

# BURY ME IN THE RAINBOW

Bill Johnson

**Bill Johnson was born on the Lake Traverse Indian Reservation, in one of the more remote parts of South Dakota. The reservation is home to the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate, a branch of the Santee Sioux. Bill's family moved out of Dakota (he currently lives in the Chicago area with his wife), but he still goes back to visit relatives and to "have the lake to myself." Bill won the Hugo in 1998 for his novelette "We Will Drink a Fish Together . . ." (*Asimov's*, May 1977). His exciting new tale is a stand-alone sequel to that earlier story.**

"People never think about what happens next."

Oly adjusted his chaw, turned to the side, and spat a brown stream onto the winter dead/spring fresh grass just coming up.

"For God's sake, Oly! We got company. At least use a can."

Dakota—home—always made me feel comfortable and exasperated at the same time. Comfortable, because I was home, not stuck in one of those places where I just didn't fit. Like New York or Los Angeles or D.C. or London or Beijing or . . .

Exasperated because, well, it was Dakota. More than that, it was Summit. Which even for Dakota was in the back ass end of nowhere and filled to the brim with misfits.

I stood next to Foremost, the alien ambassador from the Ship. Akicita stood on the other side of me. She watched Oly and huffed out a chuckle. Oly glared at her, frowned at Foremost, then grumbled, stepped back a step, looked around, and picked up a tossed-aside beer can off the ground. He swirled it, hopefully, then scowled. It was empty. I closed my eyes and shook my head.

"*She shoots something.*" Oly jerked his head toward Akicita. "The bad guy goes down and dies, and everybody is happy and cheers and tells her what a great guy she is. Then they all walk away and have a party. Until someone thinks to call *me* to clean it up." Oly sounded disgusted. We were used to it. We knew when to ignore Oly and when to pay attention.

I reached into my jacket pocket and handed him a flask. He nodded, appreciatively, opened it up and sipped. He made a face and handed it back to me.

"What is that crap?"

"Thirty-year-old Highlands single malt scotch. We got it as a thank you for saving this fool's," I jerked my thumb at Foremost, "ass."

"No flavor," Oly grumbled. He smacked his lips and stuck out his tongue. "Like drinking water from the lake. No bite to it. You need some fish moonshine, that's what you need."

I capped the flask and slid it into my pocket. Oly nodded at the ground.

"So what do you want to do with this thing?"

Foremost, Akicita, Oly, and myself stood in the backyard of Oly's shack. It stood by its lonely self just below the crest of a little hill, a knob, really, with no trees, just a few half-buried boulders, tall prairie grass, and a continent full of wind. Above us was a sky of broken clouds, and around us were more prairie grass hills, taller, with a clear view out to the horizon. It looked like it must have looked in the old days, empty and clean. All we needed to do was add some buffalo and we could have been in a time before even the First Nations people arrived.

In front of us, laid out on a black tarpaulin, was the body of the Synth assassin. Its body was covered so only the head showed.

The dead alien had a strong jaw and heavy orbital ridges. Its lips were pulled back and showed several large canine teeth—top and bottom—and broad molars in the back. The lips were brown, like tanned leather, and short tendrils, which writhed and whipped when it was alive, limply draped below the nose and across the lips.

"And what the hell do I call it?" Oly asked Foremost.

"It's probably a male. If I remember my childhood stories correctly, Synth males are the muscle, and the females are the brains."

Foremost sounded uncertain. And I didn't want to strip the Synth and start digging around for some kind of alien genitals. I remembered the Synth just a day ago as he charged the ambassador and me at the cemetery, a killing machine determined to do his job. He seemed indestructible, completely unfazed as I emptied my handgun into his chest, and his armor shed the bullets like water. He'd lifted up his laser and I knew we were going to die.

Suddenly, there was a small bullet hole just above his muzzle of a nose, and a larger exit wound in the back of his bald head. The Synth hesitated, almost puzzled, as if he wasn't quite sure what had just happened. I remembered I wondered if his brains were in his head or tucked somewhere less obvious, less vulnerable.

Then he fell and was still, and Akicita stepped out of the brush behind us, her rifle ready, another round already jacked into the chamber, and Foremost and I were still alive.

Which led us to today's problem.

I turned to Foremost and tried to read his expression.

Impossible. He said nothing, just looked calmly back at me, the cowls of his robe loose around his neck, his face one damned fine impersonation of a giant wolverine.

"Well?" I demanded.

"Well, what?" Foremost replied. He seemed almost amused. "Let me guess. I'm alien, so I'm supposed to know everything about every other alien race? I'm supposed to know what to do with a dead Synth?"

He shook his head.

"Tony, I have no idea what to do," Foremost admitted. "I've never seen one of these before."

"It came off your ship."

"It's a big ship. A huge ship. It's almost the size of your moon. And these things," he nudged the body with the toe of one foot, "are rare. I've never seen one before. Heard about them, yes, but never seen one. Somebody hires them, they do their job, and they're gone. Never heard of one getting killed before."

“So you have no idea what to do?” I asked, almost accusingly. Foremost shook his head.

“None.”

Disgusted, I turned to the other two.

“Oly?”

He held up his hands and shook his head.

“Not me, Tony.”

“We’re the Pool Hall lodge. This kind of stuff is our business. And you were Sam’s Counselor,” I said. Oly nodded but then shook his head again.

“I agree,” Oly said. “But this,” he pointed at the Synth, “is above my pay grade. This is the kind of stuff Sam took care of.”

Sam was my grandfather. Not by blood but by something more important. When the Default and the Second Depression started, my dad’s family hit the roads and worked the northern fields, from the orchards in Oregon to roqueing beans in Dakota.

The family always came home to Summit for the winter. One year, there was nothing. No place to rest or sleep. Sam let my family use an old shed, even piled up bales of hay against the walls to insulate it and break the wind. My dad was just a little kid, but he used to walk into town to work at the pool hall. One day he sent word back that he was staying with Sam and Laverne. Everyone agreed it was for the best. So when I grew up, I had an extra pair of grandparents.

Problem was, the Default was hard and there wasn’t any extra money for medicine. Sam ran the pool hall but he gave most of the money away. Then, just these last few years, his heart got sick and . . .

“Sam’s dead.”

“Well, no shit,” Oly said tartly. “That makes it your problem. Tell me what you want done and I’ll do it, but I don’t make the decisions. That’s your job now.”

“Damn it,” I said to myself. I looked down at the Synth and tried to think about what I knew about funerals.

I’d gone to them, of course, particularly the exile funerals in D.C. and up and down the east coast and west coast and everywhere else in the flatlands. Sam made me go, said it was part of my job and I was his representative—both from our lodge and from Summit, when one of the exiles died.

So I went.

To burials. And cremations. And organ donations to hospitals. Hell, even to some kind of a celebration for one woman who’d spent all her money to have herself frozen and stuck in a warehouse along with a thousand other stiffs. Her plan—her hope—was that science in the future could wake her up, cure her, and give her a fresh body. Like they’d do that for free. Even in the future I figured you were going to need money.

But this was a new one to me. What do you do with a dead alien?

“We could just leave it here.”

I tried to sound hopeful. Oly shook his head and squatted next to the Synth. He leaned over, sniffed, and jerked his head back. He stood.

“Already starting to go bad. Can’t leave it here. Not in my backyard. Too much rock to dig a decent grave. And if we went shallow, the coyotes would smell it and dig it up. They’d eat it and scatter the bones and the skin all over the place. And for all we know, it’s poisonous and they’ll end up dead, too. It’ll be a mess.” Oly turned to Foremost. “You think they’d like that, upstairs?”

“No.”

Oly looked back at me.

“How about we take it to the county morgue in Webster?”

“No.” Foremost interrupted firmly. “I don’t want any other governments involved. The fewer people who know I’m here, the better.”

My job back in D.C. was to protect foreign diplomats. I'd taken a bullet on my protective vest to save Foremost's life. After that, he'd headed back upstairs, to the Ship. Thing was, it seemed whoever wanted him dead wasn't only on Earth. Someone upstairs tried to shoot down his shuttle and damned near succeeded. He'd limped his ship for Summit because he knew I was here.

I glared at both of them.

Oly smiled back, smugly. Foremost concentrated on the Synth. I wanted this problem gone. I decided to try another tack.

"I'm part of the government. Maybe I shouldn't be involved either."

Foremost didn't seem impressed.

"You're not part of your federal government anymore. You resigned when Sam died. So you don't count. Besides, your old job was to hide and protect foreign dignitaries. Like me. Think of this as one last job you have to finish."

Foremost nodded down at the Synth.

"And so far I'm still alive. You're doing just fine on your own."

Foremost spoke absently and knelt down next to the Synth, his head cocked to the side. He looked up at me.

"Well?"

I wanted to curse and swear and punch a wall and sweep everything off a table, like an actor in a bad video. Thing was, in real life, none of that helped much. Problem was still there, and now you had a mess to clean up later.

"Seems to me like a local matter," Oly opined. "Which would mean Sam, as mayor, would take care of it. Problem is, his heart got Sam before any of this even started. So it's the deputy mayor's problem."

Oly turned to Akicita.

"Just who is the deputy mayor these days, Aki?"

"Shut up." I spoke to both of them. They ignored me.

"I seem to recall Tony was elected deputy mayor." Akicita and Oly, the bastards, both openly grinned. "The last two elections. So doesn't that mean he's in charge now?"

Mayor. Damn it, I'd forgotten about that. Didn't seem like anything to worry about back when Sam put me up for the job. He was healthy then and I lived in D.C. What could possibly go wrong? Okay, I had to go to a few funerals, but what else?

Screw it. Not a damned thing I could do to make any of them listen to me. It was like trying to change Carole's mind when she knew she was right and I was wrong and she was just going to humor me until I gave up and did what I was told.

And I still had a dead body to deal with.

"Fine. We take care of this ourselves. No other governments."

"Good."

"But it doesn't go just one way. Sam always told me not to do favors. He said it was better to collect debts."

I tried to make Foremost feel guilty. He didn't look terribly impressed.

"And I'll remember that. When I have time." Foremost stood and pointed down at the Synth. "But that's not right now. So?"

"You killed it, Aki. What do you want to do with it?"

Even to me my voice sounded resigned. I kept my attention focused on Foremost and watched Akicita out of the corner of my eye.

"Never seen anything like it."

Akicita spoke slowly, her voice musing. She took one step, another, paced around the body.

"Burn it," Oly suggested. "Get a bunch of wood and some gasoline. Sink the ashes in one of the pothole lakes the state doesn't have on their maps yet. Got a new one

that just popped up a month ago, south of Bristol. Fifty, sixty feet deep. Piece of cake. Nobody will ever find it.”

“Enough.” I spoke sharply, irritated. “You said you didn’t want to make the decision.”

“Still don’t.” Oly sounded wounded, as if I’d hurt his feelings. “Just trying to help.”

I rolled my eyes and silently asked for patience.

“Aki?”

Akicita shook her head.

“I don’t think we should throw it away. That’s not the way my people would do it. And I don’t like burying it. Personally, I never liked the idea of rotting in the ground. Even if I was dead.”

“Keep it? You really want to do that?”

“Keep it,” Akicita agreed.

“Ambassador.” I turned to Foremost, my voice clear and formal. “The Synth tried to kill you.”

“Even though they’re both from the same damned ship,” Oly said under his breath. I glared at him, and he went quiet.

“True.” Foremost’s voice was a low rumble.

“When it tried to kill you, the Synth went into your debt. Akicita made her claim. Now you also have to make a decision. Do you make your claim?”

“What are the laws of your state?” Foremost asked cautiously.

“This is Summit,” Oly interrupted, his voice flat and expressionless. For once, he was being serious. “This is our business. Nothing to do with the flatlanders. Our land. Our laws. Our ways. We don’t give a damn about what the state thinks. Screw the state. Screw D.C.”

“Is that how it works, up on the Ship?” Akicita asked Foremost. “Do each people rule themselves? Or is there a state that rules over everyone?”

“There are Ship regulations everyone must follow, for those things which could hurt the Ship itself.” Foremost spoke cautiously, like a diplomat, unwilling to give anything away.

“Just a few regulations?” Akicita asked suspiciously. “Or something more like a treaty?”

*Sore subject*, I thought and winced. *Stay away from treaty talk.*

“Not a treaty. Just a few safety rules,” Foremost said hurriedly. “Other than those rules, each people, in their own territory, governs themselves, their own way. No one tries to tell anyone how to mind their own business as long as they stay in their own territory.”

“How many species are on the ship?” His answer made me curious. Like he was dodging the question.

Foremost was silent for a moment. I wondered if he was trying to be diplomatic, to avoid offending us or to avoid giving something away.

“I can’t answer that, Tony. I’m not sure *how* to answer that.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’d have to see for yourself. Some places seem to be empty, and they’re not. Other places seem to be crowded, but they’re empty. Some are like you might expect. Different, but you’d recognize them. We mostly deal with those people. It has to be something big, something Ship-wide, to get the others involved.”

“So we wouldn’t recognize everyone on board the Ship?”

“No,” Foremost admitted. He hesitated. “There are thousands of species on the Ship. Maybe millions? Some of them are quite . . . different . . . from you or me. Or even the Synth. We don’t really understand many of them.”

He turned to Akicita.

"So we leave each other alone. Except for the safety regulations. Everyone has to follow those."

*All politics is local.* I could hear Sam's voice as well as if he were still alive, the memory so fresh it hurt. Which brought me back to the cemetery and the Synth.

"Ambassador?" I asked. "I still need an answer."

"I will make my claim on the Synth."

"You hear that, Oly?" I asked. "Since these fools make a claim, I might as well do the same."

"You know what that means?" Oly asked. I nodded.

"I do."

"This is your decision? As Mayor? And as Keeper of the Pool Hall?"

"It is," I said. "As both."

"What about the flatlanders? What if they try to get involved?"

"Not a problem. Cousin Beth might be Kadisha but she's also a lawyer. And she owes me," I assured him. "I'll put her on this when I get back to town. She'll throw enough legal crap together to keep the flatlanders tied up in court for years, if they get involved at all. By then, one way or another, it's not going to matter."

I looked down at the Synth. I nudged the body with my boot.

"In the meantime, this is your problem. Get him ready."

Oly took a deep breath and shrugged. He tilted his head to the side and rubbed his chin.

"I need a cigarette."

"You quit twenty years ago," Akicita reminded him.

"Shut up." Oly spoke without rancor. "I can still want one. Just don't give it to me."

"Oly, that doesn't make any—"

"How long do I get?" Oly interrupted. He looked up at me.

"One week."

Oly shook his head.

"Can't be done. Maybe in two."

"Seven days. You don't have to go all Ga on him. Just get the job done."

"Damn it, Tony! I can't work miracles. A week and a half."

"You have one week. It's got to be done by that morning."

Oly threw up his hands and glared at me. I met him, eye to eye, until he looked down at his boots and scuffed the ground.

"One week," Oly grumbled. "Can't do a proper job in one week."

"Doesn't have to be perfect. Just good enough to meet the rules. I'm not telling you to work in stone, for God's sake!"

Oly knelt next to the Synth.

"I'll need salt," he warned. "Forty or fifty pounds. Maybe five, six, pounds of borax. A solid mannequin. None of that cheap hollow crap all the youngsters use these days. I'm going to have to do some carving."

"Make sure you keep everything," I reminded him.

"Screw you, Tony." Oly spoke absently and without emphasis, his concentration already past me and on to the Synth. "I won't lose anything."

"And keep something for the Oya and the Kadisha."

Oly looked up, startled. Akicita turned to face me and frowned.

"He's not from Summit." Oly tipped his chin at the Synth. He looked almost angry. I cut him off.

"Where did he die?" I demanded from Oly. Oly bit off whatever he was going to say and looked over at Akicita. She hesitated, then shrugged.

"He got shot in the cemetery," Oly agreed reluctantly.

“He got shot in the cemetery,” I repeated. “In the Summit cemetery. What happens to people who die in Summit and get claimed?”

“He’s not a people!”

“He died in Summit.” Akicita spoke slowly. “We all claimed him.”

Oly started to object. I stared him down until he dropped his eyes. He grumbled and looked away.

I had no idea what to do next, so I was going to follow the rules Sam taught me. Everyone in Summit would at least recognize it if we handled the Synth the usual way. And when times are uncertain, people cling to tradition. It gives them a point of reference. I smelled politics in the air, and I knew this was just the beginning. The rest of it was going to be a lot harder.

Akicita stepped closer to me and spoke in a low tone. Foremost leaned imperceptibly closer to hear better.

“You’ll go talk with the Custodian?” Akicita asked me.

“I’ll talk with the Custodian,” I agreed. “You tell Flipper to bring Oly everything he needs.” I called over my shoulder, back at Oly. “Anything special you need right away?”

“Black marbles.”

“Black marbles?”

“Make sure they have yellow specks in them. I definitely saw yellow in his eyes.”

Oly always was a perfectionist.

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Three of us walked past the shack and down the hill to Sam’s old blue Ford truck. It was probably as old as Sam, a four on the floor with the long, skinny, shift levers that sprouted up through the steel. In the city I was pretty sure they’d call it an antique and offer me too much money for it. Here, it was just Sam’s old truck.

I pulled the lever-style door handle down and stepped up on the running board. Far to the east, at the edge of the plateau, a shaft of sunlight must have cut through the clouds and hit the glass just right; I saw the flash and glint of red and orange and yellow and blue of the Abbey and the Rainbow.

I shook my head and settled on to the front seat bench, pulled the door shut with a little more force than necessary. Foremost climbed in on the passenger side. Akicita stopped a few steps away.

“You need a ride?” I jerked my thumb at the truck bed behind us. “Got room in back.”

“Nah. Faster to walk.”

I have no idea where she’d stashed it, but Akicita’s rifle was now strapped comfortably in place across her back.

“It’s five miles across the hills,” I reminded her.

“Fifteen miles by road. And you’re not going to Flipper’s place.” Akicita adjusted the rifle, made sure the strap was tight. “You take care of your business and I’ll take care of mine. See you back in town.”

She turned away from us and started walking, a long, easy stride that ate up distance. A minute later she was deep in the grass, then over a ridge and out of sight. I started the engine, shifted into first, and started down the barely visible trace that led away from Oly’s place.

“A week isn’t a lot of time,” Foremost said as we drove, bouncing over a set of rugged tracks. It wasn’t bad for a Summit road. At least it was corncobbled for traction on the top of the hills.

“Nope,” I said. I shifted into second gear and gunned the truck through a rut and over a clump of weeds. “But he’ll have it done.”

“I’ll send word up to the Ship. Maybe someone knows someone who knows a Synth,” Foremost said. He changed topics. “One week from today. Sam’s death auction is that afternoon, isn’t it?”

"That is a fact," I agreed. I shifted into third just as we popped over the top of a hill. I twisted the wheel and we hit the ground, hard. Foremost grabbed the seat and the door. I hit the gas and a rooster tail of dirt and dust spun up behind us. I grinned. Damn, it was good to be out of D.C.!

"You still don't understand us, do you?" I asked.

"No," Foremost said. "But that's one reason we need you on the Ship. Different points of view, different ways of looking at problems, are just as important to us as air or water or power."

"Is that an official invitation to join the Ship?" I asked.

"No," Foremost said, reluctantly. "Call it an informal invitation. I still need a full vote from the Council to make it official."

"It would be different up there," I mused.

"Then you agree?" Foremost asked. "Your lodge, and the rest of Summit, will move to the Ship?"

"Hell, no, I don't agree!" I said, shocked.

"But the Pool Hall is the most respected lodge in Summit," Foremost protested. "The entire town was at Sam's funeral out at the cemetery."

"Sam was good at keeping the peace," I admitted. "Oly always said Sam could talk the knickers off a nun. But that doesn't make one damned bit of difference."

"You can't order the others to move to the Ship," Foremost said slowly.

"Of course not! For God's sake, don't go around saying things like that. You trying to start a feud?"

"I don't understand."

"Life isn't like they show on the video," I said patiently. "Most people here have lives already. Kids and grandkids and jobs and friends. They're not going anywhere. The best we can hope for is to get the Keepers of the lodges to let anyone go who wants to go. Give them permission to take what they need to get them started upstairs. We get that permission, and we'll get the restless and probably a lot of the young people. That's who we really need."

We were back at the county road. I looked both ways and turned off the dirt and on to the county gravel.

"I'll talk with the others," I said. "I'll get my brothers busy on it, too. Akicita and I can both talk to the First Nations."

"You have First Nations blood?" Foremost asked, surprised. I was surprised myself, that he even knew what I was talking about.

"This is all reservation land." I gestured at everything outside the window. "Or it used to be. Hell, it gets confusing even to us. Then you get the lawyers involved and, well . . ."

"Yes?"

"Thing is, there's not that many of us permanently up here in the hills. But a lot of us are born here and leave and come back and leave and come back again, with a change in husbands and wives and kids and such. Everyone has aunts and uncles and cousins all over the place. Do I have First Nations blood? Probably. Does Akicita have Irish or German? Probably. Black? Mexican? China? Japan? Indian? Viet? Iraqi? Probably. Even the gene tests don't work so good here. So we all kind of ignore that shit. Think of it as Summit and the lodges against the flatlanders in Minneapolis and New York and Beijing and London and everywhere else. Makes it easier."

"You're the castoffs. The people who never fit in anywhere else."

I nodded. I pointed out the window.

"Our land is poor. Not very good soil, lots of rocks, no oil or gas or anything worth a damn. Hardly any railroads. No airports. Hell, no highways until a few years ago. If you want to make it up here, you need a lodge, a group of people who work together

and live together and share together to make a living. Some of us are farmers. Some are water people. Some are mechanics or construction or something else.”

“What happens to the children? The ones who want to see what it’s like in the flatlands?”

“We’re not stupid,” I said, sharply. “If anything, I think we’re more driven up here because there’s no extra. Helicopter parents? Dream on. Up here your parents and your friends and every relative is on you to succeed. If you leave, life in the flats seems easy.”

“And lonely?” Foremost pushed.

The county road ended, and I stopped for a minute. The cloud of gravel dust behind us drifted up and over and around us, thinned out, and was gone. In front of us, the top bar of a T, was a choice.

“Maybe a little,” I admitted.

To my right was the state road, asphalt and concrete, smooth and straight and clean. Turn right and it was high speed and easy, all the way to the flatlands, to where someone else took over all my problems. Turn left and it was uphill with nothing but dirt and potholes and rumble crap and into Summit. The Ship was still faintly visible on the horizon, fading as the sun hauled itself up into the pale blue sky.

“You run Sam’s pool hall,” Foremost mused to himself. “You sell everyone drinks and food.”

“And we hire the bands for Saturday night and sponsor the softball league and the bowling league and roller skating Sundays,” I added.

“They relax around you and tell you things,” Foremost said thoughtfully. “And if there’s a big problem, you get the lodges together to solve it.”

“That’s one way to look at it. The Pool Hall is like the oil in an engine. Our job is to make sure everyone else gets along. But we can’t survive by ourselves. We need the others.”

“And if you don’t have them?”

“Then we’re not going on the Ship.”

“Your lodge will die out if you stay on Earth,” Foremost warned. “Change is coming to the Dakota hills.”

“I know,” I said softly. “But if we go alone to the Ship, we’ll die for a fact, body and soul. We aren’t big enough, don’t have all the skills we’d need. We need farmers and mechanics and water people and all the rest to survive. Hell, I’ll admit it, sometimes we even need Mother Lu and the Nacacijin to deal with the outside world.”

“So you must convince the other lodges to come to the Ship,” Foremost said, and I swear he gave a very human shrug. “That’s what Sam would do.”

“You never even met Sam!”

“True,” Foremost said. He shrugged again. “But you have.”

I started to spit out some smartass answer, but I stopped myself. He was right. It didn’t matter whether he had ever met Sam. This was about me, and what I thought Sam would have done.

*Yeah, I thought to myself, gloomily. Problem is, I’m not Sam.*

So I broke the rules and changed the algorithm. Instead of going right or left, I drove the truck straight ahead, through the T, off the road and down the ditch and around the fence onto a little path that no one would ever know was there, unless you were born up here. We crossed up and over a ridge and the Abbey was ahead of us, in the middle distance.

Time to see the Custodian and talk about the Rainbow.

\* \* \*

Blue Sky Abbey faced us. It was a five-story octagon with glass walls, on top of a hill, with each wall separated from the next by strips of sandstone colored concrete.

A bell tower, connected by a ground floor walkway, stood to the side. Downhill, another walkway connected to a small dormitory for the monks.

I parked in the lot and stepped out, Foremost beside me. I walked up to the entrance, rang the bell, and waited by the double doors. Someone was always awake inside.

A minute or so later one of the doors pushed open. The Custodian stood in the doorway.

"And look what the cat brought in!"

Brother Stephanie smiled up at us, her short brown hair neatly tucked back. She was barely five feet tall with a round, almost pixie-like face, freckles, and soft blue eyes. She hugged me, pulled my face down, kissed me on the cheek, and urged me inside. She did the same with Foremost, without any hesitation. Alien or not, nothing seemed to bother her.

Somehow, I wasn't surprised. Abbey monks were tough. The Custodian was even tougher.

We stood in the walkway for a moment. Stephanie looked at me and Foremost shrewdly.

"I would like to think you're here for my professional guidance and wisdom," she said drily. "But I know you, Tony, so I doubt it. As for you, Ambassador, I have seen the Ship and read about you. Even Tony might hesitate to waste your time."

"Stephanie—"

She talked right over me.

"So, Tony, is this a personal visit, something to do with expanding the Ambassador's knowledge of Earth and the Church? Or is this Summit business and the Ambassador is your tagalong?"

"Damn it, Stephanie," I started. I stopped myself. I was in church, but old habits—both ways—died hard. I knew not to swear in church, but I also knew what to say when she teased me. This time she smiled at me, with just a hint of the grin she'd used on me when we were in grade school together.

"I need to talk to you, as the Custodian. And Foremost here needs to be with us while we talk. Then you get to decide whether this visit is personal business or Summit business."

Brother Stephanie looked at me for a moment, then shook her head.

"Nothing is ever easy with you around, is it, Tony?" She sighed. "So is this an opportunity? Or a problem?"

"Yes," I said. She didn't smile. She gave me that *you haven't done your homework? Again?* look.

"Office?"

She pivoted on her heel to turn down the walkway toward the base of the bell tower. I shook my head and turned the other direction.

"Ah."

Stephanie studied me for a moment. I felt like I was back in grade school and I had suddenly done something unexpected, and one of the smart nuns realized it and gave me *that look*. The one that said *maybe you're not quite the dumbass everyone thinks you are*.

I hated that look. It was a lot safer to stay quiet in a nice, comfortable box of expectations and be overlooked. When people started noticing you, all those comfortable expectations got tossed up in the air, and life suddenly became a lot more complicated.

"Right. Well, not a waste of time, then. I have a little work to do in the chapel."

"The Nguyens? Linh and Hieu?"

"You knew them?"

I nodded.

“Nice couple. I felt bad for their grandkids when I heard.”

Stephanie took Foremost’s arm and led us down the walkway toward the chapel. She explained as we walked.

“Car accident down by Lake Traverse a week ago. Some drunk flatlander coming back from ice fishing. Took his car off self-drive, bypassed the GPS, and blew a stop sign.”

She reached into the pocket of her brown monk’s robe and pulled out two thin glass tubes, one a light green, the other a soft yellow, each stoppered with a clear cap. Inside one was a small piece of bone, and the other held what looked like a baby tooth.

“Happened outside of Summit, so that was easy,” Stephanie said. “The flatlander’s remains went back to Minneapolis and the Kadisha took care of the arrangements here and the Oya approved it. The Nguyens’ names and history went into the Registry this morning and Dove brought over the tubes.”

“Same lodge?”

“Actually, no. Linh worked out at the wind farm. She was an accountant, but she was invited into the Engineer lodge. She was always very proud of that.”

“Hieu?”

She held up the green tube.

“A cook. Best pho up here. Opened the place after you left town. Grew his own herbs in a greenhouse behind the restaurant. He joined the Farmers.”

“You’re going to separate them?”

“Roy G. Biv, Tony,” Stephanie scolded me gently. “Remember the colors. Yellow and green are right next to each other.”

I looked at the tubes again. The yellow might have had flecks of green in it, and the green shaded a little toward yellow when she held it just right in the light.

“I think we can get these in the right lodges and still get them next to each other.”

We stopped at the double doors to the chapel. I pulled them open so Foremost and Stephanie could step through.

“Time to put these in the Rainbow.”

\* \* \*

One way to describe the Rainbow was to say it was a chapel, with a simple altar at one end of the room, a carpeted floor, and a dozen pews separated by a single aisle. And the walls were five-story-high frosted glass, so that sunlight poured in on every side, even above the altar.

Except the walls weren’t really just walls. . . .

The walls of the chapel, from top to bottom, on all sides, were made of thousands of little medicine bottles, test tubes, small glass containers. A rare few were clear, but most were red or rose or orange or yellow or green or blue or indigo or violet. Sunlight streamed through the windows, and through the bottles and into the chapel, in arcs and bands and mixtures and spilled across the floor and the altar and the pews and us.

Foremost and I walked down the aisle, through the middle of the Rainbow. Stephanie stopped behind us and let us go ahead.

I always wondered when I walked through the Rainbow. One thing I learned, one thing Sam drummed into me, was that every person who ever lived was the hero of their own story; every person was the center of their own little universe. Inside the Rainbow I wondered about all those stories, about all those universes.

Thousands of stories, thousands of universes, stretching back through the history of Summit . . .

I heard a noise and looked back. Brother Stephanie maneuvered a rolling ladder, locked the wheels, and climbed up. She unlocked a transparent protective panel and

slipped a datapad out of her robe. She studied it and then slid the two glass containers carefully into place, by their family and kin and lodge. She wrote all the information down on the datapad, sent it to the Registry, then locked everything, and climbed down. I helped her put the ladder away.

"Well?"

I looked at Foremost. He stood in the middle of the chapel, behind the pews. He watched the colors and patterns slowly change as the Sun moved and clouds crossed the sky outside. We walked over to stand next to him.

"So what do you need from me?" she asked.

"I need approval from the Custodian."

Stephanie stared at me, puzzled, for a moment. Then her face cleared and she nodded.

"The other alien. The one at the cemetery."

"He's called a Synth." I shrugged. "Other than that, I don't know his name."

Foremost turned, slowly. He didn't really look at either of us. His eyes were on the colors and the walls and the ever-changing patterns.

"He died in Summit," I said to Stephanie. "Aki' and I and the ambassador made a claim on him. Oly's getting everything ready."

"Ah," Stephanie said. She frowned for a moment, then her face cleared and she looked up at me.

"He doesn't have a lodge, then?"

"No."

"Not a problem," she said. "The answer is still yes. I have a spot for him, and he's welcome to it. He died in Summit."

I nodded back.

"I'll do the best I can to find out anything about him, to put in the Registry," I said. "Thank you."

I moved in front of Foremost, to get his attention. He started, as if he had forgotten where we were and who I was.

"You all right?"

"Yes," Foremost said. He glanced at the Rainbow, then down at the floor.

"My eyes aren't like yours," Foremost said.

I studied him closer then, just for a moment. He looked back at me calmly. I realized his eyes were slitted vertically and there was a hint of another, inner, set of eyelids.

"I saw a video once, on the internet," I said. "Video said that cats don't see things the way we do. That they're not color-blind, but they see colors lower in the spectrum and they see things more sharply, to detect movement. You like that?"

"Something like that," Foremost said. He gestured to the Rainbow. "You start at red and work your way up to violet. I start lower than red and go higher than violet."

"I don't have words for colors like that," I said.

"I know." Foremost looked up again, at the walls and the colors and the arcs. "But you have those colors here, all around me."

I gave him another few seconds and that was enough.

"Time to go," I said. "We need to get back to Sam's house. We've got things to do."

"Of course," he said. He turned to the Custodian.

"Thank you."

Brother Stephanie smiled and tilted her head. We walked across the chapel, down the hallway and out the doors. We climbed back into the truck. I saw Stephanie wave at me from the doorway and gesture for me to roll down the window.

"The container," she called.

"Yeah?"

"It needs to be clear."

“Clear.”

“So the Rainbow goes through it.”

“Not a problem.”

“And old. Old would be nice.”

I thought for a moment, then nodded. I rolled the window back up and turned the truck around to head back to town.

“Old and clear?” Foremost asked as we got on the road. “I’m going to make a guess here. Clear means he belongs to all of Summit, not to any particular lodge or family. Old simply means he’s important.”

“See?” I said. “You are starting to understand things around here. . . .”

\* \* \*

I parked the truck in the driveway behind Sam’s old house. Kelli and Rose, two of my brothers’ wives, waved and then ignored me and went back to their argument. Tom and Bob and Steve, my brothers, walked over as Foremost and I got out of the truck.

“What’s wrong now?” I asked and gestured at the women.

“The usual,” Bob said. I looked puzzled.

“Kelli wants the backyard fence,” Tom explained. “She thinks it’ll look nice around her garden.”

I turned to Steve.

“Rose wants the bushes and the other plants along the fence line,” Steve said. “She’s afraid if Kelli takes the fence, she’ll rip up the plants doing it.”

I studied the plants and the fence for a moment. The brothers waited.

“Tell Rose she can have half the plants,” I said, finally. “And Kelli gets half the fence. The rest has to stay here to go with the house at the auction.”

They looked at me. I looked at the wives. Everybody waited a minute.

“Fine,” Tom said. Steve nodded. Tom tipped his head toward the fence and the bushes.

“But how?” Tom asked. “We still might break the fence and kill the plants.”

“Damned if I know,” I said firmly. “Not my job to figure that out. You want the fence and the plants, fine, that’s how much you can have. How is not my problem.”

“That’s not fair,” Steve protested. “They’re not going to be happy.”

“So? Life’s not fair,” I said. “And tell them if they don’t work together, then neither of them gets anything and it all goes at auction.”

Steve and Tom looked at each other for a moment, then back at the arguing women.

“That fence is pretty long,” Tom said, thoughtfully. “A lot bigger than our garden. Just this one side of fencing would be enough for us.”

“And my van’s already pretty full of plants Rose wheedled out of the neighbors,” Steve observed. “Not room for a hell of a lot more. Only need a few really.”

“I could use some help getting the fence out,” Tom allowed. “I could help you with the plants.”

Tom and Steve glanced at each other, then turned and spat in the same piece of dirt. They both ground it with their boot heels, then nodded to me and walked toward the garden. I turned to Bob. He held his hands up, palms open.

“Your girlfriend doesn’t want anything?” I asked skeptically. Bob was divorced, but there was always a new girlfriend.

“Didn’t say that,” Bob replied. “But Sam’s *house* doesn’t have what she wants.”

“Then why do you look so guilty?”

“She collects medicine bottles, Tony. The older, the better.”

“You showed her the Rainbow. And that gave her ideas.”

“She was at Sam’s family service, Tony,” Bob said defensively. “Remember when

the sun broke out and the light hit the glass? She grabbed my arm so hard I thought she was going to rip it off?"

"You know what happens if anyone messes with the Rainbow," I warned. "You want to face off against the Kadisha, and after that with Mother Lu? The Nacacijin will take you back in the hills, make sure you understand the rules, and weight down what's left of you in one of the pothole lakes."

Bob shook his head.

"I'm not crazy," he said, stubbornly, "but she still wants some of the old bottles."

"Does she know where the pioneers used to throw their garbage?"

"I told her about Outhouse Ned," Bob confirmed. He did not look happy. "She made me call him. They talked and he's coming over before the auction. Says he thinks Sam might have been squatting on a gold mine. Says the pioneers and other people used to throw all kinds of stuff down there. Antique dealers in Minneapolis love that crap."

"I don't want to know any more." I winced, and Bob grinned. I knew his choice of words had been deliberate and precise. Smart-ass.

I glanced at the outhouse in Sam's backyard. I'd seen pictures from when Sam was a baby and from when my Dad was a baby and from when I was a baby. Different house each time on the lot, but the outhouse was always there, in the background. No telling how old it was.

"She's got to work out a way to share with all of us, to make sure there's no hard feelings."

"Ned can dig around? She'll check over what he finds."

"Yeah," I said, reluctantly. "As long as they work on it together, to make sure Ned doesn't pocket anything good. He's got to be done and out of here before the auction starts. And I need one medicine bottle, in good shape. An old one. And it has to be clear glass. And clean."

Bob thought for a moment, then nodded and stepped away. He took out his phone and held it up to his ear.

I watched the brothers and the women back Tom's truck into the backyard. They looped one end of a chain around the tow hitch and the other end through and around the links and bars in the fence. As I watched, Kelli got into the truck and Rose stood back to give her directions.

"Put her in first and go forward slow," Rose called out. "Slow, slow, slow."

The truck's engine came to life. I turned away and headed for the house.

The back door of the house opened and Carole stepped outside. She wore her official jacket, with SECRET SERVICE in huge letters across the chest and back. She saw Foremost and me and headed toward us.

"Ambassador," she said. "Tony."

"It is very good to see you, Agent Carole," Foremost said gravely.

"You were gone a long time," Carole said, and glared at me.

"I was quite well protected," Foremost assured her. "If I remember correctly, you once said Keeper Tony was almost good enough to be in the Secret Service."

"How many times have I saved your life?" I asked Foremost. "Twice? Three times? Almost good enough, my ass."

They both ignored me. I expected that, and I wasn't upset. It seemed comfortable, somehow.

"I understand, Ambassador, but at the same time, the president has made it very clear your safety is now the Secret Service's responsibility. Specifically, it's *my* responsibility. If you would just let me bring in a regular protective detail, I would be much, much happier. And you would be much safer."

"I understand your concern," Foremost said politely. "My own people up on the Ship have told me much the same thing. And I would not interfere with your official

duties in almost all other circumstances. However, this is Summit, and things are somewhat different here—”

The engine on the truck roared and the truck ground forward. The chains pulled and tightened. Rose waved Kelli to hold it, while Tom and Steve checked the fence and the chains and made some small adjustments. Rose waited until they were done and then waved Kelli to go ahead.

Kelli slowly let up on the clutch. The truck inched forward. The chains seemed to hum as the truck strained. The fence stayed in the ground, stubbornly refused to give any ground. Kelli gave it just a little more gas, and the fence bent, and then, reluctantly, the rods began to slide out of the ground. Rose stepped back, slipped, and fell flat on her ass, just in time to avoid getting a metal rod through her head as the truck jerked forward and the fence popped free and whipped through the air.

Tom and Steve ran to Rose, shouting. Kelli killed the engine and jumped out of the truck and joined the rest of the pack.

Rose just sat on the ground, completely covered in mud, and laughed and laughed and laughed.

“Things *are* different in Dakota,” Carole said drily.

“They are indeed.”

Foremost turned to me.

“When will you and the rest of the lodges decide if Summit will go to the Ship?”

“Seven days. Everybody will be here for Sam’s auction. We’ll settle the death gifts, then we’ll vote. Doesn’t make any sense to wait longer.”

“Good.”

“You’re going back to the Ship today,” I said, matter of factly. Foremost’s head jerked up.

“How did you know that?”

I shrugged.

“Your shuttle was sabotaged, and that’s how you ended up here, in Summit. So I know someone, upstairs, wanted you dead. Wanted it bad enough to hire the Synth and send it down here to kill you when you managed to land in one piece. Biggest thing your Council is deciding is whether to bring humans on the Ship. If your enemies are willing to kill to stop it, and you’re willing to risk your life to push it forward, then I figure you need to be upstairs, not down here.”

“Maybe you *can* survive upstairs.” Foremost sounded like he approved.

“We’re not stupid. We might be behind you in technology, but we’re not stupid.”

I turned to Carole. “And you’re going with him, aren’t you?”

She took a deep breath, blew it out, then looked up at me.

“My job is to keep the Ambassador alive. I got my orders last night, after you two talked with the president. I stay with the Ambassador everywhere he goes.”

“Even on the Ship?”

“Even on the Ship,” she confirmed.

“We’ll come back that morning, before the auction.” Foremost sounded like he was trying to be reassuring. It didn’t help.

“Bring me a Synth. Someone who can make decisions.”

“No promises. I’ll be back, but I have no idea what’s going to happen upstairs.”

“Do your best,” I suggested. “Otherwise, you’re going to have to make some decisions on your own.”

“About what?” Foremost asked, cautiously. Now it was my turn to smile.

“Can’t tell you,” I said. “Not sure it will work. But if it does, and Oly can make it happen, then you better bring a Synth with you.”

Foremost opened his mouth as if he was going to start an argument, then he just shut his mouth. I turned to Carole.

"We'll meet you that morning, in the clearing by the cemetery. Get me a message when you're coming down."

"Not a problem."

I shook my head. Carole smiled, stood on her toes and put her arms around me, and kissed me. The smile folded up and was gone by the time she was off her toes.

"I'll do my best to find a Synth." Foremost sounded cautious. "I may have to call in some favors."

"All politics is local," I said, automatically. "Someone up there wanted you dead. Instead, you're coming back alive and the Synth is dead. People are going to ask questions upstairs. Find them and talk with them."

Foremost looked at me and, for the first time, tried a human smile. His lips pulled back from his teeth and the fangs showed, long and curved and sharp.

"Exactly right," he said. "All politics is local."

\* \* \*

Carole kissed me again, and I got all the usual promises to be safe and careful. We both knew she was lying, that there was no way to go into a completely unknown situation and be safe and careful.

But we felt better. Sometimes lying is the best you can do.

An hour later I stood next to the truck on the outskirts of town. A shuttle from the Ship, fresh and not smashed up like Foremost's vehicle, rested in a little pasture between a pair of cow tanks. Foremost and Carole walked into an airlock. She waved goodbye, and the door shut behind her.

The shuttle lifted, silently and effortlessly, no wind, no exhaust, and went straight up. A moment and it was gone.

I stood for a minute. The sky was pale blue with spots of puffy clouds. From where I stood I could see down off the hills, all the way to the big lake. Minnesota was a vague, misty place on the horizon.

I turned and got back in the truck and started the engine. I had work to do.

\* \* \*

I spent that afternoon returning phone calls and texts and emails and setting up appointments for the next day. Laverne from the mayor's office sent over a pile of purchase orders, carefully marked to show which ones I should sign, which ones to deny, and which ones to ignore.

My personal guess was that when the world finally ends and we find out what "42" really means, there will still be some damned clerk who has to stay late to fill out paperwork.

It was after midnight when I left the office in the back of the pool hall and climbed into my town car. I pulled the string to start the engine and drove home down abandoned streets, the Ship and the stars looking down on me.

Sam's house was an old cracker box with two bedrooms upstairs. You reached it using a set of steps that was more like a ladder than stairs.

One bedroom was completely filled with an outdoor TV antenna. I never knew why Sam put it inside the house, instead of up on the roof. The other bedroom held an old iron bed, much too big to get through the doorframe, with big round springs. I had no idea how Sam ever got the bed in the room in the first place, but there it was, topped with a dusty, hard, flat mattress just barely big enough for one person.

With Carole, it was just fine. But she was upstairs, on the Ship.

That night, alone, I lay in bed and stared at the ceiling. The thought of leaving Dakota scared the hell out of me, but the thought of staying was even worse.

Every person born in Summit knew that, sooner or later, they'd have to make the big decision: move to the flatlands or stay in the hills.

I knew the anger and frustration and sense of loss of the kin who left our little

corner of Dakota. I'd seen it and heard it and felt it in the reunions in New York and Shanghai and London and all the other big cities.

Here in the hills I'd seen the alcoholism and senseless violence and shame of the stay-behinds. The mainstream had discovered our unspoiled land and lakes. They took what they wanted, and that left no room for us. We were rapidly becoming strangers on our own land. The First Nations folks had gone through it first, two hundred years ago, when the pioneers arrived. But then the frontier had moved west and the stay-behinds, First Nations and newcomers, slowly and warily worked together, had babies together, made families together. Now it was starting all over again. We knew we could stay and get ground into the dirt again or . . .

But to leave everything behind . . .

*"Change don't come easy to the hills,"* Sam told me once. We were on Summit Lake on a sweltering August afternoon. No fish bit our hooks, but mosquitoes the size of dragonflies took a lot of bites out of us. We slapped at them and drank beer and enjoyed each other's company.

*"But when it's live or die, then the hills will change. Ain't easy, Tony. Won't be pretty. But they'll change, and you'll have to take them there . . ."*

\* \* \*

The next morning my brother Bob and I drove to see Limbo.

The Sun was climbing, and the wind, out of the southwest, had blown most of the clouds away. The daylight actually felt hot on the side of my face.

I studied Limbo's farm as we turned off the gravel on to the lane and up to the house. I knew by the look, crisp and tight, that he kept a good farm, but it still didn't look right. It took me a minute and then I knew what it was. The buildings might be bright and freshly painted, the fences strong and the barbed wire tight, but his fields looked wrong.

All the other farmers around Summit dressed and turned their fields in the fall, rolled the corn stubble and soybean straw back into the soil. This helped everything decompose more quickly, and made it easier and quicker to plant in the spring.

Limbo's fields weren't dressed. Stubble and straw lay thick on the ground. I looked at Bob, then nodded at the fields. Bob shrugged.

"Limbo is the best farmer in Dakota," Bob said flatly. "He has thirty-seven patents for genetic research. If his fields aren't tilled, there's a reason."

"He got his degree at Iowa State," I said. "Then he came back to the hills after school. Why?"

"His dad died, and there was no one to take care of his mom and the farm," he said.

"She died a couple of years ago," I pointed out. "He stayed on the farm."

Bob studied the big white house as we got closer.

"The farm's here in Summit. He's got farming in his blood. More importantly, Beth's here."

"Yeah. But they never got married."

"Before Limbo's mom died, Beth went to college," Bob said. "Limbo loved Beth too much to make her choose between him and her dreams."

"Damn," I said and shook my head. "She's back in town?"

"Yep. Moved back here last summer."

"She knows Limbo loves her?"

"She knows."

"So why doesn't he just ask her to marry him?"

"She belongs to the Kadisha lodge," Bob reminded me. "Word is that the Oya hasn't approved yet."

"Beth and Limbo haven't complained?"

Bob snorted.

"You're talking about the Kadisha. Their Oya made the decision, and Beth is a good girl," Bob said. "You can only dream Pool Hall was so orderly. The Oya is just taking her time, letting them get acquainted again before she gives her blessing. She doesn't want to rush things."

I looked up at the sky. The Ship was a fading clear white against the blue sky as the Sun rose higher.

"I think a lot of things are going to get rushed. One way or the other."

I thought about Carole and how all this might sound to her. I wanted to talk with her, to make her understand Summit, but I was afraid she'd just laugh. She was a New York City girl, born and bred. I'd worked for the State Department, in Manhattan and D.C., for ten years, but I'd never quite understood why people in the city acted and thought the way they did. Things that seemed so simple and natural up here just didn't feel right down in the flats. I knew it went the other way just as well.

"So what does Limbo do now, with the Ship and maybe leaving Summit?"

I stopped next to the tractor shed and killed the engine. Bob looked around through his open window.

"If Beth goes on the Ship, Limbo goes. If Beth stays, Limbo stays."

My side window was open, and all I heard was the sound of the wind through the straw, rustling and cracking. I smelled mud and, just below it, fresh grass eager to rise and grow and start a new year and a new life.

"That's why we're here to talk to him," I said. "And maybe we need Aki' to talk with Beth."

\* \* \*

We opened the doors and stepped out of the truck. I hesitated, but nothing happened.

"No dog?" I asked, surprised. "Every farm has a dog. Something's not right."

"Limbo!" Bob shouted. "Limbo!"

The barn door opened and Limbo stepped out.

He was tall, over six foot, and lean and ropy with muscle. His hair was straw yellow blond, his features classically chiseled, and he had bright blue eyes. He wore an open lumberjack shirt and tight, worn jeans. Give him a Stetson and he'd look a lot like the guys on the covers of romance novels.

"Bob!" Limbo said. He smiled, all perfect teeth, and walked toward us. He grabbed Bob's hand and shook it.

"Long time," Limbo said, half accusingly. Bob grinned and slapped him on the shoulder. Limbo stepped back and looked at Bob. "Money?"

"Damn it, Limbo," Bob said, and laughed. "It hasn't been long enough if you still remember that." Bob looked up at me. "I still owe him ten bucks for a pitcher of beer back when we were in school. If I ever paid him he'd die of shock."

"No risk of that," Limbo said drily.

Bob put his arm around Limbo's shoulders and said something to him in a low voice. They laughed and I stepped away to let them have some time together. I wandered to the edge of the farmyard and looked across the road and out over the fields.

Bob and Limbo came over and joined me. Limbo nudged Bob with one arm and pointed to the neighbor's fields. He shook his head, disapprovingly.

"Erosion," Limbo said. Words seemed to come hard from him. He pointed to his land. "My topsoil stays here."

Bob frowned for a moment, then cocked his head to one side and looked up at Limbo.

"You're telling me the other farmers are all wrong?" Bob asked. "When they dig everything up in the fall, they get a lot more erosion from the rains and the snow melt? And your way saves the topsoil?"

Limbo nodded, then knelt and dug, almost reverently, down through the brush

with his fingers and came back with a handful of thick, rich, black soil. It crumbled in his hands as he worked it with his fingers.

“Better yield,” Limbo said. “Spring plowing.”

“How much better?” I asked.

“Half again,” Limbo said. “Maybe double.”

“But a lot more work,” I replied.

Limbo shrugged.

“Work never killed anyone,” he said. He brushed the dirt off his fingers and turned away, back to the farm. “Give you a tour.”

Limbo’s farm was built to work with an absolute minimum of outside supplies. He used no agricultural chemicals and recycled the manure and other waste products into the fields. He was exactly what we wanted in the closed ecology of a space habitat.

At the end of the tour we came around the back side of the house, and I heard the sharp *tink!* of clinking metal. Bob heard it, stopped, and looked at Limbo.

“You got a dog chained up back here, Limbo?” Bob asked, puzzled. His face cleared. “I remember him. A big black dog. Friendly thing. Slobbered over everything and always wanted up in your lap. Thought he was the world’s biggest cat. Good hunter.”

“Dog’s dead,” Limbo said.

The wind picked up again and the clinking of the chains was stronger. Bob and I and Limbo all looked up, into the trees.

Above us, chains carefully and lovingly wrapped for support, was a large black Labrador. The dog was dried out and shrunken a little bit but he looked peaceful, eyes closed, mouth wired shut with a length of fishing line so it didn’t gape open.

“Why is your dead dog up in the tree, Limbo?” Bob asked carefully.

“Coyotes.”

“Coyotes?”

Limbo’s expression told me he thought I was an idiot, then he looked away and out at the fields and the trees and the prairie. He waved his hand slowly, to encompass all of it.

“They belong here,” he said. He seemed to struggle with the words, as if he knew what to say, but not quite how to say it. “They fit. It was their land first.”

“So after he died you arranged him up in the tree so the coyotes wouldn’t get to the body,” Bob translated. “Why not bury him and put rocks on top to keep the coyotes off?”

“Bury him under dirt?” Limbo looked shocked at the question. He shook his head forcefully and scuffed at the ground with the toe of his boot. It almost looked as if he wanted to cry. “Coyotes just doing what comes natural. It’s not right to kill them over a dead dog. Besides, Buddy was an outdoor dog. Loved it out here. Always wanted to see everything. Now he can, all the time. This is best.”

We walked back to the house, went inside, and sat around the kitchen table. Limbo served us coffee, an experimental brew from some bushes back in his garden. It wasn’t Kona or Blue Mountain, but it wasn’t bad. And it grew in Dakota, not the side of a mountain in the tropics.

I sipped, then curled my fingers around the cup and looked at Limbo. The best thing with him was always to be straight and to the point.

“Things are changing in Summit, Limbo,” I said carefully.

“Yeah,” he said.

“I need your help,” I said bluntly. “You and your lodge. I need the Farmers.”

“The Ship,” Limbo said. I nodded. News traveled fast in Summit. Gossip traveled even faster.

“Limbo, I want your lodge to come with us to the Ship. I will not depend on any alien technology for our food up there. If we depend on others, then the last thing

we'll do is dig our own graves when things break down. And I'm not going up there to die," I said.

Limbo put down his cup. He looked thoughtful.

"Summerdale," he said. I looked puzzled.

"It's a housing development, over by Big Stone Lake," Bob explained. "Two hundred country homes, on multi-acre lots. Used to be the Swenson place. The kids sold it and moved the folks down to Florida. You could hear old man Swenson cursing them out from a mile away. Grandma just sat on the porch and cried until they got her in the car."

I shook my head. I remembered the Swensons. She was a Kadisha and taught Sunday school; he was a Lutheran deacon and a Farmer. None of the kids wanted to farm. I'd met two of them at the exile clubs in D.C. and New York. They didn't look too happy either.

"Heaven's Hills," Limbo said distastefully.

"Latest rumor is the Ahrendsens are selling out, too. Another new development. It's starting to happen all over the hills," Bob said. "Lots of people from the flats, from Minneapolis and Sioux Falls and Kansas City and Chicago. They like the lakes and the hills and the cheap land. They come up here and turn farmland and ranchland into weekend homes. You get enough of them, turn enough land into residential mini-estates and, next thing you know, we're just another look-alike country resort."

"I'll go look, on the Ship," Limbo suddenly said. "Something to think about. Can't go alone, though. We'll need more lodges. Farmers and Pool Hall are not enough."

"We're going to have a vote at the auction," I said. "All the Keepers of all the lodges."

"Can I bring Buddy? If we go upstairs?"

I didn't hesitate. If Buddy wanted to see from even higher up, that was fine with me.

"Yes."

Limbo thought for a moment, then nodded.

"Sounds fair," Limbo said.

"Deal," I said. I stood, and Limbo and I shook hands.

"Come to the cemetery at dawn," I told him. I made a note on my phone to call Foremost when I got back to Summit. "Shuttle will pick you up. Bring enough clothes for, say, a week. They've got food for you upstairs."

Limbo nodded.

"And with that, we've got to get back to town," Bob said, and stood. "Thanks for the coffee. And, Limbo, we'd appreciate it if you talk to anyone who'll listen. We'll keep in touch and see you in town at the auction."

We stacked our coffee cups in the dishwasher, then walked outside. Limbo watched us from his porch, motionless, as we drove down the lane to the county road and out of sight. I glanced at Bob and grinned.

"So, we've got the Pool Hall, and maybe we got Limbo and his Farmers," Bob said grudgingly. "Maybe."

"It's a start," I agreed. "Who's next?"

"Mother Lu and the Nacacijin?" Bob suggested. "We should get the tough ones out of the way first."

"Tough, I don't mind. But her?" I shook my head. Bob made a face.

"She's not happy either," Bob said. He spoke carefully. "We're heads and she's tails. We're not supposed to agree all the time. But we're still on the same coin. Can't have one without the other."

He didn't say anything more, just let me stew on it.

"You think she's right, this time?" I asked. Bob made a face.

"I don't even know which side she's on," Bob said. "You ask her?"

"No," I admitted. "But if I say the sun is shining, she's going to predict rain."

"She might want the same thing," Bob repeated, stubbornly. I nodded, reluctantly.

"She might," I admitted. "But even if we do agree to go to the Ship, she wouldn't want us in charge. She'd want to be the one in the room doing the talking with Foremost and the rest of the Ship people."

"She's got to be in the room anyway," Bob pointed out. "This is too important for it to be just us. Besides, Mother Lu and her people are a lodge. They've got a purpose just like the rest of us. We've got to talk to her sooner or later."

"Let her be later," I said. "Who else first?"

Bob shook his head at me, then shrugged. He pulled a notepad out of his shirt pocket and referred to it for a moment.

"Flipper, just to make sure the Water people are on board. Then Asphalt, the Teachers, the Still People, the different First Nations lodges—"

It was going to be a long day.

\* \* \*

The second day began bright and cheerful and lonely.

Carole's side of the bed was cold and still neatly made. Carole always teased me about how I slept like a corpse in a coffin, flat on my back, my hands folded over my chest. I tried to explain how my bed, growing up, was just a narrow little thing, pushed up against a wall so we could fit more kid beds in fewer rooms. Mom put a footstool and cushions at the end because the bed was too short and I was too tall. I told her there wasn't room to twist and flop around. She just laughed at me each time I tried to explain.

I missed her.

There were three handwritten notes on the kitchen table, one each from a different brother about the lodges he planned to visit that day. I glanced over the notes while I breakfasted quickly on toast smeared with peanut butter and topped with slices of locally grown fresh banana, a special gift from Limbo.

I left the truck in front of the house and drove Sam's town car, an ancient beat up Deere riding lawn mower, blade removed, downtown to the pool hall. The Deere was an old racer from Sam's younger days. It didn't look like much, the traditional green and yellow paint chipped and stained, but the engine roared and kicked me back in the seat when I touched the gas.

Oly waited out front on the wooden stoop of the pool hall, leaned back in one of the old rocking chairs Sam kept out front. I started to wave hello, until I saw Oly had that look on his face. For a moment I wanted to accelerate, to rush by him and keep going and not look back. Maybe all the way to California.

I slowed, parked, and stopped.

"We need to talk," Oly said. "Now."

"All right," I said. Oly shook his head.

"Not out here. Inside," he said. He pointed at a backpack sitting on the worn wooden boards of the stoop. "Bring that, and let's go into the office."

I grabbed the backpack and Oly led the way inside. The pool hall was dark and cool and I heard Chuck the bartender stacking bottles in the storeroom. We walked past the bar and around the tables (all safely bolted to the floor) and chairs (fixed to the walls) so they could not be used in the regular Friday and Saturday night disagreements, and into the office in the rear.

I put the backpack down next to the round coffee table and sat behind the desk. Oly shut and locked the door behind us and sat on the battered green guest couch. A puff of dust shot up, outlined in a bar of sunlight from the window, when his butt hit the cushions.

"Tony, there's something weird going on."

"Yeah?" *Like what else is new*, I thought.

"It's about the dead alien's bones."

"What about them? Did you get them boiled down?"

"Yeah. And then I looked them up."

"What do you mean, you looked them up?" I asked, suddenly cautious.

"I've got the internet, Tony," Oly snapped. "I've got friends who keep in touch with me, on the quiet. And I've still got my sense of curiosity. Drop something like a dead alien on me and I'm going to do a little research."

I remembered Oly from high school. He'd arrived suddenly one year, a new teacher from down in the flats. He'd been a crotchety old coot even back then, but he'd also been one of the best science teachers I ever had. I never heard why he was here or how he ended up in Summit. Oh, I heard rumors, of course. They were all over the place. University, government, hospital, corporation. Someone had kicked him out and blackballed him good. Who did it and why they did it? Never knew and never asked. What happened in the flats didn't matter much, as long as you kept your nose clean in Summit.

But now he was curious. And curiosity . . .

"What made you itch?"

"Everything," Oly said. "About both Foremost and the Synth. I don't like it that Foremost has two legs and two arms. I like it even less that the Synth, a completely different species, also has two legs and two arms. I don't like that they're both bilaterally symmetrical. I don't like that they can breathe our air and hear us and see us and not break out in a thousand different kinds of skin rashes when they walk around here."

"All right, you've lost me," I said.

"It's just too damned unlikely that they're so much like us. Cut us in half, top to bottom—"

"Gross."

Oly ignored me.

"—and our left half and right half are basically the same. Works great for us here on Earth. Most animals are bilateral."

"Why?"

Oly shrugged.

"The theory is it helped our distant—I'm talking half a billion years ago—ancestors move more quickly and change directions faster. Helped us to escape predators."

"Sounds good to me."

"Maybe." Oly sounded skeptical. "But we've got exceptions even here. Radially symmetrical creatures. Spherical. Asymmetrical. Pentagonal, for God's sake. And that's just under the conditions here on Earth. Change the conditions and who knows what you'll get? My guess is that every planet is pretty damned unique. And the evolutionary history that comes along with that is just as unique."

"Oly, what did you do?" I asked.

"I took the Synth apart. Carefully. I over-nighted samples, quietly, to people I know. People who know how to keep their mouths shut. And what do you think I found?"

"Do I want to know?"

Oly just looked at me as if I was an idiot. I was getting that look a lot lately.

I sighed.

"Of course I want to know." The last thing I needed was to piss off Oly. "Talk to me."

"The Synth has a single temporal fenestra, Tony."

Ask me about politics. Or economics. Or how to break down and clean a rifle or milk a cow or find the best restaurant in some godforsaken pesthole in an out of the way country. I'm your man. But temporal fenestras . . .

"I missed that class," I admitted. Oly looked at me over the top of his glasses. I felt like I was back in junior high, admiring the girls from behind when I should have been paying attention to Oly.

"Anatomy, Tony? Paleontology?"

I gave him my best blank look. It's actually very good. I get to practice it a lot when I'm around Oly.

He sighed and looked both disgusted and disappointed. That felt familiar, too.

"It's an opening in the bone of the skull behind each eye, on the side of the skull," Oly explained. "It leaves a bony ridge under each eye. Fenestra were a good place to attach muscles for a nice, strong jaw. Gave you a good bite."

"And this means . . . ?"

"About three hundred million years ago, before the Permian extinction and long before the dinosaurs, there were a group of animals called the synapsids." Oly looked up at me. He shook his head at my blank stare. "Mammal-like reptiles. Terrible name. They got rid of it. Anyway, the synapsids lasted about fifty million years. They've been extinct here on Earth for about two hundred and fifty million years. They were the first animals to have temporal fenestra. They had exactly one on each side of the skull. Dinosaurs—evolved after the synapsids—had at least two fenestra on each side."

"So?"

"Your Synth's temporal fenestra match perfectly with synapsid fossils. If I didn't know better, if I hadn't just spent an hour carefully cleaning his headbone, I'd claim the Synth's skull was a fossil, about three hundred million years old."

"That's impossible," I snapped. "No Synth has ever been on Earth. Especially no dead Synth."

"I took some pictures of the Synth's skull," Oly said, stubbornly. "I sent them off for confirmation."

"Where? And are *you* an idiot?"

Oly shook his head.

"Screw you," he suggested. "I encrypted them."

"With PGP? NSA will crack that in an hour. The Russians and the Chinese will do it even faster. Mossad will beat all of them," I scoffed. "You do realize that what we do here is bound to be under the microscope of every intelligence agency on the planet? Hell, my bet is they need a traffic cop in orbit to keep all the spy satellites above us from running into each other."

"I used something your brother Tom gave me," Oly said. "Remember how the NSA tried to recruit him?"

I remembered. The NSA had heard rumors about Tom. They talked to him and sent him a job application packet. Tom thought that was funny. He filled out the forms and sent them back, encrypted with something he wrote up in an afternoon. When they couldn't crack it, he told them to buzz off. Said he only worked with smart people. Really pissed them off. Made them try even harder to recruit him. They even tried to figure out a way to draft him, claimed national security.

I pulled some strings to shut that one down. Bob helped, too, with his connections on the private side. We might fight with each other, but nobody messes with the family.

Never did hear the NSA was able to crack Tom's application, though.

"All right," I said, grudgingly. "If Tom said it was okay . . ."

"And I sent everything through null island. Used an Almendra address. No one will even know my friends received a message."

"And the people who got the pictures? All good people?"

"All good people," Oly reassured me. "Some of them come to the exile reunions down in the flats."

I nodded, satisfied.

"All right," I said. "So what do they think?"

"They agreed with me about the Synth," Oly said and shook his head. "And they agreed it's too much of a coincidence. The eyes, the ears, the bones? Too much. I haven't got the analysis of the blood and tissue and the microbiology back yet, but I'm going to bet it shows the same thing."

"Parallel evolution?" I asked, feebly.

Oly gave me that look again and reached into his backpack. He carefully pulled out a cloth bundle, the velvet worn and shiny. He handled it with reverence and unfolded it on the table.

There were maybe half a dozen bones. They didn't look familiar, like the deer and pheasant and coyote I was used to hunting. They were definitely not human.

But there was something about them, the shape, the color . . .

"The Synths started here on Earth," Oly said flatly. "They're descended from an extinct species from this planet."

"That's impossible," I said. It sounded stupid, even to me. I just didn't know what else to say.

"Yeah."

Oly gestured to the bones and up to the sky, through the ceiling, toward the Ship.

"But last time I checked, we've got a friggin' assed Ship the size of the Moon hanging over our head. We've got aliens walking around my backyard. We've got one of them trying to shoot you. I've got a dead one down in my basement. So, tell me again, this is impossible? I *know* it's impossible. Problem is, we got the bones of mister impossible right in front of us."

"What about Foremost?" I asked.

"Maybe Foremost is more of the same." Oly sounded uncertain. "Not a synapsid, but more of the same. Probably a species younger than the Synth would be my guess. Foremost seems more like a mammal of some kind. I'd have to carve him apart to make sure."

"No."

Oly ignored me.

"Don't know about the other folk on the Ship. Does make a man think, though, don't it? What if each of the species up on the Ship started out back here? I wonder what that could all be about?"

I sat back and tried to think. If only Sam was still alive.

*Could of. Would of. Should of.* I knew exactly what Sam would say, and I could almost hear his disdainful tone. *Doesn't do any good to fret about it. I'm dead. It's your problem now. So what are you going to do?*

I leaned forward and gestured at the bones.

"Oly, pack them up. Get back to your shack and put everything where it belongs. Keep doing what you're doing."

"What about the Synth? If Foremost brings somebody down from the Ship in a few days—"

"This doesn't change one damned thing, does it?" I glared at Oly. He shifted his wad of tobacco from one cheek to the other, then spat a thin brown stream into the spittoon. He hit it perfectly, and not a drop spilled on the wooden floor.

"The Synth is still dead. What he is and where he came from is something for later. What does matter is that I, as the Keeper of our lodge, associated Foremost. He was under *our* protection when the Synth tried to kill him."

"Aki' killed the Synth," Oly pointed out.

"Which is what I expected her to do," I snapped. "She did her job, and the Synth belongs to her. Now I expect you to do *your* job."

Oly studied me for a moment, then nodded, as if I had passed some kind of test.

He rolled up the bones and placed them back in his pack. He stood and slung it over his shoulder. I had no idea how old Oly was—he looked the same as I remembered when I was in kindergarten—but he was as strong as he was durable.

“You going to tell Foremost what we know?”

“That’s a good question.” I shut my mouth. Oly waited for a heartbeat, two, then shook his head.

“You’ve only been in charge for a week, and you’re already as bossy and tight-lipped as Sam,” Oly complained. He rubbed his hand over his chin, through a couple of days’ growth of old-man beard, sharp and bristly.

“You have a problem with that?” I demanded.

“Nope. Sam always believed in you. He said, even after you left Summit for the flatlands, that you’d be back, that you were the right one.”

“And now?” I asked.

“Maybe he was right,” Oly suddenly looked tired and old. “It’s been a long time, Tony. Time’s coming when I’ll need to take a rest myself. Maybe spend some time with Sam, and have a few beers, drink a little fish.”

“Not yet, Oly,” I ordered. “It’s not time yet.”

Oly nodded.

“But not yet,” he agreed.

\* \* \*

I walked Oly to the front door and watched him amble down the street. He climbed onto his town car and headed back to his workshop. I stepped back inside.

Chuck, solid and thick, his scalp shaved clean, with muscles on top of his muscles, stood behind the bar, his white apron neatly in place, drying glasses.

Gang tats ran up his arms and his neck and into his hair. He’d come to Summit after some problems along the Wild Hundreds in Chicago. Normally, in my old job, I only handled foreign witness protection. In Chuck’s case a marshal friend of mine called me, said domestic protection wasn’t secure enough for Chuck.

I’d called Sam and asked for a favor. Sam gave him a job. Chuck fit right in. Nicest guy in town.

Once, when things were calm and we were friendly, I drank a beer with Mother Lu. She told me about a van full of people who had come north to find Chuck. Sam heard they were coming and called Mother Lu. He mentioned these visitors might be a problem for Summit. Mother Lu promised to see what the Nacacijin could do.

“And?” I asked.

“Somehow, those Chicago people got the wrong directions. They ended up out on some unmarked dirt road near Pigeon Lake,” Mother Lu said.

“It’s quiet out there,” I said. Mother Lu nodded and sipped her beer. “Empty.”

No one ever heard about that van again.

A few years after Chuck arrived, my marshal friend told me it was safe for him to go home. But he did a good job as a bartender, and he’d met a girl, one of the Water people, at the winter Friday night roller-skating parties. Now he was settled down with a couple of kids. He basically ran the pool hall building. He’d struggled with whether to join the Nacacijin or the Pool Hall but eventually he’d come down on our side.

Like I said, a nice guy.

He looked up at me when I came back inside. He tipped his chin toward my office door.

“Everything all right?”

“No,” I said. “Everything is *not* all right. But it’s still our problem.”

He nodded.

“Let me know if you need any help.”

“I will.”

"Beth just called," Chuck said.

"Yeah?"

"She's at the Oya's house."

"Yeah?"

"Terry Voge's there. Beth said you should come by."

"When?"

"Now." Chuck finished the glass, inspected it critically, set it down and picked up another one. "She said you might want to hurry."

\* \* \*

The first thing I saw as I drove up to the Oya's house was Terry Voge's motorcycle parked on the sidewalk, leaned against the fence. The lawn inside the fence was neat and clean, the sidewalk carefully edged, just a touch of spring green starting in the grass. Voge's bike was splattered with mud and dead, brown grass, with scorch marks on the muffler. The bike blocked the sidewalk, and the handlebars marred the white paint of the fence with black rubber scars.

The second thing I saw was Akicita, her gimme cap pulled down low over her eyes, slouched in her own town car. She drove an old, white, beat-up golf cart, the plastic roof dulled, the sides nicked and scarred by loose, kicked-up stones. She was parked on the side of the gravel street across from the Oya's house. I pulled in behind her in Sam's town car, killed the engine, and yanked up the emergency brake.

"Morn'," Akicita said as I walked up to her.

"You know what's going on?" I asked. Akicita shook her head.

"Then why are you here?"

"Dove. She called me."

"Why?"

"She kept telling me you're going to be the new Sam, and I'm going to be your Oly. Said this was our problem now."

"She's crazy," I protested. "We're nothing like those two."

"Oly and Sam?" Akicita said. I nodded. She looked at me, doubtfully. "You could be right. We could be completely different."

"Still, it's good to have you here," I allowed.

"Yep."

I pointed with my chin at Terry's bike.

"What's that doing here?"

"Terry's inside," Akicita said, her voice flat. She straightened on her seat and tipped up the brim of her hat.

"Any sign of Jerry?"

"Nope," Akicita said. "Just the one twin. But where there's one, the other is going to show up. That's how it works with trash. If you leave a little bit laying around, more shows up."

When we were in elementary school and junior high, the Voges made both my life and Akicita's a living hell. They hit puberty and grew up big and strong early, with an arrogant attitude and a mean streak to match. Their mom held them back from school and, once at school, they got held back again. They were two years older than most classmates, almost three in the case of youngsters like Akicita and me. They regularly beat the crap out of the two of us just for the fun of it. Didn't make any difference to them that Aki' was a girl.

In high school, my parents pulled some strings one year and sent me out of town to work for the summer. I came back in late August, after a summer living with my uncle in the Badlands, swinging sledge as an underage illegal on the railroad section crew. When I got back in town, Jerry, the smarter of the twins, came around a corner and slammed into me.

What was funny was that instead of knocking me down, and then stepping on me, he bounced off me and down into the dirt. He came up, screaming with rage, and launched himself at me. This was my cue to turn and run and not be fast enough and then endure a beating.

Instead, when he screamed, I didn't follow the script. Inside my head I heard a snap, and a cold wave blew from the top of my head to the soles of my feet. Jerry seemed to move in slow motion. I took my time, turned slightly sideways, and listened to the voice of Sam in my head.

*"Never use your fist, if you really need to hurt someone. You'll break a finger or a knuckle and then your fist won't be any good. Forget the movies. It doesn't work that way in real life. Remember, the whole idea of a fight is to hurt the other guy.*

*"Use your elbow and the heel and side of your hand . . ."*

The next thing I knew, Jerry was on the ground, and his nose was bent and pushed to the side and blood poured out. I bent over him, and his eyes got wide.

"Never touch me again," I said, my voice calm. "Never touch Akicita. Never touch my brothers."

"We'll do whatever we want," Jerry snarled back. I stood tall and looked down. I realized I was now thirty pounds heavier than him, all in muscle, and about four inches taller, and I was still growing.

"You can do that," I agreed. I bent down again, so close he flinched. "And then I will do whatever needs to be done. And I guarantee whatever you start, I'll finish."

Jerry and Terry talked a lot of trash after that, but it was just talk. They never touched me or Akicita or my brothers. I ignored the Voges, and my brothers and I went to college and jobs and left Summit behind. Jerry remembered, though. When he was sure we were gone, he found Akicita. A day later, in New York, I got a phone call from an old friend. By noon I was on a flight to Dakota. I landed in Sioux Falls, rented a car, and drove north.

I saw Akicita in the Watertown hospital that afternoon. Her jaw was wired shut and she couldn't talk. We looked at each other, and I did something I'd never done before: I took her hand and held it, quiet and still. When my rage was under control, I rested her hand back on the bed and made sure she was comfortable. Then I left the hospital and drove to Summit and found Jerry Voge.

When I was done, they put Jerry in the room next to Akicita in the hospital. He was still there a couple of weeks after Akicita was discharged.

Akicita and I never talked about what happened. But later, when Sam got old and couldn't take care of his place, Akicita would drive over to Sam's house, put the blade back on Sam's town car and turn it back into a riding lawnmower to make sure Sam's lawn was always neat and trim.

"Anybody else inside?" I asked.

"Beth. She walked down the street about five minutes ago," Akicita said.

"What are they talking about?"

"No idea. Beth looked upset, but all she did was wave at me to stay put out here."

"I don't know about that," I said. "Everyone's inside except us. Only polite to visit since we're here."

Akicita nodded, stepped off her town car, and stood next to me. She was a foot shorter and not nearly as big, but I couldn't think of a person I would rather have guard my back. We started toward the house.

"Not everyone's inside," Akicita said. I suddenly realized she was right.

The Oya was the Keeper of the Kadisha. They were one of the smallest lodges but everyone respected them, particularly if you had any problem with a plant or an animal or a person. Folk said the Kadisha people could fix anything that grew or breathed. They also took care of anything that died, kept the Registry, and worked with the Custodian.

Now I noticed a dozen or more people, all around the house. They were doing outside chores, trimming bushes and pulling weeds, but it was obvious from how slowly they worked that they weren't there to do yard work. They looked upset and worried.

"What's going on?"

"Word is that something happened last night," Akicita said. "Someone broke into the Oya's house, into the lodge room."

"Is she all right?"

Akicita nodded.

"Anything missing from the room?"

"No one will say. I'm not sure anyone knows, except for the Oya herself."

"But she's upset, so they're upset."

"Yep."

"What would anyone want in the Kadisha lodge room?"

"Damned good question."

Akicita and I crossed the road and jumped the ditch. When we were across, Akicita grabbed the handlebars of Terry's motorcycle and heaved it off the fence. She stepped aside and let the 'cycle bounce on the sidewalk and slide down the ditch into a mix of ice and slush and mud.

"Always good to throw away trash," I said, approvingly. Akicita grunted. Two of the kin stood nearby on the front lawn, one with a half-grin on her face, while the other just waited, his face a mask.

I pushed open the gate and stepped inside, Akicita next to me. I recognized the kin, Dove and Hunter. We'd gone to high school together. Dove was good with a knife and even better with her brain. Hunter could field-strip a gun blindfolded and knew how to tickle a meal out of a gravel pit. The Oya depended on both of them.

"It's not a good time. The Oya has visitors," Hunter said. He moved to block the walk up to the house. He was tall and rangy, like a basketball power forward. Dove gripped his arm and stopped him dead. She was built like a football lineman, and all of it was muscle.

"The Oya always likes to see Tony," Dove said, her voice low and soft. "And Aki's been a friend of the lodge since she wore a diaper."

"But, Dove, he told us—"

"Orders from a Voge," Dove said, her voice sharp and harsh. She spat on the frozen ground. "Last time I checked, he's not part of us."

"Dove, she said they needed to be alone."

"She didn't scold us when we let Beth go in, did she?"

"That's different," Hunter argued. "She's one of us."

"Let me make you both happy," Akicita said. "The Oya wants to talk with me."

"About?"

"A personal matter."

"Not enough," Dove said and shook her head. "Not enough to get inside by a long shot."

"It's about Beth. And Limbo," Akicita said, reluctantly. She glanced over at me.

*Comes the dawn.* Sometimes I think Oly might be right and I am an idiot.

"Aki's been filling me in about Limbo and Beth," I chimed in. Akicita nodded. She looked uncomfortable.

"Yeah?"

"I approve, by the way," I said. Dove looked thoughtful for a moment, changed direction, looked at Akicita expectantly and waited. Akicita waited, then sighed and continued, reluctantly.

"Limbo has something he wants me to talk about with the Oya . . ."

Dove smiled, slowly. Akicita hurried to add: "And I didn't tell you anything!"

“Does Beth know the Oya wants to talk with you?” Dove asked, shrewdly.

“Not yet,” Akicita admitted. “But she will. Limbo’s got his mother’s ring ready. Added another pair of stones and got it sized properly.”

“What are you two going on about?” Hunter asked, confused.

“Beth and Limbo,” Dove explained, patiently. “But keep your mouth shut. Limbo’s finally got enough courage to ask her, but he’s old-fashioned. He wants the Oya to approve, and Aki’ is acting as go-between.”

“Does everyone in town know about this except me?” Hunter complained.

“Do you really want an answer?” Akicita asked.

“No,” Hunter said. “But if it’s about Beth and Limbo, then it’s all right.” He hesitated one more time, looked at Dove and up at me. “But what about letting Tony in?”

“Summit business,” I said. “I’m the mayor now.”

“Sam’s dead,” Dove said thoughtfully. “So I guess you are the mayor, at least until the next election.” She looked over at Terry’s bike, laying in the ditch. “Maybe you’ll campaign about getting new street drains.”

Dove smiled and stepped aside and took Hunter with her.

Akicita reached behind us and shut and latched the gate. I saw her glance at Dove and her grin back. I realized these two were very pleased with themselves. Birds of a feather and all that. I shook my head and kept moving.

\* \* \*

I heard the voices as we walked up the steps to the porch.

“It’s time for you to leave, Beth. Jerry doesn’t want you here.”

“Go to hell, Terry,” Beth suggested, in a calm, conversational tone.

“If you don’t walk out the door, I’ll put you out,” Terry Voge said. He sounded eager. “This is a private meeting. Just Jerry and me and the Oya.”

“Don’t touch me!”

“And what are you going to do about it?” Terry asked, his voice a taunt. “I’ll do any damned thing I want.”

I turned the doorknob and pushed the door open, Akicita right behind me. I stepped inside.

The Oya sat in an overstuffed chair and faced the front door. Beth stood next to her, face to face with Terry, his hand raised in a fist, his head turned to see who dared to disturb him. I took two quick steps, crossed the room, and wrapped my hand around his fist.

“Don’t do that, Terry,” I said softly into his ear. “Don’t even think about it. She’s my little cousin.”

I squeezed.

Suddenly, in my mind, I was a junior high school kid again. The look on Terry’s face, the sound of his voice, the sneer and the fist . . . I felt gristle and bone move under my hand, and I realized I enjoyed it as his expression changed from gloating and self-satisfaction to plain old-fashioned pain.

“Let him go, Tony,” the Oya said sharply, after a pair of heartbeats, just long enough for a point to be made.

I glanced up and realized she looked tired, but determined. She was coldly elegant, her chair like a throne, her only jewelry an obsidian and hematite necklace with a little piece of bone in the middle. I released Terry and stepped forward past him, next to Beth.

Terry bent over and massaged his hand. Akicita moved next to me, to leave the path to the door open.

“It’s time to leave, Terry,” Akicita said.

“Screw you, Aki’,” Terry said, his voice half a gasp.

“Wouldn’t be much fun for either of us,” Akicita said. “And I don’t much like the suggestion.”

"I don't much care," Terry said stubbornly. "I don't leave until Jerry says I leave."

"Where is he?" I asked.

"He just called," Beth said. "He's on his way."

"You all right?" I asked.

"I didn't need any help, Tony," Beth said tartly. She looked contemptuously at Terry. "I can handle myself."

"Beth," the Oya said, reprovingly. She sounded like one of my elementary school teachers, gently reprimanding a prize student. "Polite. Always be polite. Tony was just trying to be helpful."

"Not a problem, ma'am," I said. "Sometimes she gets an attitude. Comes from my side of the family. I'm used to it."

Beth glared at me. I smiled back.

"And Beth appreciated your help, even if she didn't need it," the Oya added reproachfully. She tactfully ignored the looks we gave each other. "Terry just forgot his manners for a moment, didn't you, Terry?"

Terry said nothing. I closed my eyes and concentrated on my breathing. I opened my eyes and faced the Oya.

"We need to talk," I said.

"About the alien ship?"

"Yes," I said.

She turned to Akicita.

"And I presume you're here about Beth and Limbo," the Oya added. Akicita nodded.

Beth looked at the Oya, then at me. Her expression said she wanted to be right there, in the middle of both conversations, but she also wanted to be invisible. She started to step away, reluctantly, toward the door. The Oya motioned for her to stay.

"Some things always come first," she said.

"Yes, ma'am," Akicita said.

"Aki, we understand that Beth loves Limbo," the Oya said. Beth blushed and ducked her head, but she didn't argue. "I also understand Limbo loves her. And I understand you've been acting as a matchmaker—"

A car door slammed outside and the fence gate opened and shut. I heard Dove's voice and a lower voice, gravelly, answer sharply. Footsteps on the porch, and the front door opened, and Jerry Voge stepped inside.

He was a couple of inches above average height, broad and thick through the belly and chest and shoulders. On him it was mostly fat, where on Terry it was mostly muscle. Other than that, they looked the same, with long, black hair down to their shoulders, thin mustaches, and pale blue eyes. That's where the differences showed.

Someone wrote once that the eyes were windows to the soul, and it showed in the brothers: Terry was flat out mean, but he was easy to distract and he did what he was told. Jerry was vicious, the kind of man who, when a rattlesnake bit him, the rattlesnake died. He enjoyed giving orders, particularly if someone got hurt, and he enjoyed even more the anticipation of their pain. Problem was, he was the brother with the brains, which made him even more dangerous.

He glanced around the room, saw Akicita and me and how Terry held his hand. I saw him dismiss us in his mind and concentrate on the Oya.

"Jerry," she said politely. "Terry might need a ride home. It seems he's hurt his hand."

"That's too bad," Jerry said, coldly. He stepped next to his brother and studied his hand. "Make a fist. Now spread your fingers wide. Again."

Terry obeyed. He winced at the pain, but the hand flexed and relaxed.

"Not likely anything is broken, but we need to double check with Doc," Jerry decided. "Go get in the car and wait for me. I'll be out in a minute."

“My bike—” Terry started to argue and Jerry shook his head.

“I’ll send someone for it. Now get in the car.”

Terry glared at Akicita and me and left the house. I heard Dove’s laugh outside. Jerry’s lips tightened. I got the feeling Dove’s name was now added to a list in Jerry’s mind.

“I’m here for a private talk with the Oya,” Jerry said to me. I glanced at Beth, then at the Oya.

“Beth belongs here,” the Oya said firmly. “And we don’t mind if Tony and Akicita stay.”

“Is that so?” Jerry said. “Now, that just doesn’t sound very smart to me. Some things need to be talked about in private. Some *decisions* need to be made without a crowd looking over your shoulder.”

“They are my guests,” the Oya snapped. Jerry shrugged.

“Your choice.”

He reached inside his coat pocket and pulled out a long, thin leather pouch. He opened it and removed a small, empty, vintage medicine bottle without a label. It was a soft rose-colored glass, maybe three or four inches long. Next to me I felt Akicita stiffen. Jerry looked at Akicita and smiled, a nasty gash that showed teeth and gums and absolutely no humor. He laid down a piece of felt out of another pocket on a side table, uncorked the bottle and shook it gently and respectfully over the felt.

An old, tiny, polished piece of bone slid out.

The Oya went very quiet. All her attention was focused on Jerry. Her face was like old stone, lines carved and hardened.

“What do you want to say?” she asked. Jerry unfolded a piece of paper and read from it.

“Cecelia Syversdottir Satter,” he said. “Born, July 16, 1894. Died, April 7, 1979. Married to John Satter. Six children, lived near Peever, a school teacher, etc.”

He handed the paper to the Oya.

“You can read the rest. It’s all there.”

“You violated the Rainbow!” Beth sounded both frightened and seriously pissed off. “We’ll have all the lodges after you! Tony, you’re the mayor, I—”

Jerry held up his hand. He looked nervous but stubborn. He ignored Beth and focused on the Oya.

“We have permission from one of our own people. This bone is from her direct ancestor. We filled out the forms and went through the Custodian and it goes back as soon as I leave here.”

“You can’t do something like that—!”

“Mother Lu wanted me to pass on a message.” Jerry spoke directly to the Oya. She focused on the paper in her hands, the paper with the name on it, and then up at the rose-colored medicine bottle. “Mother Lu thinks Tony is making mistakes with the aliens and their ship, and Summit is going to end up hurt. Now, Mother Lu, she doesn’t want anyone to get hurt. She doesn’t want Summit to get hurt, so she’s sent me to talk with the Oya and the Kadisha.”

“And you, of course, have talked to some of the other lodges,” the Oya said. It wasn’t a question.

Jerry picked up the bone, delicately, and slipped it back in the bottle. He corked it, put it inside the leather pouch, and slid it back in his coat pocket. The felt went into another pocket.

“Maybe one or two,” Jerry said. “Maybe a few more.”

“Let me guess,” I said. “Mother Lu wants to be in charge of talking to the Ship people. She wants to be in charge upstairs.”

“You’re too damned trusting!” Jerry said. He scowled. “We need to negotiate from a

position of strength. This isn't a dispute between neighbors or an argument about who gets to fish in what lake. This is the real thing. Mother Lu and the Nacacijin need to be in charge of this, not you and your Pool Hall people."

"You think we're too weak," I said. Jerry hesitated for a moment, glanced at the Oya, then nodded.

"What if individuals want to go with Tony and his lodge up to the Ship?" the Oya asked. Beth stirred next to me.

"If a lodge votes to stay down here, we expect everyone in the lodge to stay down here," Jerry said flatly. He wiped the smile from his face and studied me for a moment. "One exception. If Tony's Pool Hall wants to go, well, they're free to go. Surviving, though? That's going to be his problem. Might be kind of tough up there, by themselves. Not sure if it would be a good idea to go. Alone."

"Who says you can give orders to the Oya and the Kadisha?" I challenged.

"I'm not giving orders," Jerry said, his face calm and placid. "Just Mother Lu's opinion."

"I'd be glad to take individuals," I said, "or an entire lodge. You can't stop them."

"You remember when you came home that one time after Aki' got hurt, when you got all high and mighty and told me to listen to what you had to say? And then you followed it up with your fists and your feet? Well, now it's your turn to listen," Jerry said softly. "We'll do whatever we want. Right now, I want you to get the hell out of here. I want to talk with the Oya. Without you or Akicita."

"Jerry—"

"I think it would be a good idea for you to leave," the Oya said.

To me.

I turned to her, surprised and ready to snap, when I felt Akicita's hand on my arm. She shook her head and gently pulled me toward the door. Beth started to follow us, looked back at the Oya, and meekly sat down in one of the chairs next to her, a defeated look on her face.

I shut my mouth and followed Akicita outside. She closed the door and walked down the sidewalk to the front gate. Dove and Hunter waited, their expressions grim.

"The Oya kicked you out," Dove said.

"Jerry Voge kicked us out," I corrected her, still angry. "But the Oya didn't argue."

"You're not in there with her," Akicita said, sympathetically, to Dove. "She's talking lodge business and you're not in there."

Dove's face tightened and she looked angry and ashamed at the same time. Hunter stepped back, out of earshot, and concentrated on the street.

"She told me to stay outside," Dove said in a low rumble. Her voice sounded like the words were torn out of her heart. "The Oya's deciding things in that room. Things I could help her with."

"And she told you to say out here," I said.

"And she told me to stay out here," Dove confirmed.

"We're going to the Coffee Cup," Akicita said after a moment. "I owe you lunch."

Dove hesitated, glanced at Hunter, who studiously avoided any eye contact, then turned back and smiled with relief.

"Give me a few minutes," she said.

Akicita nodded to both of them, opened the gate, and we walked across the street to our town cars.

"What the hell was that all about? Why did we leave? What was that whole business with the bottle and the bone and the name?" I demanded.

"I did for you exactly what Oly used to do for Sam," Akicita said. "I got you out before you opened your mouth, inserted your foot, and got us all into trouble."

"You're not Oly," I said angrily. "And I'm not Sam."

Akicita looked at me and didn't say anything. She took a toothpick out of her pocket and put it in her mouth.

"You're right," she said. "But we're the best Summit's got. Unless you agree with Jerry and want Mother Lu in charge?"

I started to answer, then shut my mouth.

I heard the front door slam. Akicita and I looked up at the sound. Beth ran outside, down the porch steps and past Dove and Hunter. Tears streamed down Beth's face. She ran down the sidewalk and was gone.

"What the hell is going on?" I asked. "What has Jerry got on the Oya? Why did she even listen to him?"

"You didn't notice," Akicita said. It was a statement, not a question.

"What?" I asked. "What didn't I notice?"

"You saw the bone and the bottle?" Akicita asked. I nodded, puzzled.

"That was an old, old bone. Even older than the kind Oly works with. The bone and the bottle of someone who everyone has forgotten. And Mother Lu made the Custodian take it out from the Rainbow to make a point," Akicita explained patiently, as if I was a slow child and she had to use easy words.

"Yeah?"

"Jerry knew the name. And Jerry never studied genealogy in school," Akicita said flatly. "He had no way to know whose bone that was. And he didn't have to ask the Oya to get out the Registry and look it up. He knew it ahead of time."

"How could he know that name?" I protested.

"Damned good question," Akicita said. Her eyes narrowed, and she bit down on the toothpick.

"I don't think the Oya and the Kadisha have the Registry any more. I think Mother Lu's got it."

\* \* \*

We drove away from the Oya's house. I watched Dove and Hunter in my side view mirror. Their faces were blank, expressionless. Dove started to raise her hand, as if she was going to motion to Akicita, but then let her hand fall. They turned away from us, back toward the house.

Akicita led the way and I followed. It felt good for some reason to eat dust and have something real to complain about, even if it was just to myself. A few minutes later, Akicita turned into the parking lot of the Coffee Cup.

The Coffee Cup wasn't much, just two concrete islands with fuel pumps and a small building with big glass windows, blue, dented siding, and a stuck half-open screen door. It was the only fuel station, and the only restaurant, in Summit. Both the fuel and the food were self-service.

We parked and walked inside. Two women, one the mother and the other her daughter, sat up on a small platform, next to a pair of cash registers. Racks of candy, cigarettes, and snacks ran down all the sides of the platform. Beer and soda were racked in the coolers at the far end.

"Hey, Aki."

"Hey, Tony."

"Hey, ladies," we replied. Akicita gestured to the back of the room. The mother nodded absently and concentrated on her controls as a truck pulled next to the fuel pumps.

There was a small table in the back. Akicita set up three folding chairs while I walked over to the waist-high deep-freezer next to the ladies' room.

"Two lunches, or three?" I asked.

"She'll be here," Akicita said. "Make it three."

Through the glass-topped freezer lid I saw frozen hamburgers and bratwurst. Everything was marked both kosher and halal. Like I said, Summit was full of

leftovers from everywhere. No one at the Coffee Cup wanted to offend anyone. It was bad for business. I lifted the lid, took out three hamburgers and three sausages, and shut the lid.

There was a little counter between the freezer and the ladies' room door. On top of it was an electric fry pan. Hung on the outside wall of the ladies' room were a spatula and a tattered, gray cooking mitt.

I plugged in the fry pan, let it heat, and dropped in the hamburgers and sausages. I covered the pan with its lid, then reached above the freezer and removed three paper plates, extra-thick. I flipped the burgers, rolled the sausages, and covered the pan again.

The customer door chime sounded. Dove walked inside. I held up a plate and motioned toward the back table.

We ate quietly and quickly. I expected the food to be fuel and nothing more, and I was surprised. The sausage was full-flavored, and the burger was exceptionally rich. Something must have showed on my face.

"They make their own sausage and grind their own hamburger," Akicita said, and gestured to the front. "They get it from Limbo's lodge."

"We make sure it's good. We help the Farmers with their plants and animals," Dove added. "Limbo gets things mostly the way he wants, then we handle the details. He and the Oya get along well. They're both perfectionists."

"We want both of your lodges on the Ship," I said. "We need both of you."

"And you want to start your own Rainbow and your own Registry," Dove said.

"Of course." I sipped my soft drink. "They go where Summit goes."

Akicita finished her food and took our plates and dumped them in the recycler. She refilled her drink and sat down with me, across from Dove.

"What's going on?" I asked Dove. She scowled and Akicita looked as if she wanted to strangle me.

"We want to help," Akicita hurried to add, and glanced at me as if I was a barbarian who had no idea of how to act in public. She was right, usually I was more tactful, but today I just didn't have the time to be diplomatic. Dove glanced at us and nodded.

"I was at Sam's last night, playing pool," Dove said. She looked nostalgic, as if all she wanted right then was to be somewhere else with another beer.

"So?" I said. There was always someone from each of the lodges around Sam's, just in case something happened and people needed to get out the word. If it was after hours, the call went to Oly or Chuck or me or whoever else was on duty. And, just in case, there was an electric line hung across Main Street, from the top of one of the power poles to another, with a light bulb in the middle. If no one answered a call, the light bulb turned on. Somebody was always watching the light bulb.

I tell you, in Summit, we got things covered.

"I got a call from the Oya last night," Dove said.

"And?"

"She tried to log into the Registry, just after midnight," Dove said. "When she got in, nothing was right. First it showed pictures of little panda bears running all over the screen. Then it showed the Registry but it was all scrambled. Somebody had gotten in and encrypted it. With a new key."

"And it wasn't you or someone from your lodge," Akicita finished. Dove nodded. She did not look happy.

"I got over as fast as I could. We worked on it until this morning. Nothing helped. We got nowhere. Finally, we called Beth."

"The names are all gone," Akicita said flatly. Dove shook her head.

"They're there, all right," she reassured us. "The size of the database is right. So

far as we can tell, no one got into the actual records themselves. But we can't access them. We can't map them to the Rainbow. We have no idea which person, which history, which memories, goes to any medicine bottle in the Rainbow. Everything is locked up. It's as if someone changed the lock to the records room and didn't give us a key."

"Damn," I said. I looked over Dove at Akicita. Jerry Voge knew the right name and the right bottle. Which meant the Nacacijin knew how to get into the Registry, and Jerry had just showed that to the Oya and Beth.

*Shit*, I mouthed silently. Akicita nodded, her face set.

"All that's left is the bone or the note or the tattoo or the lock of hair in the bottle in the Rainbow," Dove said, her eyes focused down on the table. She sounded numb. "What good is that? It's just a piece of . . . something. Everything else, all the story of the person, is gone."

"Who else knows?" I asked.

"No one," Dove said. "Yet."

"What happened next?" Akicita asked.

"This morning Mother Lu called and talked with the Oya. She listened, then told Hunter and me to wait outside. She said Terry Voge was coming over and to let him in, but no one else," Dove said.

"What do the Kadisha think is going on?" Akicita asked.

"What do you think?" Dove flared. "They don't know anything for sure. All they know is something's wrong. Why else would the Oya let Jerry and Terry inside her house? Why would you two show up? Why is Beth crying? It's confusing the hell out of everyone. They know something's wrong, but they don't know what."

"Sooner or later the Oya will have to tell them something," I said.

"Sooner," Dove confirmed. "It's going to have to be sooner."

"It's all aimed at you, Tony," Akicita said, quietly. "At you and the Ship."

Problem was, Akicita was right. Mother Lu knew I needed Limbo and the Farmers. They were key to getting the other lines. And Limbo wouldn't go upstairs if the Kadisha wouldn't go. Particularly if it meant losing Beth.

"Dove, I'm going to tell you a secret," I warned her. Dove waited.

"Jerry showed the Oya a medicine bottle and a bone, fresh from Brother Stephanie, right out of the Rainbow. He knew the name and the kin. He knew everything. Mother Lu wanted to make the point of who is really in charge in Summit," I said. "After that, Jerry kicked us out so he could tell the Oya what she was going to do next."

"And tell Beth what she was *not* going to do," Akicita said, her voice flat and expressionless. "That she wasn't going to marry Limbo if he went to the Ship. Because the Kadisha and the Rainbow weren't going to the Ship unless the Nacacijin and Mother Lu are in charge of Summit."

"Can you get the Registry back? Isn't there something your brother Tom can do? He's supposed to be able to make computers do anything," Dove asked, pleading.

"We'll put him to work," Akicita promised. "Maybe he'll get lucky."

Dove's phone vibrated. She took it out, read the message and stood.

"The Oya needs me."

"Keep your eyes open," I urged. "Let us know if there is anything we can do or if anything changes. And Tom's going to need a username and password."

"And you'll fix this?"

Akicita nodded. I wanted to kick her under the table. Sam always told me to never make a promise you can't keep, and I had no idea how to fix this.

But it worked, this time.

"I thought you might need that."

Dove reached in her shirt pocket, pulled out a scrap of paper, and laid it down on

the table. A username, password, and three confirmation answers were written on it.

Dove stood, gave Akicita a relieved smile and left. I stood, refilled our coffee and sat down again.

*"Alea iacta est."*

*The die is cast.* I had no idea Akicita knew Latin. One of the side benefits of Jesuit school.

What the hell.

I brought the phone to life through one of Tom's encryption programs, slaved in Akicita's phone, and called Tom. I explained things while Akicita listened, stared at her cup, blew on it to cool it down, and slowly sipped.

"Some of the Nacacijin are good with computers. Some of them retired from Langley," Tom said after I finished bringing him up to date. He sounded both like he was doubtful he was going to succeed and, at the same time, as if he was going to enjoy the challenge.

"Do what you can."

"I'll need passwords and usernames."

"Got it. Aki' will bring it over. And Tom," I cautioned him, "don't think Langley-type encryption when you work on this. Think Beijing style."

"Beijing? Why?"

"You know Uncle Weng?" I asked.

"Old guy who runs the bait place down by the Jim? Yeah. I buy worms and minnows from him when we go fishing."

"Well, Chuck isn't the only person up here in the hills who's got something to hide." Tom didn't seem surprised. "A lot of different agencies hide a lot of different people up here. I hid Weng myself. It's far enough away to be isolated but close enough to Minneapolis that people can get in and out in a day or so."

"So we're convenient?"

"And everyone up here knows how to keep their mouth shut." I paused for a moment to let that sink in. "That's important."

"You're telling me Weng's up here hiding."

"He's here to keep him safe," I corrected. "He found out he really liked money, back in Beijing, back in the old days. And he decided he was owed his share of the pie."

"Yeah?"

"From what I hear, things were going great. Until one of our agencies found out about his little side businesses. They blackmailed him, one secret at a time, until he worked for us."

"Let me guess. Something happened, and the Chinese found out."

"Eventually. When they did, the agency pulled him out and handed him to me. I hid him up here."

"Anything more I should know?"

"His full, real name is Leng Wengchiang. He used to work for the encryption section of the guobao, the secret police. When you pronounce that, in Mandarin, it sounds the same as the words 'national treasure.' That's what the Chinese also call panda bears."

"Uncle Panda." I thought I could hear Tom smile through the phone. "And the Registry screen now shows a bunch of dancing pandas."

"Yeah."

"At least he's got a sense of humor," Tom said briskly. "And he's Nacacijin?"

"Yep. His choice when he got up here."

"Got it." Tom didn't sound surprised. "Once a bad ass, always a bad ass. I'll call you when I've got anything."

The line went dead. I sipped my coffee, and Aki' pulled her toothpick in and out of her mouth.

"You know Mother Lu has those codes to the Registry hidden and guarded. She might even erase the Registry if Tom gets close."

"She might." I didn't have a clever answer. "But she expects us to try to get the Registry back. If we don't try, it'll look even more suspicious. And, hell, what would the rest of the lodges think about us if we didn't try? It's a risk, but we don't have much choice."

"What happens to the Kadisha if the Registry is gone?"

"They won't be a lodge any more." I thought that through, tried to imagine the Oya and the rest of them without the Registry, without any purpose. "They'd be lost."

"Exactly. The Oya knows that. She'll do what Mother Lu tells her."

I tried to think of something profound, something Sam might say. Akicita waited. And waited. And waited.

"I need a beer."

"Make that two."

\* \* \*

Carole and Limbo left me messages that night. They were on board the Ship. Foremost had cleared them through the Ship equivalent of customs and immigration. First, they got a tour, mainly for Limbo. Then, meetings. Carole and Limbo couldn't give final agreement to anything, but they'd start the process.

"We can't talk after this, Tony. Some kind of security rules. I miss you, I love you, I wish you were here."

Like hell she did. I saw her face on the message. She was pumped. She always loved anything new and now she was in the middle of everything new. More than that, like in that old song from the musical *Hamilton*, she was in the room where it happened. She had a seat at the table. She was making history and she knew it and she loved it. A hundred years from now everyone would remember her name. If I was remembered, it would be as what's his name, Tony the boyfriend.

Which was fine with me. I didn't want to be remembered. I didn't want to live in interesting times. I just wanted to get things figured out, down here, then sit in the pool hall and have a beer. As far as I was concerned, Carole and Limbo could have all the credit. I didn't even want to be a footnote.

Problem was, in all the history books, in all the novels, everything looked so clean and tidy. *This* began, so *that* had to happen. It was clear and obvious and fell together perfectly.

Bullshit.

Everything in Summit was a mess. I had a dead alien. I had lodges fighting each other. I had people confused and upset and no one knew what the hell to do. So, they expected *me* to figure things out and *tell* them what to do.

Wonderful.

I missed Sam.

\* \* \*

Someday, someone will get a Ph.D. thesis out of these four days. Maybe more than one someones. To me, it was just a blur of politics: breakfast, lunch, dinner, and night.

Akicita and I and the brothers and Chuck and everyone else from the Pool Hall met with lodge after lodge after lodge. Mother Lu and the Voges did the same. We lapped and overlapped each other. We'd politely nod and smile and watch our backs.

Pool Hall claimed the only way for Summit to survive was to leave, that the flatlanders were coming for our land and there was no way to stop them. The Nacacijin agreed. None of this made the other lodges happy, but both of us kept hammering the message, again and again and again.

That was all we agreed on.

Pool Hall (which meant me) thought the best way to survive was to go to the Ship and negotiate. To get ourselves in a good position by making friends and allies. To find a comfortable little corner upstairs, get ourselves set up, and figure out what was going on before we pushed for any changes.

Nacacijin disagreed. Mother Lu wanted to go up strong, figure out the major power blocs, use what the Ship wanted from Earth as leverage, and start pushing for one side or the other. She wanted to be a player, from the get-go, before she even knew all the players and what they were trying to get.

We claimed they were reckless; they claimed we were going to get Summit steam-rolled. Problem was, neither one of us really knew who was right. . . .

\* \* \*

On the sixth night, I got more messages from Foremost and Carole and Limbo.

Foremost was terse.

"We're coming back tomorrow. Carole and I will be on the first shuttle; Limbo will be down a couple of hours later. You and I and Carole need to talk. The Synth are coming with us. One of them is a priest. She wants the dead Synth. I promised them everything would be ready."

Limbo sent two messages. The first was a technical treatise on soil conditions, water availability, possible farming techniques, food storage, transportation technologies . . .

Essentially, it boiled down to:

"Yeah, we can live here. We'll have to work, but we can do it."

I forwarded that to the Farmer lodge, the Rancher lodge, the Pig lodge, and to Flipper and the Fish lodge.

The second part of the message was more private. Even for Limbo it was terse:

"What's going on with Beth? Is she okay? Why won't she write back to me? What the hell is going on, Tony?"

I thought about it. I really did. In the end, I decided Limbo and Beth were both grown-ups, and I'd be damned if I was either one's Mommy or Daddy. Hurt feelings were important, but they needed to talk with each other. Not to me. So I sent a message back to Limbo.

"Forwarded your message to Beth. Keep trying on your end."

And I sent his message to her, with my own addendum.

"Don't be an asshole. Talk to him."

All right, I admit it, diplomacy was not my strongest suit. But sometimes, when you don't know what to say, it's better to just be straight out with it.

Carole's note was more interesting. She was careful. She assumed someone (probably multiple someones) was going to read her message. First, she told me she loved me (which I always liked to hear). The rest of the note was simple and clear and didn't really tell me anything I didn't already know. It was along the lines of: *The weather here is very nice. We had rain today. How is it at your place?*

Except for one line, which I figured was driving everyone crazy at the CIA and MI-6 and FSB and MSS and every other set-of-initials intelligence agency.

"Remember what Sister Virginia always told you."

I remembered.

Sister Virginia was our Latin teacher. She was the meanest and smartest nun in parochial elementary school. She had to be mean because everyone hated her class. She had to be smart because, well, we still had to pass the damn class even if she had to pour it in through a funnel stuck in our ears. And it's hard to teach kids who just don't want to listen.

My problem with her was that she was one of the people who figured out I had

potential. When I got stubborn, she'd whisper in my ear and then go to work. She was an expert with her ruler. My butt and my palm were red more than once. She never would have been allowed in the public system or anywhere near a city. The lawyers and parents would have been all over her with lawsuits shimmering in the air.

But this was Summit.

The result was that I passed her damned Latin class and I still remembered it.

Her favorite sayings were *Cui bono?* and *In Assumptis*.

Who benefits? and Never Assume.

I knew, before he left, that Foremost and I agreed on the most basic point of diplomacy: All politics is local.

What I didn't know was what was going on among the aliens on the Ship. And Carole didn't want to talk about it where everyone on Earth could hear. Since Sister Virginia had been dead for twenty years, it was a good way to get me a message.

*Cui bono.* Who benefits? Follow the money. Different versions of that saying were pretty much standard to any politician. That one I could follow.

*In Assumptis.* Never assume. What did that mean? What was I assuming that I shouldn't?

We were going to have a quiet conversation, away from everyone, when she got home.

I sat up in bed that night. Tomorrow was the public auction and then Sam's death auction. Tomorrow, everything—for the moment—was going to come to a head.

I knew better than to think all of our problems were going to be resolved in one day. Things don't work that way in real life. I firmly expected I'd come out of tomorrow with just as many—likely more—questions and problems than I had now. But at least some things were going to get decided.

I turned out my light and went to sleep.

\* \* \*

Just before noon, we drove out of town, headed east. We went in two pickups: Akicita and I in Sam's old beater, Oly in his new machine.

We all dressed in the same clothes we wore the day the Synth died. Oly was in his burying suit. Akicita wore jeans, boots, a camouflage T-shirt, and her hunting jacket. I wore my standard jacket, pants, and shoes, including my government issue handgun, fully loaded, in my old, familiar shoulder holster. Akicita's rifle was snapped in the rifle rack fixed over the rear window of the truck. She worked a toothpick in her mouth, slow and relaxed.

We went the back way to avoid attention. The concrete road turned into asphalt, which potholed into gravel and rumbled down to dirt. Corncocks, for traction, were ground into the dirt on the top of the hills. That finally ran out and we drove along the trail, prairie grass on both sides, stretching up after winter.

Finally we reached Blue Sky Abbey land, the back entrance. We stopped, Akicita jumped out and pulled open the back gate, old wood with a string of barbed wire on top to keep the cows either in or out. We drove through, and she pulled the gate shut behind us and climbed back in.

We drove around and through a grove of trees. In front of us was a meadow with spring flowers, yellow and white. We stopped, Sam's truck on the right, Oly's truck on the left. We all got out, unloaded everything, took our positions, and waited.

Oly stood on the left, Akicita on the right. I was in the middle with an empty space next to me. A bundle covered by a soft orange and brown blanket was carefully positioned on top of a buffalo hide, in front of Akicita. A larger object, almost as tall as Oly and covered by a tarp, stood in front of him. A third bundle, smaller, made of felt, rested on a blanket spread in front of the empty space between Akicita and me.

I felt the last package in my pocket. I rolled it around, just to make sure it was all in one piece.

"There."

Akicita pointed at the sky, to the south. I looked and saw nothing. Then sunlight flickered off hull metal and two minutes later a shuttle grounded in front of us.

\* \* \*

Everything was quiet. Sunlight, not the weak stuff of winter but something with enough muscle to make a man feel the warmth, danced in and out of light, puffy clouds. I heard a bird warble and cluck in the tall grass. Wind, warm and thick with the smell of spring, brushed my face. All I wanted, right then, was to be alone on some quiet lake, out in the sun, with a cold beer and a fishing rod . . .

The passenger hatch opened. Carole stepped out.

"Damn it," Oly cursed softly, his voice low. Akicita slid two steps to the right, away from me, to give herself room to move. She unslung her rifle and jacked a round into the chamber. I unsnapped my holster strap.

Foremost came out after Carole. He was in full formal robes, brown and black, with gold piping and striping at the collar and the sleeves. He bowed and gestured for Carole to go first. They walked across the meadow to us. The hatch closed behind them.

"Tony, we've got to talk. My God, you won't believe what it's like! It's incredible. We've got to—"

Foremost touched her arm and she stopped, startled. Foremost never touched anyone. It was one reason he fit into Summit so well. Touching was *personal*. People down in the flats hugged and touched too much.

"Please, Ms. Carole. Tony must concentrate."

Amateur diplomats never knew when to shut up. Professionals knew the value of silence. Foremost was a professional.

He looked at me and I nodded. Carole hesitated, puzzled, then checked out Oly in his suit and his frown, and Akicita with her rifle and the blank look on her face. Last, she looked at me and saw how I stood, relaxed and ready, a little smile on my face, just like I always looked when I was on the job and things weren't going right.

She didn't have a damned idea at all of what was going on. She wasn't from Summit. Neither was Foremost. But, suddenly, she was a Secret Service agent again. She knew something was wrong. She quickly moved past me and to the side, careful to stay out of everyone's line of fire. I didn't look, but I could hear her going for Sam's truck. She knew where I kept my backup piece.

Foremost moved up close to me.

"Where do you want me to stand?"

"Your place, if you want it, is next to me. Behind the blanket. You earned it."

"My claim on the Synth."

He sounded like something now made sense to him. I nodded.

"You almost died. That counts for quite a bit up here."

Foremost stood silent for a moment and just looked at me. I ignored him and concentrated on the Ship.

Sam's truck door opened and shut, and I heard the metallic *snick! click* of a clip going in and a round being jacked into the chamber.

"Where do you want Ms. Carole?"

"Behind us." *Where she might have a chance . . .*

"Bullshit." Carole did not sound happy. She was still behind me, and I could not see her face. "If this is official business—"

"Nothing official about this. It never happened. Don't put it in any report."

"Damn it, Tony—!"

"This is Summit business."

"I'm not somebody you have to protect," Carole snapped. "I can handle myself."

"Behind us," I repeated. "Either that, or get the hell out of here. Keys are in the

truck. This isn't your problem, Carole, and I don't need the distraction. Your choice, but decide. Now."

I waited. I didn't hear any footsteps leaving. I figured I was going to catch hell tonight, but that was later and this was now.

Foremost walked to the blanket. He knelt, undid the tie cord on the bundle, pulled it slightly open. He nodded as if he found what he expected, tied the cord, and stood next to me, to face the shuttle.

"Your clothes and Oly's and Akicita's are the same as you wore when the Synth tried to kill us at the cemetery."

"Yep."

"You should have told me," Foremost said reproachfully. "I am not dressed properly. My death clothes are back on the Ship."

"You're a flatlander." I tried to say it kindly. "We don't expect you to know the rules. We make allowances."

The hatch opened again, and a Synth stepped out. The Synth priest looked like a copy of the Synth we killed: short, squat, and grey. She wore spotless white clothes. They almost hurt my eyes when the sun hit them. I glanced over at Oly. He nodded back, just a fraction.

"She's the priest." Foremost said it loud enough for Akicita and Oly to hear. "And the boss."

"Formal attire?"

"Yes. Very."

"Are we on camera?"

"Wrong question. Correct question is 'How many cameras? Whose cameras?'"

"They're watching upstairs, on the Ship?"

"Everyone's watching, upstairs and downstairs. What do you call a cluster of your spy satellites? A gaggle? We practically had to brush them away to get down here."

Two Synth attendants, larger and heavier but otherwise identical, stepped out of the shuttle and followed behind the priest. Under their robes I caught a glimpse of holstered lasers.

The priest headed straight for us. I heard Oly's raspy breaths get faster. Akicita was silent. I concentrated on the wind and the Sun and the shadow and forced myself to relax. The priest stopped in front of Foremost, her attendants a respectful two steps behind her.

"We want the body of our honored warrior," the Synth priest said.

I liked that. No diplomatic pretty talk, no wasting time. Straight to the point. I followed suit.

"Go to hell," I suggested. Her head snapped over to focus on me. "Your warrior tried to kill Ambassador Foremost while he was associated with my lodge and under our protection."

The priest said nothing. She looked at me as if she was trying to decide if it was worth it to talk to me.

It was an act, and we both knew it. I was sure she knew who I was and as much about Summit and the lodges as she could find. Which probably wasn't much. And it probably didn't make any sense to her anyway.

But I wasn't her real audience. Her audience was all the people watching us through all those out-of-sight cameras. They were the ones she had to impress.

And she got right to it.

"Our warrior had a contract. A legal and binding contract. He followed our laws and customs. You should have stayed out of the way and let him do his job."

I paused for a moment, deliberately. I hoped the Synth translation programs got every word of what I said. I did not want mistakes.

"This is our land," I said. "Our customs. Our laws. And our laws say we protect our lodges and those associated."

"I don't give a damn about your customs or your laws," the priest said. "You're nothing but savages."

"Your opinion and your problem, not mine," I said sharply. "Your warrior tried to kill the ambassador, and failed. I tried to stop your warrior, and I failed. We both have a claim on your warrior because he tried to take our lives, and failed."

"And that one?" the priest said, and pointed at Akicita. Yeah, she'd been getting briefed upstairs. She knew about Aki'.

"Akicita honored our lodges and killed your warrior," I said.

The priest focused all her attention on Akicita. Aki' stared back at her, then drew her toothpick into her mouth, waited an instant, and slid it out the other side of her mouth. She said nothing.

"Honor calls to honor," I said. The priest looked back at me. I nodded to Akicita.

She reached down and uncovered the bundle in front of her. Inside was a package of meat, about thirty kilograms, not as red as beef and not as pale as chicken, carefully wrapped in transparent plastic. She made sure the Synths saw it, then re-tied the bundle and stood, the package in her arms.

"Your warrior's flesh. My claim on your warrior."

Akicita stepped forward, and the two attendants shifted position and reached for their weapons. I saw, out of the corner of my eye, Carole bring up her handgun, still not quite aimed at the priest, but ready.

The priest held up her hand, and the attendants relaxed. Akicita held out the package. The priest looked up at her and stretched out her arms. Akicita put the package, gently, in her arms. The priest paused, as if the weight didn't bother her one bit, closed her eyes, then opened them and handed the package to one of the attendants.

"He died well. Take him home."

The priest glanced over at me. I ignored her and felt only the wind and the Sun and the shadows. . . .

"Accepted," the priest said.

Akicita stepped back. I nodded to Oly.

"Your warrior fought honorably," Oly said. He spoke slowly, as if he was in church. "His job was to kill the ambassador. He tried to do only that, without killing others unless they got between him and his target. He did not kill for the sake of killing."

"His flesh failed, but not his spirit," Oly continued. "I offer you his last moment, so you will know how he died."

Oly pulled the tarp aside. Foremost jerked and then regained his composure. Carole made a noise and was silent. The Synth priest and attendants made no sound.

I always said Oly was a taxidermist genius.

The Synth warrior seemed alive. He knelt on one knee, and used his laser to push aside and peer through a tall clump of prairie grass. I could almost swear he breathed, and the yellow flecks in his eyes looked too damned realistic. He looked alive enough to make me nervous.

The Synth priest stepped forward and reached to touch the dead warrior. She stopped, just short, then moved back. She gestured to the other attendant, then turned back to us.

"Accepted," the priest said. I glanced at Foremost.

"He died well," Foremost said. He knelt, picked up his bundle, and unwrapped it. Inside were the Synth warrior's bones, smooth and fresh and clean.

"I hold the bones of your warrior," Foremost said. He wrapped the bones again, carefully and respectfully. The priest stepped forward to accept them.

And Foremost turned to me.

"You associated me with your lodge. The Pool Hall protected me," Foremost said. He kept a firm hold on the bundle.

"Damn it," Oly said under his breath.

"This will be my death gift for Sam," Foremost continued. "From my people, at the auction."

"Double damn it," Oly said softly, and Akicita cursed.

I could not refuse. I held out my arms and accepted the bones.

"What are you doing?" the priest cried out. "Those are ours!"

"When your warrior tried to kill me, and failed, I had a claim on him, under Summit law and custom," Foremost said to the priest.

"The bones belong to us," the priest said, stubbornly.

"You can bid on them at the auction, this afternoon," I said. "I cannot refuse a death gift."

"No," the priest said, and gestured to the attendants. "We want them now."

I felt it then, as I had only felt it a few times. I didn't run. Inside my head I heard a snap, and a cold wave blew from the top of my head to the soles of my feet.

Something showed on my face. Oly looked at me and then I saw a flash of sunlight and realized he now held a long knife. I heard the snap as Akicita released her rifle safety. Foremost turned away from me, to face the Synth priest, and both of his hands suddenly sparkled and shimmered. I knew, from the way he moved, and how the priest and the attendants slowed, that Foremost was now fully armed and deadly. I could feel Carole was ready behind me.

I stayed absolutely still.

"The bones go to the auction," I said to the priest, and repeated, "I cannot refuse a death gift."

And it was all on camera.

The priest and I looked at each other. All on camera, to the Ship and to all the people behind the spy satellites on Earth. Now this was about politics, not just a poor, dead Synth.

The priest held up her hand, and the attendants stopped. She concentrated on Foremost.

"Do you realize what you're doing?" she slowly asked Foremost. "You're not leaving me any choices. If I don't come back with his bones, then I'll have to explain what happened to his kith and kin. They will demand satisfaction from these people."

"I am associated with Tony's lodge," Foremost said calmly. "And he is associated with mine. Anything happens to the Pool Hall, those kin will also have to deal with my people. On the Ship."

"This is insane!" the priest said. "You'd risk war, down here and on the Ship, for these savages?"

"Yes," Foremost said.

The priest hesitated, looked at Oly and Foremost and Carole and Akicita and me. She waved the attendants back.

"We'll be at the auction," the priest said grimly.

\* \* \*

"Then you have to come with us now," I said, resignedly. I noticed Foremost's hands were calm and placid, all the sparkling gone. Akicita's rifle was pointed firmly at the ground and Oly's knife was out of sight.

"I have to return to the Ship," the priest protested. She gestured at the flesh and the tableau. "I have to return what you've already given us."

"Not enough time," Oly said, and shook his head. "Auction starts in two hours. You can't get up to the Ship and back down here fast enough. If you need to get everything back to the Ship, you'll have to send the shuttle up and have it come back for you."

"What about my attendants?"

"They go back with the shuttle," Oly suggested. "You come alone to Summit."

"Delay the auction until I return," the priest said. Oly ignored her and looked at me.

"Carole!" I shouted.

"Yes," she said. Her voice was calm and reasonable and way too close, just behind me. I glanced back and realized she had moved closer, next to me, when we faced the Synth. I also noticed my spare in her hand. I wondered what she had done when the priest moved toward me, and decided it was probably better I hadn't seen.

"Foremost and I and Akicita will go in Sam's truck. The priest will go with you and Oly in Oly's truck," I ordered. "Your job is to keep the priest alive."

"My job is to guard the ambassador," Carole protested.

"Foremost is still associated with the Pool Hall," I reassured her. "We'll keep him alive. The priest isn't associated. She doesn't have any protection. Either you guard her, or she just takes her chances."

"At a death auction, by herself, in Summit?" Carole sounded skeptical. "What happens when she starts bidding on those bones? You can't associate her to give her protection?"

I looked at the priest. Foremost stepped next to the priest, spoke quietly and quickly to her in some language I didn't understand. The priest listened, asked a few questions, then turned to me.

"No," the priest said stubbornly. "No one can put me under their protection. It's not . . . acceptable."

"Tony," Oly interrupted, "this is crazy. Just take the damned bones and give them to the Oya and the rest of the Kadisha, and let's get the hell out of here. The Oya can handle this. Funerals are their job."

"He can't do that," Akicita said. Her voice was different, older and more confident, as if she knew exactly what she was saying and we damned well better listen. "The bones are a death gift. Tony doesn't have a choice. They go to the auction, and they go to open bid."

Akicita was right. I didn't have a choice. Foremost had made sure of that.

I walked to Sam's truck and opened the driver's side door. I set the bones, carefully, on the floor and got behind the wheel. Foremost opened the passenger door and sat next to me, and Akicita climbed into the back. I switched on the engine, put the truck in gear, and headed for Summit.

\* \* \*

Foremost didn't answer one damned question on the drive into town.

I knew he was a diplomat before, but I'd never seen him in action. I'd ask a question, and he'd think and think and then give me a long and thoughtful speech. When he was done, I realized he had talked for ten minutes and not said anything. I tried again and again, different questions and different ways of asking them, and he was very polite and told me nothing. In the end I gave up and just drove.

The streets around Sam's place were clogged with trucks and town cars and people on foot. I edged us forward until I was stopped by a sawhorse roadblock about a block from the house. My brother Bob was on duty. Two more cousins, Shelley and Little Digger, stood just behind him. I rolled the window down and waved Bob over.

"Where the hell have you been?" he asked. He noticed Foremost and Akicita and our death clothes. His expression changed. "You got trouble?"

Akicita climbed out of the truck. She glanced at me and was gone, lost in the crowd as it pushed toward Sam's house and the auction.

"Nothing we couldn't handle," I reassured Bob. "Be ready, though. Oly's behind us. He's got Carole and another alien."

“One of this kind?” Bob asked, and nodded at Foremost.

“No,” I said. “It’s a Synth.”

“Like the one that tried to kill everybody at Sam’s funeral?” Bob asked, surprised.

“Yeah,” I said. “Except this one is a priest. And female, if anyone asks. Let them all drive through.”

“Is the priest associated?”

“Nope,” I said. “But Carole’s going to babysit her and keep her out of trouble.”

“Carole the flatlander? Your special friend? Is she associated?” Bob asked. He kept his eyes on the crowd while he talked, but I knew he and Shelley and Little Digger listened very carefully. I also knew whatever I said was going to be told all through the Pool Hall, and half the others in Summit, by the time we drove the block to the house.

“No,” I said. “She’s not associated. She can’t be. She’s on government business. She owes the flatlanders first loyalty.”

“So she’s fair game?” Bob persisted.

“No,” I said, carefully and slowly. “Pass the word. No one bothers her, in any way. I don’t care if they’re from us, another lodge, or a flatlander.”

“Yeah?” Bob asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

“And if someone does bother her?”

“I will deal with them. Personal. Not lodge business. Personal,” I said, my voice flat and expressionless.

Bob and Shelley and Little Digger all started to grin.

“Really? Personal?” Bob said. “I’ll put out the word right away. Don’t want to mess up something like that.”

“Shut up,” I said. Shelley and Little Digger and Bob all started to laugh. They moved aside the sawhorses and we drove through. In the rearview mirror I saw them put the sawhorses back in place.

“Carole is not associated?” Foremost asked.

“No,” I said shortly.

“Is that safe for her?”

“She can take care of herself.”

“Why not associate her?” Foremost persisted.

I drove the truck onto the lawn next to Sam’s house and turned off the engine. I picked up the package of Synth bones, and when I straightened, Foremost still looked at me and waited for his answer.

*Damn it.*

“If I associate her with my lodge, I’m giving the honor of the Pool Hall to keep her safe,” I said. “But her first responsibility is to D.C. I can’t make the Pool Hall choose between Summit and the flatlanders, in case something happens. Better to just keep this personal.”

“But you, personally, want to keep her safe?”

“Yes.”

“So, this is related to your mating rituals,” Foremost said thoughtfully. His gaze was appraising, just like Sam before he gave me the truck to go on a date. Right then it didn’t matter that I was a grown man, two meters tall, veteran of more stakeouts and fights than I could remember. I still blushed like a thirteen-year-old virgin.

“Yes,” I said, in a strangled voice.

“Interesting,” Foremost said. He opened his door, stepped out, and shut the door. He spoke to me through the open window.

“Miss Carole is very important to me, also,” he said. “You will, of course, be very careful with her. I would not want her to be hurt in any way.”

*. . . and make sure she's home by midnight. . . .*

"I will," I said, resignedly. I opened my door and stepped down, the bones under one arm, and shut the door. "Now, let's get moving. It's already been one hell of a day, and I don't expect it's going to get any better real fast."

\* \* \*

Sam's house and yard were transformed, from a small white bungalow on a corner lot in a quiet part of Summit, into a community celebration. Town cars were parked up and down the street, and across the street on an empty lot. People flowed down the streets and sidewalks and over the lawns and converged at the house.

There were three flatbed semi-truck trailers parked on the lawn around Sam's house. The two closest to the house were the bid trailers. They were covered with Sam's possessions. Foremost and I went to the nearest trailer, just to check things out.

I saw Sam and Laverne's life laid out, ready to be auctioned away.

I saw wrenches and sheets and Laverne's collection of souvenir brochures from all the state parks she made Sam visit. I saw half-filled bottles of bleach and laundry soap, a chainsaw, and Sam's second-favorite shotgun, a double-barrel, unloaded and with the chamber cracked open. Each item was separated slightly from the one next to it, so people would know what would be in each bid.

"You must sell it all?" Foremost asked, subdued.

"No," I said. "We could keep it, but why? We've got what's important and what we're going to use. The rest is just stuff."

"It doesn't carry memories?" Foremost asked.

"Of course it does," I said, exasperated. "But if I see someone on the street wearing one of Laverne's old necklaces, well, it's like I see a little piece of Laverne. And the necklace picks up more memories when it's used. Hell of a lot better than sticking it in a drawer and forgetting about it until I die. Then someone else will throw it away, and Laverne's memories really will die."

An ice cream truck was parked at one corner of Sam's lot. Tinny music played through speakers mounted on the roof, and the truck was surrounded by children, shouting and running and jumping up and down. Parents handed out money and grandparents held babies. Two servers worked as fast as they could, scooping out cones and cups and shakes and malts and sundaes. They looked frantic, but they had grins plastered on their faces.

Foremost and I let the crowd move us, past the ice cream truck and down the street. On the other corner, farther from the house, was a barbecue tent run by the local church council. They served beef, Texas-style, on one side, and pork, North Carolina-style, on the other. The smell made my mouth water, and I closed my eyes for a moment and let the rich smell pull the last of winter out of my bones.

"Hungry?"

I opened my eyes and saw Carole standing in front of me. The Synth priest stood just behind her, her attention totally focused on a plate of half-eaten barbecue, sauce smeared over her teeth and tendrils. But, mostly, I saw Carole. Her hair was loose, and there was a dot of mustard at the corner of her mouth. She looked beautiful.

"Yes, we are hungry," Foremost said, when I didn't answer.

Carole handed me a paper plate of barbecue, Texas on one side, Carolina on the other, with rice and a fork in the middle, and a plastic cup of beer.

"You don't work for the government anymore, so you can have a beer with lunch," Carole said. She turned to Foremost and offered him an open Mason jar of moonshine, brilliant fish scales in a shifting pattern at the bottom of the jar. "Ambassador, if I remember correctly, alcohol is food for you. Flipper said this was his special blend, just for you. He pulled the fish skeleton out personally."

"Bullhead?" Foremost asked, hopefully.

“Bullhead,” Carole confirmed.

“Thank you,” Foremost said fervently. He took the jar and helped himself to a long sip. When he was done he glanced at me and delicately belched. I nodded approvingly.

Carole led us to one of the wooden picnic tables next to the barbecue tent. We sat and concentrated on eating and drinking our lunch. My brother Steve saw us and sat next to us, my niece Elizabeth on one side, my nephew Daniel on the other. Foremost showed them his claws and slid them in and out, which seemed to interest Steve as much as it did the kids.

I finished my plate, and Foremost finished his jar. I put the plate in the trashcan and retrieved Carole’s deposit on the mason jar from the drink tent people. I sat back at the table, next to Carole, while Steve and Foremost played with the kids. The Synth priest stayed slightly apart from all of us and watched and said nothing.

“What’s next?” Carole asked.

“They are,” I said.

Mother Lu stood beside the barbecue tent. She was tall for a woman, almost six foot, lean and wiry, with gray hair pulled back and tied out of the way. I caught her eye and nodded, and she nodded back. She leaned over and said something to a man and a woman, Nacacijin, in front of her. They stepped ahead and began to make a path so she could walk through the crowd toward the back of the yard. A moment later, when the crowd around them thinned, I saw her again, with the Voge brothers.

“Trouble,” I said to Carole. “Trouble is what’s next.”

\* \* \*

Foremost and I headed for the back of Sam’s lawn, toward the death gift trailer. Bob was there, and he and Tom and Limbo and Flipper kept the crowd back and shooed away the kids. Death gifts were laid around the edge of the trailer, with the center of the trailer left clear for me.

Each gift was carefully arranged according to an old protocol known only by the lodge councilors. Oly was at the end of the trailer, Akicita next to him. Oly would comment and point, and Akicita wrote everything down in a notebook with a stub of pencil.

“Tradition passes on,” Mother Lu said. She stood next to me, her voice a soothing soprano, her eyes fixed on Oly and Akicita. I glanced at Mother Lu, saw the Voges on the other side of her, then focused back on the trailer.

“Talk?” I asked.

“Talk,” Mother Lu agreed. I stepped slightly away from Foremost and gestured for him to stay behind. Mother Lu did the same to the Voges.

“Is your death gift up there?” I asked in a low voice.

“On the far side,” Mother Lu said, and pointed. I saw her gift, a conch shell, set on top of an offering blanket.

“A summons?” I asked, surprised. Mother Lu nodded.

“One call for help, no questions asked. As long as it isn’t against our lodge, we’ll do whatever the owner asks.”

She saw the look on my face and shook her head.

“No, that’s not a way out, Tony. Even if, somehow, you end up with the shell, I will not answer a summons to return the Oya’s key to the Registry. That would be against our lodge.”

*My lodge. Your lodge. Our lodges . . .*

“This isn’t good, Mother Lu. Sam told me once that Summit needed the Nacacijin as a safety valve, as a backup in case the Pool Hall couldn’t get the job done. He also said you were a good home for all the different people who didn’t quite fit in anywhere else.” I kicked at the ground, and shook my head. “But this. With the Registry and everything? This isn’t good.”

"Sam admired us, in his own way," Mother Lu admitted. "He told me that, when he was young, he seriously considered joining us. In the end, he chose the Pool Hall, but it was a close decision. He said there was a time for one lodge, and a time for the other, to lead Summit."

"Mirror, mirror, on the wall," I murmured to myself. Mother Lu smiled.

"Exactly."

"And the Oya and the rest of the Kadisha?"

"Are caught in the middle," Mother Lu said regretfully. "She is, right now, only a tool to force a decision."

"You believe Summit should stay down here."

Mother Lu shook her head.

"You misunderstand. You and I both believe Summit needs to go on the Ship. The problem is, I don't believe your lodge is the right one to lead us once we get there."

I studied Mother Lu for a moment, then turned slightly to face the trailer and the death gifts. I spoke slowly.

"You believe we need to go with our guard up, on edge to gain every advantage. You believe we can't trust any of the aliens, and the only way to be safe is to discover all their weaknesses and play them against each other."

Mother Lu seemed surprised.

"You *do* understand."

I nodded.

"Understanding is my lodge's job. I understand what you're saying, but I don't agree. I believe the best way to succeed on the Ship is for the aliens and ourselves to work together. I will be wary, but I will consider the aliens as potential friends, not enemies, until they prove otherwise."

"You're wrong." Mother Lu shook her head. "You trust too much. You'll get us all killed."

"It's my job to make sure I'm right. It's your job to keep me honest and to be ready in case I'm wrong."

I reached out and offered my hand. We shook.

"Enjoy the auction."

I walked forward and left Mother Lu behind. I ducked under the police tape and went to Oly and Akicita.

They stood next to the final death offerings, at the back edge of the trailer. I watched as they carefully rearranged several offerings.

"You got them?" Oly asked. I handed him the package of Synth bones. He took them, unfolded the fabric to examine the bones, then carefully placed them on the blanket laid out for them on the trailer.

"Foremost is next to last?" I asked, surprised at where Oly placed the bones.

"Seniority rules," Akicita explained. "Farmers go first, same as always."

"But we did move things around a little," Oly admitted as Akicita spread an empty display blanket on the trailer.

"That's for the Kadisha," Oly said, indicating the empty blanket. "Last three are Mother Lu, Foremost, and then the Oya to finish everything."

The various Keepers stepped forward and either placed an offering on their blanket or handed it to Oly or Akicita. I waited for Beth or Dove or the Oya herself to place an offering gift on the empty Kadisha blanket. After a few minutes I realized it was going to stay empty.

"Damn it," I swore. "Tell me there's a mistake."

"No mistake," Akicita said. "Tom couldn't get into the Registry. It's locked up tight."

"Every Keeper brings a death offering when another Keeper dies. It's how we keep the peace," I said.

“Don’t tell me the law,” Oly snapped. “Tell the Oya.”

Akicita shook her head.

“If their lodge doesn’t run the Rainbow, then they don’t have a purpose. She doesn’t have anything to put up as a death offering.” Akicita sounded sure of herself, not just a young person explaining rules she didn’t really understand. She pointed over at the Oya and the rest of them, Beth and Dove and Hunter, clustered around her. “They don’t believe they’re a lodge any more. She doesn’t believe she’s a Keeper. And if you’re not a lodge and she’s not a Keeper, then what the hell are you?”

I glanced over at the Kadisha. They milled around, no discipline, no order, with the Oya in the middle, her head down, her eyes staring at the ground. I looked over at the Nacacijin. Mother Lu was impassive. Jerry smiled.

“We can’t hide an empty blanket,” I said to Oly. He nodded.

“So what are you going to do about it?”

I didn’t answer. The Synth priest wanted a war, Mother Lu wanted to take over Summit, the Oya and her lodge were about to dissolve, and Limbo and Beth were never going to get together. Everything was going to hell, and everyone wanted me to make it right. Now I understood why Sam said only an idiot wanted to be a Keeper.

Behind me I heard the auctioneer start to warm up the crowd for Sam’s household goods auction. Bob waved for me to join the rest of the family at the bid trailers.

“It gets worse,” Akicita said as I turned to walk toward the bid trailers. “When the other Keepers see the Kadisha aren’t a lodge anymore, they’re going to wonder if Mother Lu is in charge now. And we have the vote on the Ship right after the death offering auction.”

\* \* \*

The auctioneer for Sam’s household and effects stood in the empty spot in the middle of the first bid trailer, high above the crowd. He spoke into an old-style microphone, like a sugar cone with a big black bulb of ice cream stuck on top. His daughter and son-in-law stood on either side of him. Their job was to hold the bid items up high, so everyone in the crowd could see them, and help the auctioneer catch bids from the crowd.

“Each one of these things is a treasure,” he announced, and his voice boomed across the crowd. He picked up one of Laverne’s artworks and held it up high so the crowd got a good view. It was a crocheted pattern, yellow and gold like a sunflower. In the middle of the pattern was the snipped out face of a plastic baby doll, the open eyeholes and mouth staring at us. Carole, next to me, shook her head. I looked down at her and shrugged, palms up.

“She liked to do them,” I said, apologetically. “Sam and I never understood it, but they made her happy. Always creeped me out.”

The auctioneer did an elaborate double-take, as if he hadn’t seen the pattern before. He shook his head and carefully put it back down.

“To someone,” he said. The crowd roared laughter.

“And we’re going to give you a chance to buy a treasure. We’re going to sell it all,” he said, and waved his arm to encompass everything on both trailers. He bent over and lowered his voice and turned in a slow circle, to encompass the entire crowd.

“Be smart. Bid high, and bid often. We’re going to move all this, and we’re going to move it fast. If you wait, it’s going to be gone. Some of it is junk, and some of it is going to be worth a lot more than what you pay,” he said. “That is, if you get your bid in.”

He stood up straight, stepped back, and pointed to his daughter.

She promptly picked up Laverne’s crochet. Next up for sale was a pair of antique duck decoys. I saw a woman across the way, a folk art dealer I recognized from Minneapolis. She saw Laverne’s artwork and got a determined look on her face. A few

bodies down I saw a man I didn't recognize, but who wore a light jacket with a duck in full flight emblazoned on the upper left breast. His attention was locked on the decoys.

"One!" the folk art bidder called out. The crowd was silent.

"Going once," the auctioneer's daughter said. She held the pattern higher. "Such a good deal. Someone, give me another bid. Come on, another bid? Going twice—"

The auctioneer stepped forward on the stage, touched his daughter on the shoulder. He reached down, picked up the duck decoys, put them in his daughter's other hand.

"These two go together!" the auctioneer declared. "You buy one, you get them both. If you don't want one, well, that's your problem. To get the one you want, you've got to take the other. And if I see anybody talking to another bidder, getting together? Well, then, I think I'll just add a couple more pieces to the bundle, get in a few more bidders, make it even more interesting. Get my drift?"

Art lady and duck man looked at each other. She shrugged. He nodded, respectfully. They both turned back to focus on the auctioneer.

"Ten!" duck man said.

"Fifteen!" folk art said.

"And let the bidding begin," the auctioneer said, a big grin on his face.

\* \* \*

An hour later both bid trailers were empty.

I paid the auctioneer and made sure everything was fine with the charity and ice cream people as they shut down the food. A half hour later they were gone. A few minutes later the last flatlanders picked up their purchases and headed out of town.

I walked over and stood in front of the tape. I glanced around at Oly and Akicita and nodded. Oly barked out an order, and Bob and Tom and Limbo and Flipper cut the police tape and rolled it up so people could get in close. Pool Hall people carefully lifted away the tarps and folded them away. I stepped up and into the middle of the trailer.

Around me, laid out along the edge of the trailer, were death gifts from each Keeper of a lodge. They honored Sam, Keeper of the Pool Hall lodge. My first official task, as new Keeper of Pool Hall, was to auction these gifts.

*"This is one of the biggest jobs we do," Sam told me, when I assisted him at my first death gift auction. "The Keeper of our lodge is always the auctioneer, and no bidder is allowed to bid money or anything like it."*

*"What do they bid?" I asked, puzzled.*

*"Whatever else they want." Sam shrugged. "It's our job to make sure it's the right whatever and it goes to the right person . . ."*

The crowd was much smaller now and it was only Summit people, except for the Synth priest, Carole, and Foremost. Carole and Foremost stood together. The Synth priest was off to the side.

Each lodge was separate from the other, with the Keeper, Councilor, and Successor in front, the senior members quietly behind them. I saw Limbo and the Farmers, Flipper and the Water, Mother Lu and the Nacacijin, and all the others.

Beth, as Councilor of the Kadisha, stood on one side of the Oya. To my surprise, Dove stood on the other side, in the Successor position. I looked at Dove and she looked up at me and blushed. I nodded thoughtfully.

The Kadisha, upset and disorganized, moved restlessly behind Dove and Beth. I saw members whisper to each other and point at their empty death gift blanket. They seemed puzzled and frightened and lost. The Oya stared ahead, her eyes unfocused, and ignored everything and everyone. Her necklace seemed to sag on her neck.

Beth was still and quiet and pale. Limbo half-turned so he could see her. The gap

between them, only a few meters of short grass, seemed one hell of a lot bigger.

Oly stood on one side of me, Akicita on the other. I held up my hands and the crowd went silent.

“Sam is dead,” I said. “He was Keeper of the Pool Hall.”

“Sam is buried,” Oly said. “I was Councilor of the Pool Hall. I confirm Tony is now Keeper. I confirm Akicita as his Counselor.”

“Every lodge has brought a death gift for Sam.” Akicita’s voice carried across the lawn. “These gifts honor Sam, and bring together the lodges of Summit.”

“Let the auction begin,” I said. I moved sideways to stand directly behind Limbo’s gift.

Limbo stepped forward and picked up his death gift. He handed it to me and I held it high so everyone could see. The gift was stalks of oats and wheat and corn and rye, tied together with a long stalk of prairie grass.

“The Farmers will create a new plant, combining the best from each of these grains,” Limbo said. “This plant will fit into whatever environment the winner desires. This is our death gift to Sam.”

“Bidding is open,” I said to the crowd.

Tinker, from the Mechanics, stepped forward. She was short and slim, her fingers permanently stained by grease and oil.

“We bid repair and improvement of any machinery,” she said.

She looked up at me, then over at Mother Lu, and I winced. If Sam was alive, I knew she would have only paid attention to him. Problem was, by now everyone knew there was a power struggle between the Pool Hall and the Nacacijin. I expected most of the lodges would make sure they were on the right side of both of us, at least until they were forced to choose sides.

“Anything you want. We’ll analyze it, fix it, make it do what you want,” Tinker said.

*Like a Ship’s life support systems*, I thought.

“Accepted,” I said. Akicita wrote down the winning bid. Tinker walked to the trailer, checked what Akicita had written, signed the paper, and took the grain stalks.

Tinker didn’t go back to her line. Instead, she walked over to Flipper and the Water lodge. Flipper stood rigid, his folk tight together behind him.

“This is for you,” Tinker said to Flipper, and held out the gift. “We never meant to spill oil and grease into your lake.”

“There were new fish in that water,” Flipper said, his voice carefully neutral. “First generation fish we had just designed. A lot of people suffered because those fish died.”

“I know,” Tinker said, regretfully. “I can’t change what happened. All I can say is it won’t happen again. And offer you a new plant to help your next generation of fish.”

The Water Line stirred restlessly and glanced at each other. Flipper thought for a moment, stroked his chin, and nodded.

“Accepted,” Flipper said. Tinker grinned and Flipper nudged his Councilor, who offered Tinker a jar full of fish moonshine. Tinker sipped politely and handed the glass to Flipper, who also sipped. Both the Mechanics and the Water people relaxed and smiled.

“Next item,” I said, and moved sideways to stand behind another blanket.

\* \* \*

A half hour later, we were almost at the end of the auction. Three items were left: Mother Lu’s conch shell, Foremost’s bones, and the Kadisha’s empty blanket. I looked at all of them and touched Akicita on the shoulder.

“You do Mother Lu, Aki’. I’m going down to bid.”

“Luck,” Akicita said. She glanced at Mother Lu and looked worried.

"Yeah," I said.

I walked down the steps and over to stand at the front of our line. My brothers were in the front row behind me, Chuck and everyone else tucked behind them.

Oly shuffled next to the Nacacijin death gift. Mother Lu stepped forward and picked up the conch shell.

"This symbolizes a call for help."

She blew gently into the shell and a low, piercing moan spread out. She held the tone steady for a moment, then slowly let it drift away.

"You call, and we'll be there." She handed the shell to Akicita and stepped back.

"Bidding is open," Akicita said.

I stepped forward while everyone stiffened behind me.

"We bid forgiveness," I said.

"You want to be forgiven for something you've done?" Akicita asked, puzzled. I shook my head.

"I offer to forgive someone else, person or lodge, for what they've done to me and my lodge," I said.

"Does anyone need this forgiveness?" Akicita asked the crowd. The Keepers and Councilors all looked at each other uneasily. There was a great deal of foot shuffling and low whispers.

"Accept the bid," Mother Lu called out.

The crowd was silent. I realized I was sweating, even though the day was getting older and colder.

"Why?" Akicita asked. Mother Lu smiled and shook her head. It seemed obvious to her.

"True forgiveness is a rare gift," Mother Lu explained. "Any person or lodge can always use forgiveness. Nacacijin and Pool Hall might fight and disagree, but no one ever doubts that each of us does what we think is right. Sometimes, in the end, one of us is right, sometimes the other. Forgiveness after things are decided? Priceless."

Akicita thought for a moment, glanced at both of us, and nodded. She picked up the conch shell.

"Accepted."

I stood quiet for a moment. Mother Lu studied me as if she was trying to figure out what I was doing. I carefully kept my face smooth and expressionless.

I climbed up the ladder and resumed my position as auctioneer in the middle of the trailer. Akicita looked grateful and stepped back. I shifted to the side and stood directly behind Foremost's death gift blanket.

Foremost and Carole stood together in front of the blanket, Foremost slightly forward, Carole behind him and to his right, in a Councilor's traditional position. The Synth priest stood a few steps away from Foremost, a line by herself.

I pointed to the Synth bones and gestured to Foremost. Foremost stepped forward and picked up his death gift. There was a murmur and low rumble from the crowd.

"These are the bones of the Synth who attempted to kill myself and Keeper Tony," Foremost said. "The Synth who was killed by Councilor Akicita. These bones are my death gift to Sam."

He waited for a moment, turned, walked back to his place by Carole.

"Bidding is open," I said.

The Synth priest stepped forward. She seemed short and slim among the taller and broader humans, but her every movement was confident and economical, with no wasted motion. She reminded me of a killer animal, a hunter: all business, totally focused, and indifferent to anything except complete and unconditional success.

"These are our bones, and we want them back," she said to Foremost. "What do you want for them?"

Foremost stared at the Synth.

“Your vote. In the conference,” Foremost said.

“To take these savages on board the Ship? No.”

“Not even for one of your own?” Foremost asked. The Synth moved toward Foremost. It was a quick move, a jerk and a step.

I stepped forward.

“Enough! Sam’s auction isn’t about setting things up for a fight. That doesn’t honor Sam.”

I turned to Foremost.

“You can’t trade the bones for a vote. That’s out.”

I turned to the Synth.

“And you can’t bid directly for the bones. You’re not recognized as a lodge. Somebody else is going to have to bid. If you want to work out a deal with them afterward, that’s fine. But nothing directly with Foremost.”

I stepped back into position. I’d done my best.

“Fine,” the Synth priest said. She turned to face everyone, her back deliberately to Foremost.

“One of you will bid and win the bones. Whoever does, I’ll buy them. I’ll pay your kind’s greatest desire,” she said. It came across as a sneer.

“Money. As much money as you want.”

The crowd was silent. Even if Summit voted to go to the Ship, only a few from each lodge would go. Most people never wanted to leave home. And Summit wasn’t a rich place. Everybody needed something. Kids who needed to go to college. Old people who needed help. As many other needs as there were problems and people. I saw the different Keepers and Councilors look at each other, and then at the other lodges. I saw desires and hopes and dreams chase across their faces.

I imagined a Summit where every person was suddenly rich. No work, no sweat, just everything we wanted dropped in our lap. No one would have to suffer through another bone cold winter with not enough heat, or sweat through a scorching summer. No one would have to spend a year coaxing a crop to life or a summer mucking out stalls in a barn full of cows. No one would spend their days behind a counter, or trapped in a job they hated. We could each be completely happy.

And alone. Just like the exiles, outside Summit, were alone at their parties in Chicago and New York and London and Los Angeles. Just like I had been alone, outside Summit.

I imagined it, and I didn’t like it. I saw the death of Summit. I looked over and saw Mother Lu. She frowned and shook her head. She didn’t like this either.

And suddenly I knew exactly what I had to do.

I turned to the Kadisha.

“What is your bid for these bones?” I asked, my voice pitched so everyone in the crowd heard me.

The Oya looked up at me, startled.

“We don’t have anything to bid,” she said slowly, and unconsciously touched the totem bone in her necklace.

“Yes, you do.”

I stepped forward, reached into my pocket and pulled out that antique, clear as artesian water from a pothole lake, medicine bottle Outhouse Ned had mucked up from Sam’s outhouse. Inside was a small bone, a tiny fragment, a chip off the Synth. I walked over to the Kadisha’s spot and placed the bottle in the exact center of their empty blanket. I looked up at the Oya. I felt the rest of Summit watching me.

“The Synth died in Summit. This is our memory of him. You’re the Oya of the Kadisha. The Rainbow and the Registry belong to you and now this belongs to you.

Bid this memory for the bones."

I turned to face the crowd.

"And the Pool Hall line says the Synth belongs here. We'll bury him in the Rainbow, and we'll rebuild the Registry," I said. I stared at Mother Lu, defiantly, then back at the Oya and the rest of the Kadisha.

The Oya reached out, then let her hand drop.

"But the Registry is lost. Their stories are gone. All we have left are pieces of bone in little glass bottles. . . ."

My brother Tom shook his head and spoke deliberately. He reached, picked up the memory bottle, and forced it into the Oya's hand.

"Bullshit! Bid this. Put it in the Rainbow. Start the memories again. As for the others, it may take time, but we'll get them back. If we can't open the Registry, we'll talk to every damned person in Summit until we know everyone in the Rainbow, all of their history, all of their stories. We'll build it back for you."

The Synth priest walked over to the medicine bottle. She looked at it, studied the bone inside.

"That's a Synth bone?"

"Yes," Oly confirmed. "I cleaned it myself."

"We want it back," the Synth priest said. She sounded puzzled and uncertain. "And why isn't it with the others?"

"It doesn't belong with the others."

The Oya spoke firmly. She straightened and stepped forward. Her line heard her voice and, almost on automatic, formed up behind her.

"What the ambassador has are bones from a body. What's inside that tiny bottle is more than a bone. It's a little piece of a person, a reminder, a pointer to his story in Summit."

The Oya glanced at Mother Lu, then over at Limbo and back to Beth. She paused a heartbeat, two, then looked up at me and nodded. She walked over to face Foremost.

"We bid a place in the Rainbow for the Synth. He died here, and he's part of our story."

"Accepted," Foremost said.

"No!" Jerry Voge exclaimed.

"Never!" the Synth priest shouted.

We weren't going to the stars.

I knew it as soon as I saw the Synth priest's face. I suspected Foremost never had the Synth's vote, up on the Ship, but now the priest's hatred and opposition were fixed. Foremost stood with his head down, his eyes closed, and I realized I must be getting better at reading his body language because his despair came across clearly.

"To hell with 'em all," Akicita said, softly, from behind me, her voice pitched so only I could hear her. "This is Summit, Tony. That's all that matters. You keep it that way and we'll do all right."

"But for how long, Aki?" How long are we going to last against all the flatlanders?" I said, my voice also low. "This Ship was our final chance."

"We'll last as long as we can," Akicita said. "Now do your job."

Foremost handed the bundle of Synth bones to the Oya.

She nodded and walked back to her people. She held the bones cradled in one arm and gently stroked them with her other hand. She looked up at Dove and Beth and smiled. Tears ran down all their faces.

Then the Oya turned, walked to the Synth priest, and held out the bones.

"I believe these are yours."

The Synth was shocked. The tendrils over her mouth stopped in their ceaseless twisting. She hesitated, then took the bones. She looked down at them, studied them.

She raised her head to look at the Oya.

“What do I owe you?” the Synth priest asked. She sounded surprised and suspicious. “Isn’t that the way of Summit? To pay for every favor? So what do I owe you for this?”

“That’s not our lodge’s way,” the Oya said. “The Kadisha study and try to understand all the different groups and people, but we don’t tell anyone what to do. Our job is to remember the dead. And we want you to know you are invited, when we bury the Synth in the Rainbow.”

The Synth priest was silent. Foremost leaned forward and spoke softly.

“The best part of each of us,” Foremost said. It sounded like he was quoting something old and precious. “Wasn’t that always the goal? To put the best part of each of us, the part we’d like to see go forward, on the Ship?”

“Yes,” the priest said, her voice strangling.

“And when it works, it hurts, doesn’t it?” Foremost said. “Mirrors always hurt the most. The blemish is always largest when we see it on ourselves.”

The priest held the bones and looked at the Kadisha.

“When is the ceremony?”

“Tomorrow morning, at dawn,” Beth said. “Meet us at Blue Sky Abbey.”

I waited and no one spoke.

The Synth considered this for a moment, and studied the bones and the bottle. I saw the Oya tremble. Dove put her hand on the Oya’s shoulder. Beth put her hand on her other shoulder.

The Synth stood still. A light wind tugged at her robe. The tendrils in her mouth moved back and forth, slowly and rhythmically. She looked up at the Oya and concentrated on her face.

“We accept these bones,” the Synth said slowly, then looked over at Foremost and up at me.

“Your place on the Ship is approved. We withdraw our objection in Council. Our Child was in error when he attempted to kill you and the ambassador. Your debt to our line is canceled.”

The priest turned to face the Oya and the Kadisha. She began to keen softly, so deep into bass that it faded in and out of my hearing. She began to rock from side to side.

“We will be at the ceremony tomorrow,” she said. She held the bones close and stepped away from the trailer.

“Any objections?” I called out. I waited, then nodded to Oly.

“Sam’s death gift auction is now closed!” Oly shouted.

Oly glared at the crowd, as if to dare anyone to object. The lines shifted restlessly, but there were no objections.

“Does anyone have any other business to bring before Summit?” Oly asked.

“Yes,” Limbo said. He stepped forward, climbed up the steps, and stood next to Oly. Akicita and I stepped down and went to stand in front of our lodge, next to Mother Lu and the Nacacjin.

“It’s time to vote on leaving Dakota and going to the Ship,” Limbo said. He stood stiff and straight, his expression fierce as he looked across the crowd. I followed his gaze and saw Beth, a damned stupid big grin on her face.

“To the Ship, or not?” Limbo said. “Keepers vote now. Hand up for yes. No hand is a no vote. Everyone must vote.”

The Oya raised her hand. So did Limbo and Flipper and Tinker. In the end, only two Keepers’ hands were down.

I stared at Mother Lu, and she stared at me. She glanced at the Synth priest and the Oya, at Foremost, at my brothers, and then she shrugged.

“Perhaps you do know how to keep us alive on the Ship,” Mother Lu said, grudgingly. “I still think you’ll do something stupid up there. Not everyone and everything

can be trusted. We'll watch and be ready. Just in case we're needed."

"That's how things work," I agreed.

"We'll release the Registry back to the Kadisha right after we finish this."

Mother Lu raised her hand, and I raised mine, to make it unanimous. Mother Lu nodded.

"We go to the Ship!" Limbo said. The crowd roared. Oly stepped forward and waved his hands in a shushing motion.

"Everyone is invited to Sam's Pool Hall for free beer—"

"I brought fish to drink, fresh from the still," Flipper announced.

"—and free fish," Oly continued, without missing a beat.

The crowd froze for an instant, then roared its approval again and began to break up and head for downtown. Mother Lu hesitated, glanced at me, smiled, knuckled her forehead, and led her lodge toward the pool hall.

\* \* \*

Carole and I sat on the steps just outside the pool hall. Foremost sat next to us, with Dove, Hunter, the Oya, and the Synth priest a few feet away on the outside bench. Akicita and Oly and Flipper were all inside, along with the rest of the crowd, even including Mother Lu. I heard Chuck the bartender shout, and the crowd howled with laughter. Carole nudged me and pointed down Main Street.

Limbo and Beth sat together in a town car. They faced each other, Beth behind the wheel, Limbo on the passenger side. He touched her face and she turned her head to trap his hand between her cheek and her shoulder. He made no attempt to escape.

"He's doomed," I said. Carole laughed.

"He doesn't seem too upset about it," Carole said. "He looks pretty happy to me."

"Of course he is." Foremost sounded puzzled. "He wanted to marry Beth, didn't he? He got his wish for the Ship, and she agreed to partner with him. What more can he want?"

"Going to be a lot of work up there," I said, and gestured to the sky. The Ship hung low on the southern horizon. "He's got to figure out a way to keep us alive."

"He'll do it," Carole said confidently.

"We're not there yet," I warned. "Mother Lu is going to be watching, ready to step in if she thinks we're doing things the wrong way."

"Checks and balances," Carole said dismissively. "Someone has to keep you honest."

"And D.C. is not going to be happy. And there are still people on the Ship's Council who don't want us on board when it leaves."

"You're not happy unless you're worrying," Carole scolded. She reached down and interlaced her fingers with mine. She brought my hand up and kissed it, then put it in her lap, firm in her strong grip.

In the town car we saw Limbo pull his hand away, gently. He reached into his shirt pocket and took out a small box. He held it out to Beth, then opened it. She looked at the ring for a moment, then took it out and handed it to Limbo. He took her hand and slid the ring into place. I squeezed Carole's hand just a little tighter.

"Time to go home," I said. "One last thing to do tomorrow."

\* \* \*

That night Limbo and I and Carole and Akicita talked until it was almost dawn. We slept for a couple of hours and then met at Blue Sky Abbey, in the chapel.

Foremost and I and Akicita and Oly sat in one pew. Mother Lu and the Oya and Dove and Beth were in the pew across from us. Brother Stephanie and the Synth priest stood up front, at the altar, finishing paperwork. The dead Synth's medicine bottle rested on the side in between them. Thin clouds dulled the outside sky, so the wall/windows looked like nothing more than pebbled, colored glass.

"The Registry is unlocked?" Foremost asked. He kept his voice low.

“Yeah,” I said. “The Nacacijin gave Tom the encryption key last night. He unlocked everything, made sure it was just the way it should be, and turned it back over to the Kadisha. He also went into the Registry code and took out every software back door he could find.”

“Then everything should be fine.”

I laughed, quietly, at that.

“Anything someone can build, someone can break into. It’s safe now. Until the next time.”

“So . . . ?”

“I loaned Tom to the Kadisha. He’s working out a new backup system. We might not be able to make any system perfectly secure, but at least we can make it harder for us to lose it.”

Brother Stephanie and the Synth priest put down the documents and stood to face us.

“The flesh and the bones of our companion have been returned to the Ship. The tableau—” the priest turned to Oly, who nodded “—of his death has also gone home. I have been instructed to express approval. His kith and kin acknowledge a debt.”

Oly looked pleased.

Brother Stephanie picked up the Synth’s bottle and stepped forward. She smiled and seemed cheerful. I wondered how she always managed to pull that off. Nothing ever seemed to bother her.

“Well, the paperwork’s done,” she said briskly. The Synth priest nodded. “Now, is everything in the Registry?”

The Oya stood and handed Stephanie a small slip of paper.

“Yes. Here’s the location for the bottle.”

Stephanie checked the paper and stepped over to her rolling ladder. She pushed it along the back wall, locked the wheels, and climbed up.

She checked the number again, then slipped the bottle with the little chip of Synth bone into one of the arcs of clear bottles that framed the Rainbow. She shut the panel, locked it, and climbed down.

Suddenly, something felt funny. It was like a vibration in the air and I swore I heard a deep, low tone.

Sunlight poured through the walls, and the Rainbow snapped into place. Clear light and all the colors surrounded us and seemed to move in waves.

The Synth priest went still and I watched her eyes widen. She turned slowly, her mouth slightly open. She tilted her head back until she focused on a spot in the white light of the frame.

About where the light from the Synth bone and the medicine bottle would have shown up.

“You did this?” I whispered to Foremost.

“Synth eyes see farther into the spectrum than even mine. So I arranged a small change in the cloud cover, just in case,” Foremost admitted. He sighed. “I’m afraid, now that your governments know we can do this, it will cost me in the negotiations.” He looked at the Synth. “But it was worth it.”

I stepped out of the pew and tugged Foremost with me. The others stayed behind in the quiet of the chapel while we slipped through the doors and out into the walkway.

“We need to talk. Last night Carole and Limbo briefed me about their trip to the Ship.”

“Ah. I wondered how long before you would have questions. About your assumptions about the Ship.”

“That’s all you’ve got to say?” I demanded. “Talk to me about this Ship that isn’t

only a ship and how I'm going to explain this to Summit . . .”