

[8/12/06]

## MONDAY

[Continued from last episode]

Helen cast Detect Thoughts to determine how many people were within the warehouse. She determined that there were six human, intelligent, conscious creatures inside. Three were engaged in monotonous tasks requiring their concentration. One was barely conscious, fading in and out, and seemed to be in pain. One was impatient, wondering what has gone on inside and is about to go find out. The last she had trouble understanding. It was of a human level intelligence, but its thoughts are not like the thoughts of the other creatures.

We decided to ambush him as he came out the door. Fang stationed herself in the middle of the double doors. Helen got out of the way, and I stood back on the other side. Helen motioned that someone was coming, as she was still concentrating on the spell. The doors flung open, and there stood a man in robes similar to the ones lying at our feet, as well as a familiar, somewhat inhuman looking fellow at his side—the Jumping Jack. The guy in red said, “Bill! What the hell’s going on out here?”

Fang stepped forward, her dha drawn, and attacked Jumping Jack, doing serious damage to him. I prepared to cast a spell. Helen waited to see what would happen. The robed man, armed with a ceremonial staff, swung at Fang, missing. She riposted, slicing into him. Jumping Jack looked at her and sneered, “You again?” and breathed out fire at Fang. Her clothes were singed. Helen figured out what I was doing, and began sketching the sigil as well.

Fang swung at the demonic creature again, but missed. I cast the spell I had prepared, Retribution of Nemesis, the one I failed to correctly cast last time I encountered Jumping Jack. Both Jack and the robed figure roared in pain as holy power came down upon them, the robed one holding his eyes and staggering backwards. Jack clawed at Fang, drawing blood. Fang struck back at him, wounding him.

Fang missed her strike as Jack darted out of the way. I pulled my pistol and fired at him, but the bullet seemed to deflect off his hide. Jack breathed fire,

burning Fang, but I managed to dodge away from it. I saw Helen drawing a sigil, and disappeared from sight.

Once again Fang missed. I fired at Jack again, missed him also. Jack clawed Fang twice. [Helen walked around inside, saw a few lights on in the inside of the factory and a man hanging upside down off to one side. They appeared to be draining his blood into a vat. There were three robed figures behind a table who have stopped what they were doing to watch. On the table in front of them are chemistry items, at which two of them were working. A third was taking something from them and putting it into envelopes. In front of the table was another small table. The other robed figure was getting a Thompson out of a case. She ran back out.] Suddenly I felt her presence beside me and she whispered to me that a man inside had a machine gun.

Fang and I both missed. From inside, we heard someone shout, "Get out of the way!" Abruptly Jack jumps, and the man opens fire with the Tommy gun. I dived out of the way. I heard Helen's yelp of pain and Fang's hiss as they were struck.

Fang ran straight toward the shooter and swung her dha at him, slightly wounding him. I fired at one of the men inside, missed, and realized that was my last bullet. The Tommy gunner swung at Fang with the butt of his weapon, but missed. Fang retaliated, killing him. She kicked the gun back toward the door. Jumping Jack leaped back over the table. The three men started running for the front door. Fang charged off after Jack. In his haste to get away, he tripped and fell. She sliced at him with her sword. With a mighty effort, he tipped himself upright and breathed fire on her. Fang grabbed him and yelled for me. I ran up, produced rope from my bag and bound him. We noticed his throat was pulsing, as if he were preparing to breathe fire again. I gagged him as well.

Meanwhile, Helen freed the man who was hanging upside down. He was nearly completely exsanguinated. She cast a spell to help stabilize him. The man was very groggy, as if drugged. "Thank you, so horrible..." he muttered, in and out of consciousness. Fang placed her hands on him and healed him further.

"Who did this to you?" Fang asked him. "Who's responsible?"

Physically the man seemed alright, but in a state of shock. Helen found his clothes for him and helped him dress. He explained that he was coming out of a bookstore he frequented and was grabbed by these men in robes. They put something over his face and fell unconscious. He came to occasionally and saw that he was hanging upside down and that they were draining his blood, doing something with it on the table. Occasionally an inhuman face was peering at him and poking him. He didn't understand what had happened to him.

While Fang questioned him, I looked over the equipment on the table. It appeared to be glass jars and Bunsen burners. I noticed that some of the beakers had alchemical symbols inscribed on them, and they were using the guy's blood. I heard Fang asking him various questions about himself. His name was Henry Hallmark, a student who was coming out of the Eye of Newt Bookstore when he was grabbed. Helen said, "That occult place." "Yeah," Henry nodded.

Fang went back over and searched the bound demon. He had a pistol on him, a nice suit, a silver flask of whiskey, a pack of cigarettes. The place looked like some kind of drug manufacturing setup, Fang pointed out. From the stains on the floor, it was evident that Henry Hallmark was not their first victim. They were alchemically converting the blood to powder, putting it in envelopes. There were about a dozen or so packets. The body of the head guy had a demon-headed club that seemed merely ceremonial, normal clothing under his robes, a couple of packets of the powder. He smelled bad, like the guys outside, and his skin was yellowish, his eyes bloodshot. Fang took the packets. I swept the glass equipment onto the floor. On a smaller table was a bottle, cigarettes burnt on the table, a notebook/ledger, which I took, and an open metal lockbox beneath the table with money and a pistol in it. The notebook seemed to be all numbers. We also took the Tommy gun in its case. The rest of the place was a factory floor with open offices filled with old machinery for canning milk.

Fang suggested we take our prisoner to Framhicky and van Goeth, who might be able to neutralize his breath weapon. We made our way to the car with Jumping Jack and Henry Hallmark. Jack seemed to be biding his time, glaring at us. I

drove toward the Zenith Building. When we neared the vicinity of the Coup d'Etat Club, Helen said, "Just let me off here."

"Alright..." I answered hesitantly. "Are you okay? You were shot—"

"Yeah, I 'll...I 'll have somebody at the club look at it," she said. "We'll talk about this in the morning."

"Yeah, we will," I said. I watched her hurry across the street, clutching her wounded arm, until she disappeared in the darkness.

We got to the garage. Bob was behind his desk reading the newspaper. "What've you got there?" he asked.

"A poor soul who needs some help," Fang answered, "and something I 'm not sure has a soul who may be able to help us."

Jack glared at Bob. Bob looked back at him and said something guttural and strange. Jack jerked back and looked away. Bob, oblivious to our amazement, said, "I 'll ring upstairs and have somebody waiting."

"Is there somewhere we can take this creature to interrogate him?" Fang asked Bob.

"Holding cells are on 47, first door on the right," he replied.

We took the elevator up to the 44<sup>th</sup> floor where the infirmary was, and a nurse was waiting there to take care of Henry, then went to the 47<sup>th</sup> floor. The rooms were set up like police interrogation rooms, an observation room with glass bars across it adjoining another room. The second room had a chair bolted to the floor with arm restraints on it. Fang secured the demon in the chair. She used the intercom to call the lab.

A sleepy sounding Framhicky answered. "I hate to disturb you," Fang said, "but we have someone or something in the interrogation room that might be of interest to you."

"Uh...yeah, sure, I 'll be right down," he said. Before he clicks the connection off, we heard van Goeth saying, "Who was that?" The argument began. "Never you mind, they asked for me."

About ten minutes later they both appeared, arguing. "So what did you want us to take a look at?" Framhicky asked.

"He's the one who gave us problems in an alley Friday night, and now we found him in a warehouse," Fang explained.

They looked through the glass. Framhicky said, "Haemodaemon."

"Blood demon?" Fang asked.

"Well, spirit is actually the correct translation of 'daemon,' but yeah. Also called jumping jacks," he added. "Often serve as low-level enforcers for dark wizards."

"Dark wizards who produce things like this from victims' blood?" she asked, holding up one of the packets from the warehouse.

Framhicky took it from her. "This is...wrong," he said, examining it. "We'll have to run some tests. How much of this stuff do you have?" Fang handed it all to him. "Oh yeah, yeah, we can run some tests on this." She described the appearance and smell of those who took the substance.

While we stood talking, the door opened. Akhun walked in. "What have you brought us?" he asked.

"A haemodaemon," Fang answered. "We're not quite sure what to do with him, but we thought he could provide some information about the evil going on in this town."

"Very good, very good," said Akhun. "You've done the right thing bringing him here. Leave him to me. I will tell you anything useful that he may reveal. You should get some rest."

"I would be most honored to observe your interrogation technique," Fang said.

"No," he responded. "Best if I do this alone."

"Very well."

He opened the door of the interrogation room. I noticed the daemon's eyes widened. Akhun turned and looked at us before slamming the door. We left as we were ordered, and Framhicky and van Goeth scurried off. We went back to the infirmary.

Henry Hallmark lay on a bed with his eyes closed, sedated. The nurse fussed over Fang, removed the bullet and patched her up. Somehow even in her disheveled state, she was still beautiful in an elegant way that Helen, for all her youth and vivacity, couldn't begin to match. Despite serious wounds, any one of which would've made most men retreat, she'd fought on with rare courage. I felt stirrings of the same desire I'd had on first meeting her, but realized then that she was wed to defending the city, and would probably never give her heart to any man.

"I would suggest you rest for several days," the nurse said when Fang was ready to leave, "but at least get eight hours!"

"Yes, ma'am," Fang said with a quiet smile. We went back upstairs and parted company at our respective doors.

## TUESDAY

The next morning, Fang went down to the interrogation room. It was immaculately clean, with no sign of anyone or anything but the lingering scent of disinfectant. She called Akhun, who met her in the foyer of the penthouse.

"I had planned to call you this morning," he said. "We can share information. Why don't we begin by you telling me a little more about how you came upon the haemodaemon."

"We first encountered him," Fang replied, "a few days ago in an alleyway one evening."

"Really? What were you doing there?"

"We had gone out to dinner and in walking through the city had an encounter with this fellow," she said. "After he did some significant damage, he jumped away."

"So. You chose to go looking for him?"

"No. Drake and I learned through investigation that he might be part of one of several organizations in the city looking to do it harm. On a lead we went to a warehouse and fought a strange-looking dog and robed figures that we believed were partaking in some sort of vile alchemical process. We rescued an innocent who was their captive—"

"Ah, yes, the young man has been transferred," Akhun said, "to the city hospital and seems to be recovering, but he will need to receive long-term care there."

"Not knowing what this haemodaemon was involved with or whom he might represent, we brought him here to see what we could learn."

Akhun nodded. "You are correct. He has been working for an organization that calls itself the Blood of Darkness. They appear to have been kidnapping potential mages, like your friend Drake. They drain them of their blood and use the blood

to create a powder, which is both highly addictive and gives the user a certain degree of unholy fervor. The cell that you broke up last night was just that, a cell of a larger organization. This one and his companions serve as enforcers and bodyguards for the organization. He didn't seem to know much about the hierarchy. I got the impression that he was fairly newly minted on this plane. He had been doing some investigating on their behalf." Fang sensed that he was telling the truth, although probably not telling everything. "As he didn't seem to know very much, there didn't seem to be much sense in keeping him around," Akhun went on, "so he was returned to the plane from which he came.

"This is very good," he said. "It will please the Master that you are investigating these cults. Continue. Now if you'll excuse me."

Fang conveyed her appreciation to him and said that she would tell me so that we could continue our investigation. He bowed and left.

She told me all this when she found me drinking coffee in the dining hall. She emphasized that they had been draining the blood of aspiring mages such as myself, and conveyed Akhun's hope that we would continue. "We don't really know anything about the other cells, nor the people who are really running it," Fang pointed out. "And they know that something new is out there seeking to harm them." She felt we should proceed with caution.

While we were still talking, Framhicky and van Goeth found us, telling us that they are still investigating. The substance Fang gave them had both magical and chemical properties. They weren't entirely sure what it would do, "but I don't suggest inhaling it," Framhicky said emphatically. Fang told them what Akhun told her. We explained what the process seemed to be in the warehouse.

"That seems to be mostly true," Framhicky said. "We've detected taints of demon blood in it as well. Maybe your captive didn't know what the base substance was." I asked him if the victim from whom the blood came could've been part demon, but he said no.

I told Fang I wanted to see Helen that morning. Fang suggested we go see Richard Geist the next day and to invite Helen. She gave the ledger to Framhicky and van Goeth before they left, then went down to Bob and had him put the Tommy gun and the pistol in the weapons locker. She told me later that she asked Bob what he said to Jumping Jack.

"Aw, I'd never repeat that in front of a lady," Bob said.

"But you knew his language."

"You pick stuff up around here."

"You knew on sight what he was," Fang persisted.

"The horns gave it away."

"Do you see those a lot in Arcadia?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Here and there. Look, you been around here long enough, you see all kinds of things. Come, go, some good, some bad. Appearances can be deceiving. You never can tell."

She spent the rest of the day in meditation.

I drove to the Coup d'Etat Club. After making sure Helen was all right, I asked her, "Why won't you come in the Zenith Building? I know what you've said before."

She looked at me. "I don't really want to talk about it. But if you ever really need me to go in there...I'll go."

"I appreciate that," I said after regarding her a moment. "I won't trespass on that unless it's absolutely necessary."

"Oh, Drake, you're wonderful," she said brightly and kissed me in a rather obvious attempt to change the subject.

I told her how impressed I was at her spellcasting, which she seemed to appreciate. We spent the rest of the day making love and arguing about art, interspersed with a couple of meals, forgetting for awhile about casting spells and fighting evil. That evening Helen suggested an art lecture at the university. Before I left, I asked if she wanted to accompany us the next day to see Richard Geist. She agreed. I actually got back at an early hour (for me), fed Henri and listened to his complaints for awhile, and went to sleep.

### **WEDNESDAY**

Fang and I left early, not quite sure where Geist's house was. After picking up Helen, we drove out to the hills overlooking the city. We passed large gates and distantly seen stately manors. We arrived after about 45 minutes at a stone wall with an ornately wrought iron gate. The plaque indicated it was the appropriate address. Fang opened the gate and we drove up the circular drive.

The house was large and impressive. The grounds were not overrun, but not well kept. I parked the car and we rang the bell. After a few moments, a servant opened the door, an ancient man. "Good morning."

"Good morning, sir," Fang said. "We are here to see Mr. Geist, if he is available."

"Whom may I say is calling?"

"Tell him it is the daughter of Shao Ping Long."

The old man smiled a little. "One moment please," he said, stepping aside. "If you would please wait in the foyer..." He shut the door behind us and disappeared down a hallway. He returned shortly and said, "The master will see you now." He led us into a study, the walls lined with books. A man sat in an overstuffed leather chair next to a lamp reading a book.

"Reginald, I told you I did not want to see anyone," the man said. "But—I forget my manners. You're already here. You've come all this way. Please, come in."

As chairs were arranged for us, Fang bowed and said, "Please forgive our unannounced arrival. May I please introduce to you my partner, Drake Corrigan and Helen Troy. And I am Fang Huo Long."

"Ah, yes, I knew your father," Richard Geist replied. "Please sit down." When we did so, Geist sighed and said, "Well, what can I do for you? Please don't tell me you're interested in that adventuring nonsense."

Fang smiled. "Apparently it is a family hazard."

"Indeed," Geist nodded. "It is a very dangerous business. I must admit that in the foolishness of my youth I did it as well."

"From what my father has said, and from what has been written, you were somewhat impressive in your adventures in your youth."

"No, no, it was foolish and wrong and I encourage you young people not to put yourselves in harm's way," he said. "If it's a matter of money, I would gladly give you money to encourage you not to do it."

"Please," Fang said, "that's not what's important."

I couldn't stay silent. "But— isn't it good to put yourself in harm's way if you can have good result from it?" I asked.

"But there's so many better ways to help people," the man insisted. "Give your money away, give time to charity..."

"That doesn't always quite get the job done," I said.

He waved a hand dismissively. "No, no, you sound just like I did when I was your age. You should talk to that man Akhun. He explained things to me."

"Really?" I asked.

Geist nodded. "Before he came along, I was always going out doing crazy things, dressing up in that stupid costume, driving around in that white car..."

"And what did Akhun say to you?" Fang asked.

"He—he explained it to me," Geist answered, fumbling for words. "How dangerous it was to—to live the sort of life that I did. I mean, after what happened to poor Michelle...he made a very convincing argument, his words are much better than mine. You should speak to him."

"I think your words are fine," said Fang. "I'm sorry, what happened to Michelle."

"Ah, well that is a great mystery, isn't it?" he said. "Poor girl completely disappeared. No doubt something horrible befell her."

"When?"

"Oh, what was this...Reginald? How long ago was this?"

The ancient man who showed us in spoke up from the corner of the room.

"Three years ago, sir."

"Oh, that's right, three years ago," Geist said. "How could I have forgotten? Never had a funeral for the poor girl."

"What had you and Michelle and the others been doing prior to her disappearance?" Fang asked.

"You know, the usual sorts of things," he answered. "Breaking up cults and fighting sea monsters—"

"Were you in Arcadia?"

He leaned forward. "My dear, the Geists have always been in Arcadia."

"But this wasn't on an excursion, you weren't traveling?"

"No, no. We were here in town. She hardly ever left."

Fang nodded thoughtfully, then asked, "Did Akhun speak with just you, or with everyone who worked at the Zenith Foundation?"

He shrugged. "I don't know, I haven't spoken to the others. That fool Williams was around the other day. He's still off in the woods somewhere hunting up in the hills."

"You've seen him recently?" Fang asked.

"Several months ago, sir," Reginald put in as Geist glanced at him.

"I find it curious," Fang said, "that Akhun would be so dissuasive of your adventuring lifestyle and yet still works with Dr. Zenith encouraging that lifestyle."

"Oh, surely he doesn't encourage it anymore. The Foundation has gotten much more sedate, much more reasonable. It's a modern age, not like it was before the Great War and just afterwards."

Fang raised an eyebrow. "Nevertheless, he recruited us."

Geist seemed taken aback. "I'm sure he has you doing reasonable things, research..."

"Such as swordfights with haemodaemons?"

"Well. You probably weren't supposed to be doing that, I'm sure."

"And yet when I brought the haemodaemon back," she persisted, "Akhun seemed most pleased and told us to continue to investigate and keep up the good work. That seems odd."

"I...I...I just..." the man stammered. "I don't know. Reginald! Where are those drinks for our friends?"

"Coming, sir."

Fang, glancing around the room, noticed a jade skull on the mantle. "That is a most intriguing artifact on the mantle," she said.

"The skull," said Geist. "Oh, yes, the skull. It was the most amazing thing. You should've been there, my dear. There were forty or fifty—"

"There were twelve, sir," came Reginald's voice from the hallway.

"—Dozens of big men, and the demon's head, and he had captured the heiress—" He stood up with the excitement of the story. Fang realized that he seemed completely healthy, strong and hearty. He was in his mid-fifties and getting a little flabby, but he could probably take anyone he wanted to. He moved like a fighter. Geist picked up the skull from the mantle and launched into an elaborate story about an amazingly complex deathtrap, how he wriggled free and fought off all these men and a horrible rat thing that had been summoned, how he took the ceremonial idol, the demon's head, and cracked the great sorcerer's jaw with it, freed the heiress—

"But that was an example of my foolish youth," he suddenly finished. "Not something I should be talking about."

"You saved many lives that day," Fang said quietly.

"Perhaps."

"Sounds like an inspirational story to me," I said, sorry he had stopped.

"No, you shouldn't take it that way," he said. "It's not safe..." He dropped back into his leather chair. "It's not...safe...to do those things..."

"Life in Arcadia's not safe."

"Drake," Fang said, frowning at me.

"No...it's not..." he muttered. "It's not...safe..."

"And sometimes those who possess the kind of skill and prowess, such as yourself, to save so many, is it not worth the risk?" Fang asked.

He fell silent. He seemed about to speak, his lower lip trembling a bit. At last he said, "I'm sorry, I'm going to have to ask you to leave. Reginald."

Fang thought he seemed confused, and our presence was making him more confused and upset. Fang bowed and apologized. "We are most honored by your hospitality and hope perhaps we can meet in better circumstances in the future."

Reginald showed us out. When we reached the foyer, he extended his hand to Fang. She took it as he said softly, "He's better than I've seen him in years. Thank you." She realized he had put a slip of paper into her hand.

We went out into the car. Fang examined the paper. Written on it was the name Michelle Morpheus, with an Arcadia street address.

"Helen," Fang asked as I started driving. "What do you and your companions know about mind-altering magic?"

"It's very dangerous. I mean, little spells to make somebody your friend for a few minutes or to go along with a suggestion are easy. Things that actually reach in and change a person are hard."

Fang told us that she felt that Geist was the man who told the story, the man her father knew. "Something is clouding his mind," she said. "Unfortunately it traces back to Akhun and that no mind control knowledge can be found in the Zenith Building. I'm afraid this may be the reason why Framhicky and van Goeth cannot even work with it. We must go see Michelle and we must explore the address Framhicky provided."

"You've talked with Akhun a few times," I said to Fang. "Did you ever feel like he was trying to do a number on you?"

"He is withholding information," she answered. "But I believe he is treating us honestly."

Suddenly, Helen said, "A white car."

"I'm sorry?" Fang asked.

"He said a white car."

"Yes."

"That was the Gray Ghost!" she exclaimed.

I laughed. "Yes, that's your hero fellow, isn't he?"

"Wow," Helen said in hushed tones. She sat back in the seat in amazement.

We ate lunch when we reached the city. Afterwards we headed toward the address provided by Framhicky. It is near the docks, a bad part of town. Down a back alleyway we found the address. A sign said simply, "Tattoos."

Inside was a large man covered in tattoos, wearing sailor's pants and a sleeveless t-shirt. He looked at us like we didn't belong. "Yeah, whaddaya want?" he growled.

"A friend gave me this address, Framhicky," I said.

"Lock the door," he said. Fang quickly complied. "So Framhicky sent you. What do you need?"

"Protection from mind control."

"For all of ya?"

I glanced at Fang and Helen. "Yeah."

"And possibly information about it?" Fang ventured.

"Can't tell you much about it, but I can give you something to stop it. At least for awhile."

"How long's it last?" I asked.

"Use activated," he answered. "It'll block the first attempt it detects and give ya a little boost for a few minutes after."

"And we'd be aware this attempt had been made?"

"Yeah. But. It's a one-shot thing. If it gets set off, you'll have to come back here and get another. Best not to put more than one on," he explained.

"what's involved?" Fang asked.

"You gonna be first?" I didn't particularly care for the way he looked at either of them.

"I 'll go first," I said.

He got out his equipment and told me to take off my shirt. As I complied, he asked, "Did Framhicky tell you how much this was gonna cost you?"

"No, but I 'll pay for all three of us." I wrote him a check for an amazingly huge sum of money.

A couple of hours later, we had a tattoo of a shield with a cross in it at the base of our necks. He explained that it would get warm on activation, maybe even hurt, but that it would give us protection after the first attempt for five minutes. Fang told me later that while she watched him do my tattoo, she looked at the back of his neck and saw a shield. She also noticed an eagle tattoo that she thought turned its head, looked at her, and turned back.

"What if we were already under the influence of mind control?" Fang asked him.

He shrugged. "This doesn't help you with active stuff, just the next time. Can't help you with that one."

"Is there somewhere we could find out about how mind control works?" she asked.

"What do I look like, a library?" he asked. "There useta be some dame that was all into mental powers, but I ain't heard of her in years." He snapped his fingers. "Madame...somethin'-er-other...it was Greek 'er somethin'..."

"Morpheus?" I asked.

"Yeah, that's it."

"Thank you," Fang said.

"Pleasure doin' business with ya," he responded.

By the time we finished, it was about five o'clock. We headed for Michelle Morpheus' address. It was a respectable row of brownstone townhouses. The window boxes on hers had weeds in them. The windows all had heavy curtains pulled over them. In the lower window, in peeling paint, is "Madame Morpheus: Seer, Private Detective." We went up the steps and rang the bell.

No answer. The door was locked. We went around to the back alley and found the door in a little fenced in backyard overgrown with weeds. Fang knocked. Again no answer.

She looked around, didn't see anyone in the immediate vicinity. Fang prepared to bash in the door when Helen said, "Wait just a second. Jeez, you people." She fished into her blouse and pulled out a pin, which she stuck into the lock. "They always spend a lot of money on the front door," she said as the lock clicked open, "but they never spend a lot on the back."

I pulled a flashlight out of my bag. When Helen opened the door, we noticed a bad smell. Fang tried the light switch, and it worked. We were in a nice kitchen. The dried and moldy remains of a loaf of bread was on the counter, shriveled scraps of what must have been fruit, dust over everything. The smell permeates the house.

We crossed the hall to the front room, which was set up as a receiving room. It is furnished with a desk and chair, a table with two chairs and a crystal ball on it, and bookcases along one wall. There is a window seat beneath the window with the painted letters on it. On the floor beside the desk was a body. Dust lay over everything.

The body was desiccated. The area showed little signs of struggle, but the person seemed to have been knocked down. It appeared to be a middle-aged woman, with wisps of blonde hair on her head. Fang said that the cause of death seemed to be holes in her skull, two on each side. The skull was empty. She called me over to look at it. Something sucked her brains out. The woman was apparently trying to reach something that was on the desk.

On the desk were several books of occult lore. The one open had a woodcut of a man with snakes coming out of his mouth biting the head of someone. Lying next to it was a flat jewelry box. Fang opened it. It once contained some kind of medallion, but it was empty. The other books were about mind control, evil creatures that could do it, about defenses against such creatures. I took the books. Fang went through the desk, found an appointment book. Her last appointment was about two and a half years ago. The names of socialites and wealthy women and some wealthy men were her clients, with initials listed. She kept weekly appointments with people; many were repetitive.

I looked at the books on the shelves, which were about the spirit world, ghosts, mostly for show, but some serious. Not anything about any magic I was familiar with, but the powers of the mind. Helen found the rest of the house well-appointed and fashionable, does not appear to be closed down, but was being lived in until the sudden death of the owner. The pantry had spoiled food in it. Whoever killed her turned off the lights, locked the door and walked out. The water and the lights still work.

After we left the house, Fang knocked on the next door. It was answered by a man in shirt and tie who looked as if he had just come home from work, kids playing in the background, a wife who called, "Who is it, honey?"

"I came to see your next door neighbor, Madame Morpheus, but it seems that she is no longer in business here?" she asked.

"No," the man replied. "I haven't seen her in a long time."

"How long has it been?"

He shrugged. "A couple of years."

"And the house has not been on the market?"

"No, she worked for somebody, I think that they paid her rent or own the house."

"A corporation or a foundation?" He didn't know. Fang thanked him.

Fang pointed out that if the killer didn't want the body found, he would pay for the rent and the utilities so no one would check on the house. She said she would check the next morning at the power company to see if she could find out who was paying them. We drove to the Coup d'Etat Club and studied the books.

We found out that Michelle Morpheus, if indeed that's whose body we found, was researching a creature known as an illithid, or a mind eater. There were legends in the books of these creatures infiltrating the courts of kings and nobles, often depicted as attractive foreign men, but they could make snakes come out of their mouths. Which could be metaphor. The writers were medieval. One book spoke of a Turkish lord, or caliph, who imprisoned one in a tomb. Someone had circled the name of the tomb and written outside it in pencil, "Is this where he went?"

The books talked about the creature's need to feed, but seemingly equal to its need to feed is its need to dominate others, particularly those of power and influence and to corrupt their work, almost pathological need. They speak of these creatures being very dangerous and powerful, that imprisoning them seems to be the safest way of dealing with them. I got the impression that a lot of this was written by superstitious monks who may not have had first hand knowledge of any of it. They have been inflating the danger, because they certainly equated the creatures with demons, but they didn't say why. The text said they eat minds, but whether that was to be taken literally or not, we couldn't tell. Some of the stories talked about sorcerers who gathered great armies to imprison the creatures beneath the earth, and another of a woodcutter taking an axe to its head.

Fang asked what I thought. It seemed to me that Zenith went to the tomb, and came back with a friend or two—Akhun and Bob. "We must be very careful," Fang said thoughtfully.

"No shit," was my response.

We left the books with Helen. I kissed her good night with a desperation that I'm sure she sensed, told her to keep the doors locked-unnecessary, but I was feeling overprotective, and went back to the Zenith Building. Fang and I didn't speak much on the drive back. We had a lot to think about.

[8/19/06]

#### THURSDAY

Fang went to the Arcadia Power and Water building to check up on who was paying the bills at the late Michelle Morpheus' house. She asked about it at the appropriate clerk's window. The clerk requested her I D. He then went and checked the ledger, came back, and reported that the bills were being paid by the Zenith Foundation, for a period of about ten years.

Meanwhile, I'd gone back to the Coup d'Etat Club to discuss the subject of divination with Helen. Fang joined us when she had finished and reported the results of her research.

Helen had gotten out her silver divination mirror. She locked the door, lit candles and incense, turned out the lights. Fang and I gathered around the mirror with her. She poured a shallow layer of water over the mirror, and intoned, "I call upon those who see to answer my question." Producing a small knife, she pricked her finger and let a drop of blood drip down into the water. The surface of the water turned blood red, then black. It appeared as if we were looking into a deep hole. She asked, "How do we defeat the illithid?"

A voice came back as if from a great distance, a voice resonant with clarity and strength. It said, "Long do the scholars contemplate, but Alexander's solution unraveled the knot." The hole seemed to close.

Helen staggered back. I quickly poured her a shot of whiskey, which she downed in one gulp. "I'll sharpen my dha," Fang said. "As Alexander sliced through the knot, I'll deal with Akhun."

Fang and I began discussing spells to enhance her abilities while Helen cleaned her mirror and returned the room to normal. I mentioned to Fang that we could get Helen into my room and tell her that if we didn't come back she could get help.

"No." We both looked at Helen. "Drake, I 'm going, and I 'm going with you."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Yeah."

We talked a little more about how to proceed. Helen wondered if we needed to confront Bob first. We discussed the possibilities. Helen's gaze kept straying to the tome, open to the woodcut of the man with snakes coming out of his mouth, and at length said, "I f we're gonna do this, surprise might be one of our only advantages." At Fang's insistence, we decided to behave as normal, park the car, and walk past Bob without speaking to him.

We drove to the Zenith Building and I parked in our usual spot in the garage. Bob was in his office reading, but paid us no attention. We got into the elevator and went up to the penthouse. Fang asked the receptionist if we could speak with Akhun.

"Akhun and Dr. Zenith are currently in a business meeting in the study," the receptionist replied. "I t will be a while before they're available."

"We'll wait," I said.

Helen said, "The study's this way?" and started walking toward it.

I started to cast the planned protection spell, Word of St. Paul, on Fang.

"What is going on here?" the receptionist demanded. Helen stepped over to her and knocked her out with a swift right to the jaw. The woman crumpled to the floor. Helen tucked the blackjack back in her purse.

We went through the wood-paneled room where Fang and I first met, what seemed like ages ago. Fang pushed open the double doors. Akhun was standing over Dr. Zenith's desk, pointing to various documents and saying, "Sign here." Dr. Zenith was seated in his wheelchair. At our entrance they both looked up.

"What is the meaning of this?" Akhun said.

"We have been to Madame Morpheus'," Fang said.

"Oh."

"Step away from Dr. Zenith," she said as she drew her dha.

Akhun stepped around the desk. "I thought the little nudges I had given you would've been sufficient." He sighed. "Oh, well," and smiled wickedly at Fang, pushing the turban off his head to reveal a distended, misshapen bald head with purple veins that pulsated. His smile began to split and grow wider. A line formed from the bottom of his lip down his chin, all the way to the base of his throat, and unhinged. From deep in his throat, a tongue-like extension came out in pairs, long and purple with hooks on the ends. Even though he cannot speak, we clearly heard his voice say, "Fools."

Akhun's tentacles went out straight and flashed at us. I felt a burning sensation on the back of my neck, on the tattoo, and I could tell Fang and Helen felt it as well. "What?" Akhun exclaimed.

Fang stepped up and swung her dha at him. Akhun fell to the floor.

At that moment I heard a thundering roar from down the hall. I heard the door to the waiting room behind us splinter open. Bob stood there, cigar burning in his mouth. He took it out and stubbed it out in his open palm. The blue smoke around him began to get thicker. He grew to ten feet tall. His skin was bronze, and he had a thick beard, fangs, and glowing red eyes. He bellowed and ran, pushing past Helen and me. We fell with the force of his blow. The transformed Bob ran

past Fang and said, "Foul spawn! You would enslave Gog?" His foot came down on Akhun's head, smashing it into paste.

Helen and I climbed to our feet. Dr. Zenith pulled back his wheelchair from the desk, blinked, stood up. He looked around and said, "Samantha?"

Helen said, "Daddy!" and ran over to him, embracing him.

"What are you doing here, Sam?" he asked.

"Family business, Daddy. Saving the day," she answered.

He looked at Bob. "Gog, what have you done to my floor? Who are these people? And what the hell is going on in my city?"

Fang and I looked at each other in amazement. There was going to be a lot of explaining, I felt sure.

END