt them, to *make* them comprehend, before whatever was going to happen happened. I could feel it coming closer, like Death Knocking on the Door. “It’s *real*! You saw it, Samantha! You saw that weird blue shit all over the place!” I screamed. Turning rapidly to Samantha, I grabbed her by the hands, pleading with her to understand before it was too late. “You saw it, Samantha! You *know* you did!” I looked over at her face, which was twisted into a mask of denial. “In your fucking hallway, dammit!”

“You know, too, Luther!” I shouted over Samantha’s shoulder, giving him a wild stare. He stared back as if I were loco. “I *know* that you *know*, or else you wouldn’t have been able to lift that van like you did. And you!” I said, pointing at David, who was, just like the others, becoming more and more *familiar* with each passing second, as if some elder veil of hidden memory were being slowly lifted away. “Your beard!”

Epiphany.

“Your red beard!” I shouted. “Your red, Khazak beard! Of course!” It hit me like a ton of bricks, whispered in my mind.

His name. Not the one that I knew him by now. Not David Miller, but an older, more *appropriate* one. His Khazak name. I *knew* it. Just as I had known Samantha’s, when blue sparks breathed it to me in that long, dark hallway of the soul. I stepped up to David, leaning against the driving wind, and grabbed his red, neatly clipped beard, which I knew to be but a shadow of the real, wild, hairy one that he had grown back on SenZar, the world of our *first* birth...

“Guthal Dirge! *Grog*!” I shouted deliriously, the words sounding less foreign now. “You made it!”

David’s face curled into a mask of horror as he choked back a scream. In the reflection of his glasses, I could see the outline of electric blue energy shimmer in my eyes, bathing him in radiant, magickal essence.

“What the hell!” Luther yelled, backing away in dread. Samantha gasped, transfixed in terror. Sammy just stood there, arms at his side, that wide-eyed look of exhilaration on his face. I released David’s beard and pointed at Luther.

“Rhiannazaar!” I yelled, naming him with the haunting word that flitted on the tip of my tongue next to a more familiar one. “Zaar!” I remembered aloud, as Luther backed away from me as if struck. “Where in the hell are your other arms?” I shouted with glee, a vivid memory from another life slamming into me. *He’s supposed to have four arms!*

The mental tumblers were falling like dominoes, unlocking bit-by-bit a flood of memories of another time, another place. If this was madness, then I freely embraced it, with no reservations. It seemed, however, that I wouldn’t have to embrace it alone.

Sammy, his big, brown eyes brimming with tears, suddenly grabbed me around the waist and hugged me with all of his might. There, amidst the insanity, the impending sense of personal, lonely doom, and the chaotic storm that raged about us, Sammy Joseph looked up, met my eyes, then spoke in that tongue that I knew now to be *Zengaran*, the common tongue of SenZar:

“Tatternorn! We made it! We’re alive!”

Confirmation.

At long, long last...

Luther, who had looked as if he were about to run screaming away a moment ago, suddenly smiled broadly, then scooped Samantha, David, Sammy and me into one big, bear-hug, shouting triumphantly, “Tat! Mad Sam! Guthal! Silverdancer! We *did* make it!” Luther crushed us to him again, taking our breath away. Freeing us from his joyous death-grip, he backed away, brushing tears from his dark eyes. For the first time in this world, this life, he knew who he truly was, and it was having the same effect on him, gangsta though he was, that it was having on the rest of us. “But where’s Tal’N?” he asked in afterthought, looking around the square for Michael, “Where’s that crazy golden boy?”

“Michael—Tal’N, I mean!—ran off to scout around,” I said, feeling extremely giddy, wondering if at any moment I might wake up. And wondering when Samantha *would*.

“For what?” David asked gruffly, fumbling with his glasses again as he wiped away some moisture from his eyes.

But, before anyone could reply, Samantha started laughing.

“I can’t believe this is happening!” she said, stamping her feet, holding herself tightly with her arms, as if she thought that at any moment she would disappear, or wake up. “You’re all crazy! No, *we’re* all crazy! This can’t be happening! It can’t!”

“It is, though,” I said, hugging her to me. She didn’t resist. I had to raise my voice to be heard above the howling wind.

“It’s just that... things can’t happen like this! We died. Oh, god, Logan, I lost you and we died...” she sobbed, her chin on my shoulder. This time, unlike the last, though, she didn’t try to pull away from me. I released her, but I kept staring at her. She was Samantha Teale. Of that, there was no doubt. I had known her for more than five years, as long as I had known Luther. We had loved, been together, been apart, then been together again. Star-crossed lovers, true. But star-crossed took on an entirely new meaning now in our story. For she was also Samantha Silverdancer—of that, there was now no doubt. On SenZar, we had loved, been together, been apart, then been together again. Then we had died together. All of us had died.

And now, through some sort of divine providence or some devil’s agency, we were together again. All of us.

All of us except for one...

Sigil Talisman.

The one who had spoken to me from the depths of that mirror in the bathroom. The one who had told me that things were about to happen.

Bad things. Magickal things.

...and he was also the one who had led us like sheep to the slaughter; the one who had gotten us all killed. And now he was calling us together again...

Thirty silver pieces for my kiss...

“We’re in deep shit,” I said, the smile melting from my face as the chorus of crackling lightning began to climb into a crescendo of doom. The air had an electric tingle to it. The raging storm was only the prelude to something yet to come. I knew, now, that I had once felt something akin to this very ozone tinge, but I couldn’t quite place it. My dream, perhaps? I couldn’t decide, but I knew that we had to get out of here. Quickly.

“C’mon,” I said, looking around for any sign of trouble, “we’ve got to leave. Now!”

They could feel it, too. The joy of revelation that had so recently moved us all to tears now took a nosedive, crashed and burned. Emotions, pliable things that they were, could always be relived, though. Provided, of course, that we ourselves still lived.

Still buzzing with the energy of our reunion, we forced our way into the stiff, swirling headwinds and began to work our way across the rain-slickened cobblestones of the mall area. We had to bend almost double against the freezing wind and lashing rain. The trees within the fenced-off square weren’t faring too well with the gale-force winds, some of them already uprooted and lodged against the wrought-iron fence. We headed down St. Peter, careful to keep to the left side of the street nearest the fence of the square in order to avoid the occasional flying shop sign. Halfway down the street, a single, rapidly moving figure darted from one of the shadowed store alcoves and ran towards us, gesticulating wildly.

“Run!” Michael shouted wildly, screaming to be heard above the wind. “Fall back! Move, dammit!”

As Michael sped towards us, waving his knife and screaming, the sky seemed to heave every single erg of hateful energy that it possessed down to the ground in one mammoth, mortifying, purple bolt of lightning which struck to our left, impacting with the center of Jackson Square; brilliantly illuminating and then slagging the statue of Ol’ Andrew Jackson himself. As millions of invisible ants fought to race up and down our spines, the boom of the stroke exploded outward, shredding the few trees and shrubs that remained in the square, sending lethal wooden shards flying in all directions at tornadic velocity. Thankfully, the wrought-iron fence took the brunt of the blast, deforming in numerous spots as ruined wood crashed into it. As it was, it seemed as if we were standing on the business end of one of those tree-shredding *Asplundh* trucks. All of us, even the massive Luther, were bowled over like tenpins. Or human pincushions, take your pick.

By the time that we had regained our feet, the devil-wind was gone, having delivered its promise of evil. At the foot of the slagged, molten statue of Jackson and his trusty steed stood a cadre of seven jet-black, demonically-featured warriors; each one of them bearded in sinister, strangely fashioned ornamental plate mail. They were humanoid; slender, not quite as tall as a full-grown man. Yet their bearing spoke of their power. They radiated the rawest, rudest aspects of pure hatred and loathing for all things mortal. As wave upon wave of *déjà-vu* roiled through my mind, a deep-rooted, racial hatred manifested itself, along with a name for their perverse, blood-drinking, evil-worshipping race: *Mokarr*. The name burnt itself into my somewhat shredded present memory, right next to such words as *Hitler*, *Commie* and *Brussels sprouts*.

Their leader—a lanky, sinewy scarecrow of a demon who stood a good foot taller than his six smaller companions—strode confidently over the rubble of the statue like Darth Vader himself until he stood at front and center of his troops. His great, black dragon helm was open such that one could easily see his burning, hate-filled purple-irised eyes.

“So... these pathetic mortals are the ones spoken of in the legends?” His voice was a combination of gravel and honey. His English was strangely accented, though, with some gruff, Oriental-

sounding inflections.

“Who are you calling *mortal*, Mokarr?” I demanded, suddenly regretting my outburst and wishing that we were on vacation somewhere else, like Saturn. Memories were starting to sort themselves out again, drawn out by the necessity of impending death. Mokarr were bad news: they were expert death-dealers, and they still cheated whenever they could. And, if my newfound memory was serving me properly, seven Mokarr meant a *Mokarr Death Squad*: a specially trained team that could wipe out a small army using ninja techniques and magickal gimmicks. Their team resembled Michael’s SEAL buddies in many different ways, except that they were a world apart in origination and a universe apart in moral fiber.

“You, Tatternorn!” the Mokarr leader barked, indicating me with a two inch long black talon.
heknows

“And all of your goody-two-shoes friends, too!” he mocked, his gesture sweeping over our entire group. I fought the instinct to look away. “Yes, I know who you are. I know all of you. And I know that the sages who recorded your legend were gifted with imagination, and highly paid to overlook the glaring truth!” He laughed, a sound like a cat coughing up a furball. His buddies chuckled, too, careful to end their laughter when he did.

“Look, if you’ve got something to say, then say it, dickhead!” Sammy said, from behind Luther’s leg.

“Insolent, depraved homunculus!” he shouted, foam flecking on his lips. “I am Vash Gar, first-spawned Earthborn of Lord Valthrustra!”

heknowsheknowsheknows

“And I, Vash Gar, have come to deliver his personal greeting of hate to you, six of the pathetic Seven Stars!”

Vash Gar’s hateful eyes began to glow with a plasma of purple power as his hands traced an intricate pattern in front of him. Mesmerized like children watching a David Copperfield illusion, we stood still, minds like mush, as the energies folded in upon themselves once, twice, then thrice. From the whirling, purple cocoon of magickal force there formed a great, black blade that I instantly loathed with all of my being. As Vash Gar reached out and grabbed it from its energy cocoon, the three overlapping, alien DNA-like rows of living runes that ran along its length began to writhe, pulsing in the pattern of an alien heartbeat, etching tracers of fluorescent light in the very air itself. Vash Gar held the thrice-damned hellblade at arm’s length, turning it slowly as he pointed it at me. The single walnut-sized purple jewel at the terminus of the blade’s hand-and-a-half length pommel began to throb in demonic syncopation with the triple runes, sending an arc of interfering essence along the rampant hell-bent dragon that formed the elaborate pommel guard and tang of the hateful Shadar steel blade.

Skurge.

“Ahh... I see that he remembers you, Tatternorn!” Vash Gar leered, stroking the foul Shadar steel blade. The dam in my mind burst, flooding me with hated memories of another time, another place. I liked not at all what I recalled.

“*Skurge...*” I whispered, the very name of that hellblade choking in my throat. It throbbed in response—a silent, baleful “Howdy-do! Remember me? *I hate you too!*”

“Yes! Skurge!” Vash Gar shouted holding the cruel demonblade *en garde*. “And I have a message from my grim Lord, whom you dared strike with this selfsame blade, you pathetic little man-maggot: DEATH! Death to all who oppose Lord Valthrustra! DEATH! Death to this pathetic, magick-blind world! DEATH! Death to everything! For His glory, we all shall die!”

Scene

I kept thinking over and over in my head that there was no place like home.

No place like *which* home, though, was the question that kept tripping me up.

This wasn't fair. Fighting some drunk college guys was acceptable, even if one of them did have a knife. But this was an entirely different ballgame, played in the Hell Major Leagues. For one thing, these weren't even "guys." They were Mokarr; the spawn of the Dark Earth itself. And these Mokarr had things like magickal armor—black moonlight armor, I now recalled: as light as Spandex yet as durable as thrice-steeped steel—and magickal swords named "Skurge" to back them up. Now, while it's a supposed given that we *might* have once kicked mucho ass on these guys on SenZar, it had to be noted that back then we had *probably* employed weapons of comparable magickal power to fight back with. To top it all off, while we may have once been able to actually *use* these magickal weapons on SenZar, here on Earth only Michael and I had actually ever trained with a real sword, and that was never in true life-or-death combat.

One would think that we would do the logical thing and run like hell. However, a quick sidelong glance at my friends revealed that this would never be the case. Never. Even *if* we had only been recently reintroduced to our hatred of the Mokarr, it was so powerfully ingrained in us that it was too powerful to ignore, even now.

And, as we could plainly see, that hatred burned both ways.

With a horrible, hateful Mokarr death-curse on his lips, Vash Gar, brandishing Skurge, exhorted his hit team to take our souls. Like a sheer black wave of malice, the Mokarr Death Squad charged our group, their faces etched with evil rictus sneers. I barely had time to blink as they swept past my startled, paralyzed form. Vash Gar, smiling like an addled black cobra, noted my balk.

"Surprised, maggot, that my minions pass you by?" Vash Gar seared, striding forward like a stalking black tiger. "No, you're *mine*..."

For some strange reason, Skurge made an obscene fart-like noise at this point, electing to accent the out-of-place scatological sound with an equally out-of-place bright rainbow display of colors along its cruel Shadar steel length. For some strange, unknown reason, this snapped me back to my senses.

And for another strange, unknown reason, this pissed me off to no end, and hate did funny things to my Information Age-saturated mind...

Screw this! I'm a Highlander, by god! The last sound I hear should not be that of a farting sword!

So, as Vash Gar strode directly towards me, I let my hatred burn, propelling me like one of Hell's Funny Cars down the Roads to Madness, hoping like hell that it wouldn't be my last sentient emotion. Bad karma, you know.

Instinctively, I raised both hands and shouted, ki flowing like quicksilver. Much to my pleasant surprise, blue energy flew from the tips of my fingers, tingling like the aftereffect of that lightning stroke. A single, jagged bolt of blue lightning—or some form of magickal energy that very much resembled lightning—slammed Vash Gar full in the chest, halting the force of his charge and knocking him flat on his ass, smoking and screaming.

"Damn you, mortal! You *hurt* me! You actually *hurt* me!" Vash Gar snarled as he rolled into a back-flip and landed like a huge cat on his feet. Now, after having taken my measure, he held Skurge

in a totally defensive position.

Strangely enough, it was at this point that I realized that I had no idea what I was doing.

What I did know, though, was that I had just been lucky with my little trick, and the result was that Vash Gar's pride was injured more than was his body. And the sick feeling that I had in my stomach told me that I wouldn't be shooting any more magickal blue lightning bolts from my hands until I'd gotten over this new magickal hangover.

I knew that I couldn't take my eyes off of this guy for a second. He was too fast—almost as fast as Sammy. Like I said, I was just lucky the first time. Behind me, where all of Vash Gar's buddies had gone, all I could hear was mass chaos. Luther was bellowing and Sammy was cussing up a storm. But, beyond that, I couldn't pick out anything else. *Just like Samantha's dream...*

Then, a horrible thought tiptoed in my brain.

Samantha!

Turning, despite my resolve not to, I saw nothing but an impenetrable, smoky glaze in the air, as if a smoke grenade had gone off in the middle of the throng.

"Ahh, Frailty! Thy name is... Tatternorn!" Vash Gar mocked in his gravel/honey voice.

I turned, only to see him towering in front of me, Skurge arcing towards me, death pulsing along its length. Thinking quickly, I stepped towards him, trying to intercept the arc of the blade at its pommel. But I only managed to get an armored, steel-hard elbow in the jaw, as Vash Gar modified his swing too rapidly for me to counter it. It was like running into a Mike Tyson haymaker. The impact lifted me up off of my feet and drove me into one of the mangled iron benches, one of the ones that had been bolted into the street and only partly ruined by the hurricane winds. Much to my relative relief, I bounced off of it, and hit the cobblestones of St. Peter, derriere first.

And, somehow—probably quite by accident—I was still conscious.

As I tried to kick-start my brain, Vash Gar let out a wicked belly-laugh and made up the distance between us in two strides. Just for fun, he smashed Skurge into the bench, slicing its wrought-iron hide neatly down the long axis in a shower of green sparks. I stared, horrified, at the impossible laser-precision cut that the wide blade of Skurge had made in the wrought-iron bench.

Noting this, Vash Gar smiled and said, most cruelly, "You're next, Tatternorn! You're next!"

Talk about bad karma...

I was prone, on my ass, in the middle of St. Peter, just about to become very dead. For a moment, I wanted to pinch myself and wake up out of this nightmare. *I have a gig to do, dammit!* Then, as Vash Gar raised that hellblade and smiled like the grinning head of Death itself, the air behind him turned the most beautiful shade of sunset-purple that I had ever seen, and a tall, well-dressed man in a full-length, strangely shimmering Michael Murphey black leather trenchcoat stepped through from nowhere. His expressive, patrician features were twisted into an ironic smile as he tilted his head and cleared his throat.

"Vash Gar, old chap!" Mr. Mysterious intoned in a faintly English-sounding accent as his left hand deftly traced lines of magickal power in the air before him. "I really do not think the Marquis of Queensberry would approve of that!"

With a crackle that rivaled the explosive bolt that brought Vash Gar and his cronies in, a polychromatic rainbow arced forth from the fingertips of the well-dressed man and struck the turning Vash Gar full in the face and upper body, sending the blasted Mokarr-thing head over heels right past me. Skurge flew out of his grasp, landing at his side with a dull *clank*. It seemed to express some sort of mute anger at this turn of events by glowing a deadly ochre along its length.

As Vash Gar lay there moaning, the well-dressed man walked swiftly over to where I lay and extended a long hand. Hesitantly, I reached out to grasp his hand, wondering if I was going to get

blasted, too. As I made contact with his hand, his “strangely shimmering” black leathers shimmered *quite* strangely, then dissolved like ripples in a tidal pool to reveal the ornately fashioned purple robes beneath the illusory veil. Cool robes, too, with lots of shiny silver-and-black Oakland Raiders-looking embroidery. In his right hand he carried an awesome, six-foot-plus purple crystalline staff, which faintly *thrum-thrum-thrummed* with eldritch power.

Reflected upon its multifaceted surface, as I now could see, were an infinity of staring eyes, each of which seemed to be staring right into my soul—just as the eyes in the mirror had stared. So many eyes, so many *souls*, all I could do was stare...

“Oh, come now, Mr. Logan!” Mr. Mysterious chided impatiently, grabbing my hand and hauling me to my feet with a surprising strength. “Or, should I say, *Tatternorn*?”

It was only now that I noticed that Mr. Mysterious had pointed ears! He had ears that looked like... like Spock’s! And his eyes... softly slanted like almonds and purple-tinged, radiant in inner magickal power. Then it dawned on me who this *had* to be...

“Sigil Talisman!” I shouted, a mixed feeling of filial love and betrayed hate washing over me. Love, hate, love.

“The very same, indeed!” Sigil Talisman admitted, bowing ever so slightly. Hesitantly, I released his hand, and his nifty robes were instantly “replaced” with his equally nifty black leathers; the awesome staff vanishing from sight, even though I somehow sensed that it was still held tightly in his hand. I gawked and Sigil talked: “We will discuss this whole sordid affair later, Tatternorn, at the Teale House. There is much to discuss, and now is not the time!”

Sigil’s ironic smile faded at the sound of rapid single-shot gunfire. Instinctively, I jerked my head around to find the source of the shots, but I saw only black smoke and more black smoke. I turned to face Sigil once more, thoughts of Samantha’s handgun on my mind. Sigil nodded on cue, as if he were somehow aware of my very thoughts, and walked swiftly away into the billowing, black smoke cloud, disappearing from sight.

Before I could consider what to do about Sigil Talisman’s timely intervention, the sound of armor scraping on stone drew my attention. I pivoted, turning to face Vash Gar, who was hauling himself up from the ground. His face was a twisted, leering mask of hatred. His black moonlight ornamental plate armor was now ruined; the black moonlight armor hanging in sizzling, effervescing strips from its thin yet wicked looking “backing” layer of... *of obsidium! Damn! And that volcanic alchemical hyperalloy is a helluva lot tougher than steel...* Stunned, I noted that black, viscous blood oozed from Vash Gar’s mouth and nose like hot pitch. Whatever Sigil had hit him with must have been *seriously intense...*

“Sigil Talisman, you interfering maggot!” Vash Gar spat, wiping his bloody face with his one of his foul, demonic hands. “Now that you have at long last shown yourself, my lord will have your fetid soul, you Starin charlatan!”

Having delivered his typical Mokarr promise of doom, Vash Gar first looked at me, then at Skurge, which lay curiously quiet on the ground between us. Then, strangely, he looked back over at me. I could feel his burning rage bore into my eyes as he silently promised me a cruel, slow, agonizing death. More gunshots from within the cloud drew his attention for a split second, though, and that was all the time that I needed to make my decision.

Diving onto the cobblestones, I managed to beat Vash Gar to Skurge by a fraction of a second—just enough time for me to get both of my hands beneath his on the pommel of the black blade. Gripping the pommel tightly, I tried to pry Skurge out of his iron grip as we rolled along the street. Skurge was still strangely silent, not even a single spark flying from it. Vash Gar’s grip was something to be reckoned with. He was as strong as an ox. I couldn’t budge him, and he was slowly but surely winning our little tug-of-war, crushing my hands in the process. Also, he was using what was

left of his jagged upper-body armor to gouge flesh-trenches in me; the heinous obsidium gouging them quite effortlessly through both my leather jacket and my not-quite-leathern flesh beneath. Our blood was flowing freely now, mixing together—red ants fighting black ants—staining Skurge’s pommel and slickening the grip.

“I will *win*, Tatternorn!” Vash Gar hissed as he rolled over on top of me, Skurge between our faces. “The blood of the Shadar Lords flows through my veins! I am too strong for you!”

The bastard was right. His strength *was* supernatural. I don’t think even Luther could take him one-on-one. But I was going about this like an idiot. Since there was no way that I was going to out-wrestle him, I decided to concentrate instead on the most important element of any life-or-death street fight: Cheating.

Pulling the blade down towards my chin with everything that I could muster, I managed to get Vash Gar to shift his center of balance forwards enough for a kick-out. With a sudden arching of my back and a sudden shove of the blade in the direction of his pulling, I managed to lift him off of me and flip him over onto his back.

Cool move. I was free.

The only problem was that Vash Gar now had Skurge all to himself.

Rolling to the side, I managed to get myself situated in a crouch before Vash Gar could completely regain his feet. I tumbled past his flank as he rose with Skurge in his left hand. He took a blind swing behind him, where he thought I was, but missed by a full six inches. Intercepting the weak end of his arc, I caught his left hand in a wristlock with both of my hands and bent it, palm-down, as hard as I could against his disturbingly pliant wrist.

“Drop it, Vash Gar, or lose your hand!” I squeezed as hard as I could. I could feel his limber tendons giving way, creaking against Mr. Radius and Mrs. Ulna.

“Never!” Vash Gar screamed. He pounded my stomach with his free hand, nearly knocking the breath from me. Normally, that kind of blow would be very hard to land with the kind of wristlock that I had him in, but Vash Gar’s arms were so out-of-proportion to the rest of his body—lanky black scarecrow thing that he was—that he could do it with little strain. That left me with little choice, as I realized that another blow like that would probably stun me just enough for him to lop my head off.

“I sure hope you don’t play the piano!” I said, coming down hard in a crouch, using my momentum to snap the bones of his wrist. Much to my disgust, however, Vash Gar’s *entire hand* came off at the wrist with a sickening *crunch!* Black blood gushed from the severed stump of his arm as he began to howl in pain. He bent over double in his agony, almost to the point of contortion, as he tried to staunch the flow.

“You will *die* for that, Tatternorn!” Vash Gar promised, backing away in agony. Prying his left hand off of Skurge’s pommel, I threw it at him, hard. Then, striking a stance that seemed to be ingrained in my soul, I hefted the mighty black blade and pointed it at his throat.

Suddenly, the elemental hatred of Skurge roiled into my mind like a juggernaut as I held the great black blade in my hands.

“Maggot! By the pact that binds us, I shall have thy soul ‘ere this night is through!”

“Shut the hell up and let me think, you stupid black speculum!”

Skurge lit up in silent, purple fury as I gazed at it, irate that it was once more in my possession.

“I see that he remembers you, Tatternorn,” Vash Gar hissed, rising to his feet. “Good, good,” he laughed, silently and quickly withdrawing a ninjato-style black blade from over his left shoulder with his good hand. “How better to defeat you than to take you at the height of your powers, Vash Skurrg...”

Ahh, that name: Vash Skurgg. I suddenly recalled that the Mokarr had known me by this epithet, and had uttered it with a curious mixture of admiration and fear. Beyond that, though, I knew little more—although I sensed that, given time, I would remember everything about that most cruel name, and what it truly meant to me.

Meanwhile, Vash Gar segued into the first few movements of the very flashy, very intimidating Black Wyrn—the “fighting form” of the Black Wyrn martial arts style, which every Midnight Realm-dwelling Mokarr and his brother seemed to know. Then, of course, he blurred into me so fast that it was all I could do to beat a fighting retreat. He was an expert with his blade, and I was still nothing more than an amateur at best compared to him. And the cocky bastard knew it.

“Ha! Your legendary fighting skills *were* nothing more than a pack of lies!” Vash Gar snorted derisively, driving me ever back. “You dishonor the great Lord of the Dark by sullyng his son, Skurge, in such a pathetic fashion!” he sneered, beating down my clumsy counterattack. “Indeed,” he leered, whipping forward like a snake and trapping our blades in a cross, “I must wonder why such a pathetic little mortal worm such as yourself was chosen to bear the Pact of the Impossible Blade in the first place. Once I have taken your soul and proven my value to the Dark One, perhaps he will see fit to reward me with the pact in your stead...”

A sudden black fury descended upon me. My soul screamed as something ancient, feral, and ugly suddenly took control of my brain. “*You presume too much in your arrogance, maggot,*” I pronounced in Druus, the thrice-damned tongue of the ancient Shadar Lords. With little effort, I broke his grasp. Then, striking in a blur of blackness, I relieved him of his sword-arm. Vash Gar went down, limp; both of his stumps gushing out viscous black ichor. “*My father’s will is absolute, fool!*” I raged, punting him harshly in the chest and knocking off a stray piece of obsidium armor in the process. “*You can no more presume upon it than you can presume upon your continued existence, you thrice-damned Mokarr maggot...*”

Spinning to face me, Vash Gar stared hot hatred into my eyes. “Damn you, Tatternorn! You half-breed freak of—”

Vash Gar’s words ended in a spray of black blood, fragments of sinew, and black skull dust as I caught him full in the face with a mighty cut which dropped him like a stone. Vash Gar lay there face down, mewling deep in his throat, his long bony fingers scrabbling on the cobblestones in agony.

“Good shot, Logan!” Sammy suddenly called from behind me. “You took off his whole face!”

I turned my head to see Sammy waddle up, his face one big smile. He held a captured Mokarr obsidium blade that strongly resembled a Terran *ninjato* in his left hand.

“No shit, Sherlock,” I replied, wiping Skurge off on Vash Gar’s leg. Sammy then rolled Vash Gar over on his back with his sword, revealing a hideously maimed face on which the lower jawbone was missing, along with a good portion of the right cheek. His eyes were still open; raging red pools of hatred and disbelief that sought my own eyes, burning into them. Marking them...

“Damn,” Sammy chortled sadistically, “he’s one ugly motherfucker.”

“Yeah,” I added, moving Skurge to within an inch of his hate-washed soul-seeking eyes, “and he’s probably regenerating like a troll with his ‘first-spawned’ vitality even as we speak. So,” I said, letting the words ring for Valthrustra’s benefit, “we have no choice but to chop off this motherfucker’s head!”

Vash Gar’s blazing eyes widened in complete disbelief at this utter and complete violation of all the so-called “legends.”

“Yes, you freak,” I growled, my black Skurge-influenced temper compelling me. “The legends about us *were* wrong. We’re not at all the same *goody-goody* folks your daddy may have

told you about...”

I let the tip of Skurge trace a tiny wound on his forehead in my growing rage. Vash Gar immediately convulsed as he tried to roll away from Skurge’s baleful influence. Sammy’s blade took that option away from him, though, piercing his remaining forearm and holding him down to the ground like a giant black butterfly. Vash Gar’s desperate screams took on the tones of an old-time car horn, one buried deep beneath a load of slop-feeding pigs. He knew only too well what death by Skurge meant for one of his black blood...

From the corner of my eyes, I saw Samantha, David, Michael, and Luther walk up from the boundary of the mists. They were covered in Mokarr gore; their faces blank. Vash Gar’s struggles grew more frantic as they gathered around. But, try as he might, he had no chance in hell of escaping his well-deserved fate.

“Do you see this?” I cried, head raised high. “Do you see what you have made us, Valthrus-tra? You fuck! Do you see? Do you?” I raised Skurge high above my head, taking it in both of my hands. “Well take a long hard look at this, you big black festering Shadar asshole, because you’re next! You’re next! YOU’RE NEXT!”

Hate guided my hand—a hatred for the foul, evil ways of the Shadar race, their corruption of not one but *two* world’s innocent dreams—and the vicious epitome of ironic Hate itself, Skurge, took Vash Gar’s pointed wicked witch head from his body in a shower of purple and black sparks.

“Cool!” Sammy tittered, pointing at the slowly rolling head. “Kind of like *Highlander!*”

I nodded once to Michael (trying my best to ignore Sammy, who was prancing about and blathering “There can be only one!” over and over again at the top of his lungs) as I set to work prying Skurge forth from the cobblestones, where half of the blade’s upper length now resided from the fury of my killing stroke. Michael returned my nod with a grim mask of resolve, then darted off into the mist to do his recon. Suddenly, the gravity of the scene grasped me, and I realized that such had not been his way, our way, once and long ago: the cold-blooded murder of the fallen foe.

Once, long ago on another world, we had been killers in the name of the Cause. That much could never be denied. But never murderers. Never.

But now things had changed. For all intents and purposes we were now as dark in our hearts as the great fiend that we opposed. We had obliterated our foes. We had terminated our foes—with extreme prejudice. We had, at least in one terrible case, damned our foes to an eternity of screaming darkness in that hell known as the Void. And, to the last one of us, we had *liked* it.

No remorse.

Death can do that to a soul.