

What readers are saying about *Wild Thing*...

"If you are looking for something new and a little different to read then *Wild Thing* by Australian author L.J. Kendall might be worth a try. The novel is multi-dimensional with its genre blending elements of urban, paranormal and fantasy[...] It helps when a book is extremely well-written and the use of descriptive language excellent. Images are cold and cruel and even brutal. Our heroine is a strange mixture of child and chilling adult."

"Very dark with sexual overtones so maybe not for everyone, but extremely well written. Great characters, plot development the whole enchilada!"

"Sara's story is both compelling and disturbing. I started reading it and was almost immediately sucked into her world. The story is great and I read it all in one sitting."

"I enjoyed the original spin on magic meets an industrial, technological society. I tend to favor a story with strong but not perfect and unbeatable characters and this novel filled that bill. The adept, strong but seriously flawed characters were truly enjoyable."

"This book is excellent at keeping the reader's interest in what will happen next. You are also kept wondering what the characters will do next, as the story is rife with morally ambiguous motivations."

"Intriguing, thought provoking, disturbing, probably those and more. [...] The world is such a dark place right now, I have been [...] looking for happy feel good books, and this is definitely not one of those. I still couldn't stop reading it."

"This volume has lots of action [...]. It also has the internal dialog of a horror story. It is in many ways, a mystery. There is a small amount of sex, but in such a fashion that it could never be called romance. This is a very strange Paranormal story."

"This book is going to be divisive. It's well written, but the main character is put through a terrible and sad journey. If you are the kind of reader that hates Lolita you will hate this book. [...] Don't read this if you don't like seeing characters doing nasty things. Do read it if you want a well written sci fi/fantasy/horror story with some very dark characters."

"If you enjoy something that is dark, yet has flashes of ironic humor, complex characters with unusual abilities and some new ideas, give it a try."

"This is an entertaining first novel from L.J Kendall [...] There is a fresh and edgy feel about the world and the characters he has created. It's an impressively daring book in some ways because

neither of the two main characters are all that likable. [...]. Congrats to the author by the way for actually making me hate a character, [...]. With Harmon you see it and feel it through his actions and unreliable thoughts. Ugh I HATE him!"

"Some books are [...] hard to review because they tear you in so many different directions that by the end you actually don't know what to think. This book is one such work. [...] if you like truly well developed and engaging characters you can emotionally connect to then this book DEFINITELY is for you."

"This book had me wanting more. I love the world the author created and the character of Sara."

"[...] this is a DARK story, told mostly through the eyes of a child who doesn't really understand the moral implications of what's going on. [...] The result is a very interesting psychodrama for the reader as his morality gets repeatedly compromised and Sara (the girl) twists into something very bizarre under his grooming."

"The book is both graphic and not. A perverse innocence that is amazing. It's like a YA book written for a dirty old man. Not to say there is a lot of sex, but there is a raw sensuality that blasts forth at random. The plot takes twists and turns you cannot anticipate, but remains true to the core."

"A REALLY good book. All the elements of my favorite genres, combined in such a way that it could appeal to fans of any, as opposed to all, the represented genres. Sci Fi, dystopian, paranormal, fantasy are all represented in some form. Kendall does write about some touchy subjects, so I'd not suggest this for anybody under 18, but other than that, I say go for it!"

"The story starts a little slow, at first I wasn't sure if I was going to finish it. Then I became captivated by Sara... and then spellbound by its twists. Now after reading the second half of the book in one evening I will be thinking about it for quite some time, it has set a new bar for dark fantasy. Unsettling. [...] And right when you are comfortable, there is another twist."

"Very interesting book. The beginning was a bit shaky but once we get going, it's very fun. [...] To be able to enjoy this book, you do have to look past the very low morals of one of the main characters and try to understand that the main character is being CREATED. She is not normal but that is part of what makes this book and different and fun. Recommended to people tired of the same old same old of what urban fantasy has now become."

*(As of October 2017, **Wild Thing** averaged 3.84 stars out of 5 on Goodreads, and 3.8 out of 5 on Amazon)*

Wild Thing

L. J. Kendall

The Leeth Dossier Vol. 1

**For my wife, Stella, who encouraged me
and helped me, through all the happy
years we had.**

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Note: there's a special offer if you're 1st to inform me of errors in the text – see *Publishing, 2015* for details.

Novels by L. J. Kendall

The Leeth Dossier:

Wild Thing

Harsh Lessons

Shadow Hunt

Violent Causes

(Lost Girl)

...

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PROLOGUE

Chief High Cloud crouched, silent, hands still trembling in shock. Trying to understand it all: the vision; the bonfire's snuffing; the hungering cold.

One small ember struggled in the frozen ashes, and blowing gently he nursed the fire back to life, taking comfort from the simple act. Firelight breathed traces of warmth and hope back into the shocked faces around him. Their desperate expressions pressed on him like the hopes of distressed children, eager to believe a parent could somehow make everything all right.

There would be no way to make this right, he knew.

Behind him, beyond the gathering of mis-matched people, the sun's last light crowned their geodesic domes in a glow of burnt orange. Even as he watched, the tallest slid into darkness. *Not an omen*, he told himself, as the flame took tentative hold.

But he could delay no longer. Old bones, weakened from too many zero-gravity months in years long past, protested as he stood to speak into the wretched stillness.

"Let us talk. We can not accept one whose Way is murder. Human Beings should kill only for food, respecting our brother creatures for the gift of their life. We cannot open our hearts to the woman in the vision we have just seen.

"The rules of the Sky Corn community are clear. The child must be sent from us. She must leave her name. She must take nothing. Let her go to a people for whom killing and destruction is a part of their cul-

ture: she will go to the *Wasichus*. Let her killings happen there, just as we saw, rather than among the People. If one day she sees the evil of her actions; if the Great Spirit moves her, and she proves herself worthy, then perhaps may she rejoin our community." He stopped and waited, letting any other speak who wished to.

Abruptly, the girl's mother rose to her feet. Black hair cascaded down her back like liquid, one hand briefly brushing the gentle curve of her belly for reassurance, yet something – the way she stood, the expression on her face – made her seem dangerous. Her husband flowed swiftly upright behind her, placing large steadying hands on her shoulders. His touch seemed to calm her; allowed words to come. "I would speak."

The chief looked from her to the shaman who still stood leaden with sadness. The wise-woman slowly lifted her head and nodded. He turned back to the child's mother. "The Sky Corn community will hear Shining Hair."

Her words leaped forth. "My daughter would never do these things! She is a good child. Good, and brave. The young woman in the vision was not Happy Mouth." She looked around at the doubting faces. "You all know my daughter: she is loving, not cruel."

"My husband and I follow your ways. We teach them to our child. We *know* that violence is wrong. Deeply. It's why we came to you – not just for your vision for the future, or your honoring of the past. We are teaching her to respect life, to reject violence. You know this is true." She stopped, meeting the eyes of each of the solemn faces, hating the note of desperation which had crept into her voice.

Her voice sank, against her will, fighting fear for her daughter and shame for herself. "Aunt White-Eyes' vision was not of the future, but the past. She saw me, from my bad days. You have all mistaken my daughter for me."

A mutter ran through the patchwork tribe. Her husband's head was bent, now, his face impossible to read.

But his hands, still resting on his wife's shoulders, tightened involuntarily at her words.

The wise-woman shook her head sadly. "No. All saw. It was not you, Shining Hair. You speak with love, but not with truth."

The vision was too fresh for denial. Raw, red meat, *pulsing* bloody in a delicate hand. Then flames, one girl dancing like a scythe through panicked leather-clad bikers while another fed....

Finally, the twisted scene with its inhuman cold. Cold which had, terrifyingly, reached for them all *through* the flames, scrabbling for purchase in the watchers until the wise-woman broke the link. Leaving a circle of stunned faces around a bonfire suddenly black, cold, and dead.

All had thought their hearts equal to the reluctantly-shared vision. But that vision had been far worse than they had feared.

The child's mother pushed herself away from her husband. "In the vision, her killing was in a city. Perhaps if we keep her amongst us, the vision can be broken."

"Our shaman's visions have always revealed truth," the chief answered, "even for those who tried to change the future foreseen. Keeping your daughter would be to nurture one who will be a murderer. Should she stay here, maybe she would bring her killings here, to our small community.

"But worse: might not such attention reveal your presence to those who hunt you?"

At those words, all present stiffened.

"But now we know this future we can raise our daughter so it won't happen!"

"How? You do not know what will make Happy Mouth that way, so you can not know what to change," the Chief said. "We have seen the natural future for your child. Would you seek to change her true nature? To bend her?"

"So you're saying it's natural for her to kill? That it's *all right*? That goes against everything the Sky Corn

community is supposed to stand for!"

"Shining Hair, you have much to learn." He looked sad. "Though a Way is wrong, we do not try to force others to our path. That Way is wrong too, and most treacherous. A coyote is not a coyote without its teeth. But we will not have her here, now we know her Way." He stopped again and waited, watching all the faces.

Only silence answered him this time.

"Then it is so." He looked back to the parents, troubled. "And you, Shining Hair and Crazy Bee, will you hold to your vows and stay? Or will you go with your daughter, and join in her killings?"

The mother glared back. "We will go with our daughter and *prevent* her killings."

"But if you leave, and they find you – what then? When you sought refuge here, did you not say his vengeance would be terrible, on both you and all who had harbored you? Did you not both give your word to do nothing to draw that vengeance down on any here?"

The woman said nothing. Simply stood, with fists clenched.

The Chief turned to the tired shaman. "White-Eyes Woman, will you seek their future, should they leave with their daughter?"

The shaman nodded, slowly. Nothing could be worse than the future she'd already seen tonight. She and the Chief looked back at the fire-pit – once warm and welcoming, now cold and somehow hostile, the new flame still struggling.

The Chief beckoned. "Come, we will use my tepee."

In ones and twos, then, the council disbanded. Shining Hair stalked behind the Chief, hardly aware of Crazy Bee's larger hand gripping hers as they followed the chieftain to his hide-lined, geodesic 'tepee.'

The wise-woman, crouching before the fire pit and remembering the hungering cold, struggled still to understand. A chilling awfulness lay beneath the impossible quenching of the bonfire. *What* had killed the blaze?

Finally, heavily, age aching in every joint, she rose to

follow the girl's parents.

-

The semi-permanent structure used traditionally-tanned hide, bonded to interlocking Bucky-struts earned from the community's expertise in sustainable orbital technologies. Inside, the four sat while the Chief kindled a small ritual flame.

The shaman was surprised by how easily the new vision flowed; and as the monstrous scene smashed through her, *ended* it just as quickly, amidst horrified cries.

All four reeled from the image now scorching their retinas: the community's holding, a wasteland scoured black. Nothing but drifting ash, mile after mile. Recognizably the same trees and buildings, but reduced to charcoal spars and triangular charred skeletons. *In the same positions they were today.*

"Fuel-air bomb." Crazy Bee's analysis was reflex; his tone, hushed disbelief. "Maybe a tac nuke."

Still the woman denied. "No. Once we leave... even if they found us, we would never tell them of your aid. This can't be—"

The shaman interrupted. "These people who seek you: what would you *not* do, should they threaten your daughter?"

The man and the woman flinched.

The wise-woman did not relent, though she took no pleasure from her words; her voice sinking to a whisper. "Or, might they not even seek to force the truth from your four-year-old child herself?"

The parents froze in horror, knowing the answer. Imagining what he would *enjoy* doing to their daughter.

"Which future do you choose, Shining Hair?" the Chief asked. "Which future for your daughter, and for us all?"

The two stood motionless for a long time, the man's arms close around his wife's shoulders. At last his head bowed forward.

Shining Hair stared across the small fire into the

milky eyes of the wise-woman. "No. It's not true." The woman's long black hair whipped in angry denial. "You can't see the future. No one can. I reject this prophecy. Either you let my daughter stay, or we take her and leave."

The Chief shook his head. "We cannot let your daughter stay. If we are not true to ourselves, our community poisons itself. She must leave. And if you leave with her..." His head moved left, right, refusing that fate. "We have just *seen* the doom which that choice would bring to all who remain here."

She made a cutting gesture with her hand, chopping off the Chief's words. "No. Aunt White-Eyes is mistaken. Or deceived. Come on, Crazy Bee, we're going."

"Shining Hair- 'Lita- wait, let's think this through. Maybe..."

Crazy Bee faltered to a stop at the look his wife turned on him. She stared at him as if he had just transformed into a complete stranger. Somehow, that expression unlocked his voice, and he spoke from the heart. "I love you, 'Lita. I love our daughter. But I know we've seen the truth tonight, in these visions. I don't understand – not the how, not the why – but I *believe*. You do too, I know you do."

Her lips thinned into familiar stubborn lines, and he found his fists clenching helplessly. Still he tried. "'Lita, we gave our words when we came here; when the Sky Corn took us in despite the danger we brought to them all. Remember that night: every member agreed. *Every member*. And in return we made them a vow. You can't break that vow."

His wife stared at him, her shoulders hunched. "So... what: you'll *stay* here, 'B? What about your *marriage* vows?"

Her jaw set grimly. "Right-"

"No, 'Lita. No. I will stay here, and so will you. Only Happy Mouth will leave."

She looked at him as if he'd gone mad. Or she had. She shook her head, words briefly failing her. Took one step back. "No," she whispered, before her voice

strengthened. “No, ’B, I’m leaving, and I’m taking Happy Mouth with me. With or without you.”

“No, ’Lita. You’re not.”

She stiffened at those words. Then, strangely, *re-laxed*. Her posture subtly shifted. Loosened. An air of danger suddenly draped her once again, like a dark shroud hovering at her shoulders. “You won’t stop me.”

The man’s face looked carved from the earth itself. “But I’m the only one here who can. So I must. Please, ’Lita, I’m begging, don’t do this! Don’t risk the safety of our unborn child. *I love you*. You think I *want* to abandon her? That’s crazy! But our other choices are *wrong*! And I’ll be betraying you, and me – all we have and all we hope for – if I let you do this!” His eyes locked on hers, *willing* her to see what he could. “As deep as my soul, I know if you ignore this vision, you doom us and everyone here.”

Her slim hands moved across her belly, instinctively protective, and for those seconds, as her gaze turned inward, he dared to hope his words had reached her.

Then her hands fell away, her expression darkened, and she turned sideways to him, rolling her shoulders as she took a defensive stance. “Never.”

From behind, he heard the shaman mutter – he recognized the beginnings of a spell – and he spoke without looking around. “Aunt, even if you *do* succeed in putting her to sleep, you will lose her trust forever. It must be me who stops her. Who makes her see.”

His wife was abruptly in motion, flashing forwards, lit by the warm light of the fire in the enclosed space. He rocked his head to one side to avoid her palm strike, right hand rising to deflect her left, anticipating the simultaneous knee strike, sliding his thigh forward and into it, diverting the force a moment before it could blossom. Her left leg flashed up... to those watching, it seemed the two danced: a strangely-accelerated series of moves and powerful countermoves choreographed in fury and love.

The Chief’s heart ached in his chest as he watched

Shining Hair, for the first time in over four years, forsake her vow of non-violence; the mother in her literally fighting against the impossible choice suddenly confronting her.

Husband and wife contested their daughter's fate with frightening intensity, feet weaving intimately in and around each other, body jolting body, limbs blurring and meeting, the impact of flesh on flesh jarring the man time after time, rocking him.

As they fought, the Chieftain felt a chill run through him. He was no expert in combat; was very far from a martial artist; and the two *had* been frank about their past. But perhaps in their brevity, he had underestimated the depths of their capabilities. The fight stopped making sense to him as the pace increased, the two bodies locking together in a series of blows, grips, twisting moves and blindingly-fast strikes from hands, fists, knees, elbows, which he simply could not follow. Dirt flew from the floor as the two spun and wove together. He felt he watched two tigers fighting, inches from him. Skin prickling, he had to stiffen his spine.

Time and again, Crazy Bee jerked or flinched, often only the ugly sound of a hammer blow on meat signaling a successful stroke. One of 'Bee's eyes was swelling, his cheek already darkening with a livid bruise. A *crack* of bone and a sharp gasp from the male warrior, and Shining Hair spun away, rebounding from the powerful impact of her elbow into his ribs. For a moment, Crazy Bee paused, stunned, while Shining Hair completed her spin. This time the Chief saw her right leg flash out against her husband's left knee, an audible snap as ligaments broke. The man buckled.

Instead of moving away, though, the woman flowed instantly forward again, sobbing as if she were the one who'd been injured. The man *had to* collapse; but instead, somehow he turned, sliding behind her as if he'd expected the maneuver. Or as if she had deliberately left herself open. One massive forearm suddenly clamped across her throat while his other curved lower, above her waist, pulling her against him to trap her

there, and for just a moment, she sagged into him as if relieved. He murmured soft words even as his forearm tightened against her throat.

No one moved.

But then she snarled, in denial: *still* refusing the truth. One tautly-muscled leg flashed vertically upward to smash against Crazy Bee's face with the impact of a club, rocking his head backward as blood gushed from his now-broken nose.

But his hold did not falter, his grip did not shift. Tipping himself backwards, he fell heavily to the floor, absorbing the impact as best he could.

Shining Hair smashed her head back into her husband's chest, each impact sounding like a mallet blow, screaming her defiance and desperation. He withstood each strike, murmuring still in her ear, tears running from his craggy face as he carefully tightened his grip across her neck, silencing her cries even as those cries changed to panicked attempts to draw breath. She struggled harder, the fury of her smaller body arching his own much larger form forward into a bow.

But still his grip did not ease, and slowly her movements weakened even as the desperation in her cries grew, and his tears flowed harder, as if his soul broke.

Long seconds passed as her struggles faltered; and, finally, ceased. She fell still. For a few seconds more he held his grip, eyes closed, panting but alert even now for a trick: he knew his wife. But at last he released his arm from her neck and awkwardly slid her gently to the ground, eyes now imploring the shaman. "Please. Aunt White-Eyes. Check my wife. Check our unborn child."

The blind woman moved forward, the strangely beautiful dance of terror and love that she had sensed, now settled into an awful pool of peace – and of terrible fear. The blood dripping from his nose to the floor shone in her Sight like flares of molten fire.

Tears flowed freely down her own face as she moved forward to sink beside the man, her hands moving surely over the woman, dreading what she would find –

but soon amazed at how little injury Shining Hair had suffered in the furious melee. She sensed the small life within, shaken and frightened, and sent it soothing waves of reassurance, of calm.

"She is well. *Both* are well. She will wake, soon. But what then, Crazy Bee?"

"Then: I *hope*."

-

She swam up into consciousness with a strange reluctance, as if not wanting-

Remembering, ashamed, she gasped, leaping to full awareness, lurching upward, her eyes darting.

She lay in their own tepee-dome, while her husband sat calmly across from her, sketch-pad in his lap, head down as he drew. One leg stretched out awkwardly before him as if his kneecap ached, and one of his eyes was swollen shut. His whole face was bruised and purpled. Her eyes widened in shock. *I did all that!* she suddenly remembered.

One hand flashed to her belly, and the relief that flooded through her almost made her groan. But her - other? - daughter?

They've taken Happy Mouth!

She lunged forward, grabbing the pad from her husband's lap; furious with herself, furious that *he* could be sketching-

Oh.

A long dark line now scored his drawing, but the scene struck her with the same force, the same sickening blow to the belly as when the shaman had shared it earlier.

His pencil sketch showed the once-green lands of the Sky Corn community as the burned and charred wasteland of the second vision: charcoal spears that had once been pines, now sharp black bones extruded from the earth; blackened triangular spars, the skeletons of scorched geodesic tepees. He'd been partway through drawing a carbonized skeleton. A very small carbonized skeleton. Her breath caught in her throat, and she flung the sketch pad away and rose, stalking to

the entry-way.

She paused. "Where is-?"

"When I asked you to marry me," his quiet words from behind her somehow stopped her own. He continued in that same gentle voice. The same love in the tone as when he had fought her, when he'd been forced to risk their unborn child's safety by rendering her unconscious. "I promised to respect your wishes. Today, for the first time in our lives together I could not do that. If you wish me to leave, to find a different tent, then... then I will." He pulled angrily at his hair, like he wanted to tear it out. "Just *think*. That's all I ask.

"*Think*. I swear, 'Lita, in my bones: I know if we do as your heart begs you to do – as mine begs me! – within two weeks the Sky Corn will be a sea of ash blowing in the wind, and Fate alone knows what sick vengeance he'll visit on us. And on Happy Mouth, to hurt us best. *He won't kill us*, 'Lita. He has people surgically altered for his amusement! Remember his own *daughter*?"

"Have you finished, 'B?" She refused the truth, turning away. "Good. Then I'm going to find where they've sent our daughter, and get her back. With or without your help. I'll–"

"She's not gone, yet. They're waiting for your okay."

"*What?*"

"I stand by my vows to you, Shining Hair. I always have, and I always will. If you go, I will go too."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Refusing the doubts; refusing to even acknowledge them.

Her husband unfolded without his normal fluid grace as he stood, then limped across the small living space to his splayed-open artist's pad. Picking it up, favoring his left side, he limped back to his wife still standing at the doorway. A part of her, an old and well-trained part, realized he must have had some healing already, or he would not have been able to use his knee at all.

Flipping to the nearly-completed sketch, he held it up before her as he moved behind her, pulling her into

his embrace. It was a measure of the depth of their understanding that she knew this was no ploy. There would be no more choke holds.

"Just look. And listen to me.

"The Chief told the second vision to the whole tribe. And they understood. Yet they also understood your reaction. And they decided. They have already risked all their lives, all their dreams for the future, to aid us once. And they spoke again, and decided to entrust all they have and all they strive for, to us, again. To *you*. To your decision.

"It's your decision, Shining Hair. Let Happy Mouth be taken away. Or take her, and go.

"They leave it in your hands.

"They ask *only* that you to take time to think, and feel, before you decide."

Neither spoke, and abruptly, he felt the tension in her shatter. She collapsed into his arms, an awful keening wrenched from deep within her. Like she were dying. Or their daughter was.

He made the call.

Outside their tepee, the wise-woman waited for them both. As the mother moved to step angrily past, the blind shaman spoke. Softly. "Stay. Do not say goodbye to her."

"What? That's crazy! She's only *four years old*."

"Will she suffer more knowing her parents gave her away, or if she can tell herself she was taken against their will?"

Shining Hair's fists clenched till the knuckles glowed white. Then slowly, she nodded.

"Shining Hair. Crazy Bee."

Their desperate gazes snapped from each other, to the wise-woman's sad, blind eyes.

"Our Way is not violence. We do not believe that death and bloodshed is ever a solution."

They simply stared grimly back, growing still more angry at her, she Saw. "Yet my second vision speaks of a powerful evil that moves unopposed. Perhaps there is

yet a reason for your daughter's terrible Way, a reason we are not wise enough to see."

By their auras, the shaman saw her tiny seed of hope take root. And at that moment, also sensed the child's painting clutched in the woman's hand, wisps of love curled through the paper: the sense of a child standing between her father and mother, the adult female figure gently swelling with the promise of life.

-

"Why are we going this way? Where's mama?"

Not answering, the woman continued leading the child to the edge of the village. A land skiff sat rigged and ready in the moon's clear light, the young warrior chosen to remove the child scowling beside it.

"Oh! Look there, a land boat. And the Chief! Will he give me my growed-up name?"

The shaman had already been and gone, summoning a wind spirit to fill the sails of the small land yacht. The woman and the girl reached the Chief, and the child risked a smile when they stopped.

He did not smile in return. "Remember these words, child: a Human Being kills only for food."

Confused, she repeated them solemnly. She'd seen other naming ceremonies, for her older friends, and knew this was different. More serious somehow.

She waited, a little bit scared. Maybe she wasn't going to get a Bear name after all?

The Chief's large hand clasped around hers, leading her to the land skiff where Aunt High Mirror and one of the young hunters, Walks Straight, stood. The adults didn't smile. She looked around. Where were her parents?

When they stopped, the Chief turned her to each of the four directions, then to the sky, and finally to the earth. To each he spoke the words that took away her Child name, giving it into the care of those Powers. When she had no name, he turned the girl child to him. He looked tired. Old.

The girl put one small hand to his cheek, trying to cheer him up. But the gesture only seemed to make

him sadder.

"You are no longer Happy Mouth." The ritual words fell heavily from his lips. "You are no longer alive to the Sky Corn community. Your parents are dead to you."

Her eyes widened, and her hand fell away.

"You go now to the white man's lands, so you will take a name for the white man. You will take the name *Sara*."

She shook her head once, slowly, then stood stunned, shocked into immobility, trying to absorb the meaning of the Chief's words.

He handed the young hunter a folded white paper and reminded him what to do when they reached the lands of the *Wasichus*. Walks Straight nodded curtly, then circled the skiff, checking the brakes and squeezing its tires in a final inspection before leaping up and over the side. Swinging past the rigging lines, he hoisted the mainsail while the Chief lifted the girl and placed her on a seat.

"Where's mama?"

"Your mother is dead to you now, Sara. We can not have killers here."

She struggled to understand.

Walks Straight checked the reef in the sails. Releasing the brakes as he eased out the boom, cloth billowed taut as it caught the wind and the skiff pulled away, jolting over the rough ground and quickly gathering speed.

"I didn't kill anything, grandfather!" Sara screamed back, her small face straining over the lip of the hull.

Drops of moonlit silver glistened on suddenly-pale cheeks, sparkling faintly as Night swallowed the land yacht.

"But you will, Sara. You will," he whispered sadly into the wind.

PART I

(Four years later)

CHAPTER 1

Enough, thought Dr Alex Harmon, and draped the spell delicately over the Mother Superior's mind. Paging through student records in the grim office of the orphanage, he watched from the corner of his eye, amused, as she forced her teeth to unclench – again. But now, he heard her outraged thoughts as though they echoed in his own mind: «*Browsing through my children's files like they're items in a shopping catalog!*»

Dust motes glimmered in the watery sunlight, drifting through the room's still air. Seated at the other side of her heavy oaken desk, he felt the weight of the nun's stare.

He looked up, unable to keep the hint of a smile from his lips. "Really, sister, this would have been so much easier for us both if you kept your records online."

"My first concern is caring for my children, Dr Harmon," she snapped. With his spell still running, he also picked up the following thought: «*Not in making it easy for corporations to examine them.*»

He raised one eyebrow, puzzled by her mis-identification. But all he said aloud was "None of your charges seem to have tested positive for any sign of Unfolding. Statistically, I would-"

"You won't find anyone with magical potential in the orphanage records."

He was no longer amused. "Sister, I did ask to see the records of *all* the children here. If you recheck the papers I presented, you'll see that I have permission-"

"You won't find anyone with magical potential because there *are* none, doctor. Any that test positive are auctioned off to corporations like Asgard or Medigene by the government. Or taken by the government itself."

"Really: *auctioned* off?"

"That's what the 'normal procedure' amounts to, yes," she snapped.

About to reply, a sudden thought made him pause: was *this* why his research request had been granted – they thought there was nothing *to* grant? Still, if his theories were correct, he only needed to find a child with just a bud of potential, to be able to Unfold them

into full magical ability. Calmly, he returned to studying the orphanage records.

He noted the nun slide the second form in front of her again, and heard the echo of her thoughts as she re-read the paragraph which had disturbed her so much. *«The adoption of (blank) by Dr Alexander Harmon has been duly investigated and approved... custody being granted herewith.»*

When he'd presented her with his documentation he'd watched, at first appalled by the certainty with which she had challenged its validity with Govnet; but soon delighted by her dismay when that challenge had been rejected.

Even then, though, she had refused to accept the validity of the automated response. "After all, 'Doctor,' you could have hacked the government site," she had stated, then insisted on making a direct link to someone in Child Affairs. So they had both had to suffer through a period of mind-numbing '20's German 'neu-rock' hold-music interspersed with jarring reminders that 'a service representative will be available shortly.' A period during which she refused to allow him to begin examining her records. Eventually, however, she spoke to a pleasant young woman who assured her that, no, everything was perfectly in order. One minute later Mother Superior Mary Prović had disconnected, and reluctantly handed over her *paper* records.

Apparently, a bureaucratic bungle of enormous proportions had occurred. But it would be all for naught unless—

Ah-ha! Extracting some papers from the file, he leaned back in his chair. For a moment he met the nun's gaze, keeping the triumph from his face as he settled back to examine his find.

He kept part of his attention on her thoughts — highly illegal, but such an advantage in negotiations. *«Sara,»* she was thinking. *«Of course. Full of energy, always in trouble — yet beyond that, something somehow odd about her. Yes, of course it would be Sara.»*

Harmon looked up, calmly meeting the Mother Su-

perior's cold stare, and began prodding. "Well, sister, I think I may have found... who I came for. I'm sure you won't mind having Sara sent for?"

He searched the folder he held for a surname, but found none. "Just 'Sara,' sister? Isn't that a little unorthodox?"

"It was clearly indicated on the paperwork provided by her people that 'Sara' was her full and complete name." Her annoyance at that unorthodoxy was clear in both her body language and her thoughts.

Without shifting her glare from him she stabbed a button on her ancient intercom. "Sister Augustine: please have someone bring Sara to me as soon as possible."

A brief electrical crackle accompanied the response. "Umm. I'll see what I can do."

Harmon raised one eyebrow at the doubt in Sister Augustine's voice, but the mother superior pointedly ignored him, swinging her chair around and shifting her gaze to the decayed dockyard outside the window. Harmon saw her shoulders relax as she turned. *«Let's see how you deal with our attic-haunting little eight-year-old demon.»*

A few minutes passed.

"Of course, I *will* need some time alone with Sara, before I can make my final decision," he said.

The mother superior swung back round to him, taking a great deal of satisfaction in her reply. "Not while the young lady is in *my* care you won't. Out of the question, Dr Harmon."

Sensing she wanted a fight, Harmon simply inclined his head and smiled. "As you wish, sister." Steepling his fingers he settled back into his chair, while she glared at him once more before turning her back to look out the window.

Silence descended. It hung heavily in the room as uncomfortable minutes inched past.

Ten minutes passed; fifteen. At last he could no longer contain his impatience. "Sister, I am a very busy man. Is there a problem? Do you not know where your

charges are?"

The nun spun her chair back to face him. "Please don't let us keep you here, doctor. I'm sure there are other orphanages in which to do your *shopping*."

Needled, but hiding the fact, he sat back in his chair. "I can wait. I was simply expressing surprise that you are having such difficulty in locating one of your charges."

"As I said, please don't let us detain you."

He shook his head, not deigning to answer. He would be doing the girl a favor, removing her from such ineptitude.

Silence descended again. The nun made a show of taking back her records and re-filing them. Harmon hardly needed the telepathy spell to tell she disliked being in a position of weakness, and her thoughts confirmed his assessment. *«Really, the girl is impossible! Perhaps this is for the best, after all.»*

Harmon began tapping a slow beat on the arm of his chair, pretending to be unaware of just how much it irritated her.

At last there was a gentle rap on the door, before it burst open an instant later. A small, colorfully dressed girl arrowed into the room, flapping her arms and startling him backward in his chair.

"AAAARK! AARK!" She raced once around him before coming to a halt and folding her hands under her armpits. She glared at him, then cocked her head to one side: "Aaark." Long black hair, a round face. Alert amber-flecked eyes, brown skin, freshly-grubby pink jeans.

The mother superior's open mouth closed, and she collected herself with a visible effort. "Sara! If you don't start behaving like a young lady rather than some crazy thing, *at once*, it will be six of the best!"

Sara pouted. "But I'm an eagle." After a moment, though, she added a final, almost-polite "aark" of compliance.

Sister Rowena had cautiously followed the girl in. "I'm sorry for the delay, Mother, but Sara had climbed

to the top of the old elm again.”

“Because eagles like trees,” Sara whispered.

“Oh Sara,” Harmon began, before the nun could reprimand her further. “An eagle is *just* what I’ve been looking for.”

An hour later, Sara slumped deep in the back seat of the cab, neither looking back nor waving farewell to the two nuns who had followed them out. Harmon entered the cab too and gave their destination to the driver, who met his eyes in the mirror with a worried expression. Only fares deemed commercially risky – or high status – warranted a human driver. Harmon simply frowned at the man, then settled back.

The nuns had of course been aware that he had cast spells on the girl, and also that he had been satisfied with the results. But he had been careful to do nothing overt enough to allow them to file a complaint, and they had clearly had no idea he had begun the initial mental adjustments – the erasures – right under their noses. Especially after he had slowed his pace to avoid any suspicions. Sara, too, had settled down, rather to his surprise. He had expected her to become fractious, but instead she had rapidly tired.

The cab pulled out from the curb and headed down the shabby street. In the gutter, two grubby children continued their game of ‘rock death-match,’ while a tramp yawned, spat, and staggered up from the pile of refuse he’d been nesting in. But as their gazes locked, the intensity in the man’s eyes surprised Harmon. The impression of more-than-casual interest was so strong he considered probing the hobo’s mind, but there simply wasn’t time.

For some reason, though, the ‘encounter’ made the oddity of his pre-approved adoption spring to mind. He shook his head, annoyed at the transparent fears of his subconscious.

Don’t be ridiculous, he told himself. *What am I suspecting: a government conspiracy assisting my research? How would they even know of it?* Never assume conspiracy when stupidity was sufficient explana-

tion. No doubt some programming or other human error had worked in his favor in acquiring his test subject.

Ward, rather. He had better become accustomed to referring to the girl as his *ward*. Human experimentation was highly illegal, especially since '38.

Passing the empty lot at the corner of the street, the cab turned, the nuns and the old brown-brick orphanage – and the tramp – disappearing from sight.

CHAPTER 2

They reached the Golden Gate Bridge, Sara still struggling against her exhaustion. Finally she sat up with an obvious effort, then simply clonked her forehead against the window and rested it there. He wanted to ask her what she remembered of her life before the orphanage, but didn't dare do so at this early stage, while the erasures were still fresh.

He continued observing her. For a long period she didn't move, though in the reflection he could see her eyes tracking back and forth as she took in the changing scenery.

By the time they'd left the 101 behind and entered the rolling Sonoma hills, though, she seemed a little revived. Once or twice she summoned enough energy to point out the occasional horse, even exclaiming in surprise at the cows.

It *was* good to see the herds again, though the grapevines still struggled. Compared to his childhood memories, the hills appeared blasted. He sighed and eased back in his seat, ignoring the girl's occasional childish remark while he planned ahead.

At last, in the distance, the wall encircling the Institute signaled the end of their journey. The high, pale stone barrier hugged the gentle curves of the extensive grounds. Every meter, of course, magically warded and electronically monitored. The cabbie's eyes met his again in the rear view mirror, the usual fearful expression a mere irritant after so many years. At least the annoyance factor was balanced by the knowledge that with a human cab driver he could take control should he ever need to.

Still, Harmon cut him off before the fellow could speak. "It is perfectly safe, I assure you. Just stop outside the gates to let the security drone scan us and we'll be allowed in. Nor will you have any trouble in leaving, provided you do so directly. You *will* be monitored while inside: do not do anything foolish, like accepting an unusual fare on your way out."

The cabbie laughed, nervously.

Not that any inmates were allowed outside without supervision. Close supervision. He shouldn't needle the cabbies, he knew, but their knee-jerk fear always

annoyed.

“Are we here?” Sara piped up. “What will the drone look-?”

A low hum announced the arrival of the mottled-green device. The optics mounted in its insect-like fuselage locked on the cabin as it quickly swung around to Harmon’s window. Turning toward it to simplify its job, he let it scan and ID him, then waited while it circled the vehicle, looking down into the floor spaces and under the vehicle. It zoomed off, and the heavy iron gates swung wide: access approved. The cabbie accelerated smoothly up the winding road through the wooded acreage then finally out into the cleared area surrounding the Institute proper, eventually halting on the gravel courtyard by the wide sandstone steps of the main entrance.

Sara sighed and clambered out while he settled the account. The fellow wasted no time in removing her meager belongings from the trunk and jumping back in to drive off – escorted, Harmon saw, by one of Shananahan’s less-obtrusive security drones.

Sara was staring up at the building, and though her eyes drooped with tiredness he could see she was intrigued. *Still not recovered. Probably a good thing I disengaged the mental probe when I did.* Though he suspected it was more a reaction to the *adjustments* he’d made rather than to the simple mindmeld. Still, he frowned. It could indicate a problem ahead.

A little later he stood with two of her small suitcases of clothing while she clutched the third herself, struggling with its size and weight but determined to manage it on her own.

A heavier-duty drone emerged from a window-port and swooped to a halt in front of them. “Evening, Dr Harmon.” Shanahan’s voice came from the drone. “So you were successful, were you? Or do we have a baby villain here?”

“I’m *not* a devil girl. I’m *good*.”

Harmon blinked, and the drone’s silence suggested equal surprise from the security officer.

"Thank you, Sara, we know that. Mr Shanahan was just making a rather foolish joke."

She frowned up at the drone. "I'm not gonna kill people."

This time, even Harmon was lost for words. Several long seconds passed before Shanahan's softly-accented voice spoke again. "Uh, that's good, darlin", that's real good. Maybe Dr Harmon could show you into Admissions and imprint you on the security systems." The drone pivoted its lens toward Harmon. "Her room's ready, Doc. The bots've cleaned up the empty office next to yours just fine, and I've had a bed and all set up.

"Surprised everyone, Doc, when we heard you were adopting. Never figured you for the parenting kind. No offense."

"None taken. Appearances can be deceptive. Is Professor Sanders expecting us?"

"He said he thought you'd both be tired, and you could see him tomorrow afternoon."

That was not unexpected – Sanders ran the Institute with too gentle a hand – but it was quite welcome news, nonetheless. "Very well. Thank you, Shanahan."

"You want me to come out and help you with that luggage?" came the voice from the drone. "Sara looks-"

"I can carry it. I'm very strong," she said, frowning up at the hovering drone.

It wiggled in response. "Right. Okay. Good. I look forward to meeting you in person, young lady." The drone swept off, disappearing around the outside of the building. Harmon turned to Sara, surprised to see tears in her eyes.

"I didn't do anything wrong! Why did he say that!"

"Say what, Sara? Call you a baby villain? He was just-"

"Not *that*. 'Young lady.' But I was just *standing* here! Why does everyone always think I'm bad?" Her lips trembled, but she stood her ground, staring at him as they faced one another, there at the bottom of the pale stone steps leading up to the front entrance, demanding her answer.

“‘Young lady’ is merely a polite way of referring to a girl of your age, Sara. Why would you assume it was... Ah. Sister Prović referred to you that way, didn’t she? When you were in trouble. I see.”

She stared up at him doubtfully. “I’m *not* in trouble?”

“No. You’re not.”

“Oh.” She continued watching him, and an odd expression crossed her face. “Are you going to be my father?”

He choked, flinching back. “Good god, no! Certainly not!”

“Then what *will* you be? Didn’t you adopt me?”

“Yes. That makes you my ward, and me your guardian.”

“I don’t need guarding.”

“It doesn’t mean- Never mind. Consider me your Uncle.”

“Uncle.”

“Yes: *Uncle*. Do you have a problem with that?”

It was clearly less than she’d hoped for, he suddenly saw. But in the end, she nodded her acceptance, as though consenting to a deal.

“I’m not a devil girl.”

“Did the nuns call you that?”

“Sometimes. When they got cross with me. Then they’d get all funny and hush each other. But that’s what they really thought. That’s why they gave me away.” She looked away. “That’s why they always give me away.”

“Those people didn’t understand you, Sara. They were afraid of you. But I see your potential, and it doesn’t frighten me.”

She looked back at him, blinking watery eyes, her expression slowly changing. He saw a faint hope dawning, the defensive lines melting away. *This could be a critical moment*. Quickly re-casting the mindmeld he settled it lightly over her. Illegal, and an invasion of privacy, yet necessary for his research.

But the tsunami of warmth that flooded in almost

undid him. «*He understands me! Maybe he will-*»

He dropped the spell, retreating from the wall of affection as if it were a cliff's edge seductively calling him forward. It took effort to pull himself together. *Too close.* He'd ended the spell just in time: the force of her longing had been... immense.

But it would not do to become emotionally attached to his test subject. Not with what he would have to put her through.

Forcing a smile, he indicated their suitcases. "Come along, Sara. I'll introduce you to the security system, then show you to your room."

Still shaken, he led the way up the wide steps, both doors swinging open at his approach. He strode inside, Sara struggling like a small boat in his wake, hauling her suitcase in both hands.

With the correct authority level, introducing Sara to the security systems was merely a matter of a few scans and some non-invasive bio-sampling. The whole procedure took little time, and they soon left the small booth and headed to the main staircase, then up four flights to the second level. He had to pause at the top as she struggled up with her single case. Then down the long corridor to his office.

"This is the door to my work area and rooms, Sara. Your room is this next one."

He put her cases down, opening her door and turning back to see her still eyeing the ceramic-copper plaque on his office, clearly struggling with his research area, 'Metamagical Resonance.'

But when she saw him studying her, all she asked was if his first name was 'Alex.'

He narrowed his eyes. "I think it best you call me 'Uncle,' Sara."

At the way she shrank back into herself he felt a pang of guilt. It was for her own good, though. "Come along. I'll show you your room."

She didn't move. "But...?"

"Yes?"

"You're a doctor?"

"Yes. Surely you can read well enough to—"

"And you help the people here."

"Yes. But I doubt you would understand my work."

"Am I sick? Is *that* why you adopted me?"

His mind went blank. How did he respond to *that*?

"You don't really want *me*."

"I most certainly do, Sara. You are very important to me." He almost added: *I think you will be of enormous value to my research*, but stopped himself in time. It could be very awkward if she came to realize that.

"But rest assured, you are not sick."

"Then why *did* you want me?"

"Because I see great potential in you, and could not bear to see it wasted by having you raised by a group of withered religious fanatics."

That drew a smile, and she covered her mouth with one hand. "Sister *Rowena* wasn't withered," she giggled.

Afterward, in the cafeteria, Harmon showed her how to operate the dinner machine. She selected ham carbonara with fried eggs, he opted for a synth-steak and vegetables, and then they chose their drinks. He'd half expected to have to stop her from ordering a Coke, but to his surprise she hadn't even considered the soft drinks. Perhaps the nuns hadn't been totally inept in raising her? Instead, she had copied his drink order, opting for the same glass of sparkling mineral water and a Japanese green tea. At the table, her nose wrinkled as she sipped the hot drink suspiciously, all the while watching him carefully but saying nothing. They sat in silence, studying one another, while he struggled to think of a suitable topic of conversation for an eight-year-old girl.

The arrival of the two attendants for this wing was a relief. A small blonde woman, and that black fellow who looked like he'd been a quarter-back. What were their names? Monica? Miranda? And the man – it was Martin, wasn't it? M-something, anyway. The two

stopped by their table, the woman crouching down to Sara's eye level.

"Hi, sweetie, I'm Nerida, and this is Dwayne. You must be Sara."

"Um, yeah. I just got here today."

"I know, sweetheart, you're already in the system. And not as an inmate, either," she winked. "So our Dr Harmon has adopted you, has he?" Her eyes swung to his, a definite challenge in her glance. "A little odd, bringing up a child here of all places," she said to him, before looking back to his ward. "What happened to your parents, dear? If you don't mind me asking?"

Sara looked down at the table, her jaw set stubbornly. "They sent me away 'coz they thought I was bad." She looked up defiantly. "But I'm not, I'm good. And I'm *not* going to do the devil's work, nuh-uh." She shook her head.

Silence reigned until Sara helpfully filled it. "I'm not going to kill anybody, either. *People* kill only for food."

The silence stretched even longer. Before Sara could explain further, Nerida stood, and both attendants, smiles now frozen to their faces, took a step back. "Uh, that's good. That's good to know. But, ah, we just dropped by to say hi, and Dwayne is taking me out to dinner."

Dwayne's mouth opened. "I-?"

"*Come on*, Dwayne, we don't want to be late. Bye, Sara. G'night Dr Harmon. I'm sure you and Sara will get along *just fine*. You two seem a nice match." Tugging Dwayne's hand, she backed away and left the cafeteria.

"*They* were a bit strange, weren't they, um, Uncle?"

Someone at this table certainly is, he thought.

After dinner he'd taken her back to her room and left her to unpack. Instead, she went straight back into her bathroom – *her* bathroom! – and hugged herself. Her own bathroom! She-, uh...

She frowned. It seemed real nice to have her own bathroom, but all of a sudden, she wasn't quite sure

why.

Anyway.

She looked around, checked out the cupboard under the sink – spare toilet paper, tubes of cream, shampoo and more – stood on tiptoe to eye herself in the mirror, tried the taps for the bath, flushed the toilet, and then froze, staring at the ceiling.

Oh, wow!

It had a secret trap door up there, just like back at, back at, the... oh, yeah, how could she have forgotten? Back at the orphanage! But instead of being down the end of a corridor, out in the open and tricky to get to, it was right here *inside her own room!* She looked around, biting her lip, wondering how she could get up to it.

But without warning, the tiredness washed back through her. Besides, she didn't want to explore everything all at once. She should save stuff up for later.

She smiled, sleepily.

It sure looked like she had lots of exploring ahead of her!

A knocking sound from outside made her start, and she tiptoed back into the main room – *her* main room! - to investigate. It came again, from the door, and she realized someone *was knocking on her door!* With a delighted smile, she crossed the room and opened it, to find her new uncle standing there. What were you supposed to say...?

"Can I help you?" she asked.

He blinked several times before shutting his mouth and frowning slightly. He held a bunch of smartsheets at his side. *For me?* "Would you like to come in?"

He looked at her sideways, still frowning a little, but stepped into her room. What was she supposed to do next? "May I get you a glass of water?"

Still frowning, he transferred the 'sheets from his right hand to his left and stretched and wriggled his fingers in a funny little dance, like he'd done back... before, then looked at her. Really deeply, actually. It made her a little uncomfortable, like he could see in-

side.

This wasn't how things worked in the vids, and she looked around, trying to remember any stories where the guest behaved weird. Suddenly, though, her uncle laughed, ruffled the hair on her head, and started acting like visitors were supposed to.

"Thank you, Sara. Yes, a glass of water would be wonderful."

She smiled, relieved that she was doing it right after all, and dashed back into the bathroom where she'd seen a mug standing on the basin. She filled it to the brim and carried it back carefully with both hands so as not to spill a drop, and handed it to him. She felt strangely grown-up as he smiled and took it, despite the tricky business of getting it from her hands to his while both hers were still wrapped around it.

But then he just stood there, and she had to ask him if the water was nice before he even took a drink.

After that, though, he seemed to settle down, and together they browsed the net for books and vids to download to the 'sheets. Mostly he steered her to really old stuff, ages before the Unfolding, just like at the, the... just like she was used to. They found lots of stuff on African animals, as well as one that sounded 'specially good, about a king of the lions. He also loaded a map of the Institute like he'd promised, and then spent some time pointing out stuff like where she could put her dirty clothes for the 'bots to launder; and zooming around the grounds. There were also a couple of smaller buildings quite close by. One of them was Mr Shanahan's, he said – the security man who'd spoken to her from the drone.

A lot of the map of the Institute building itself was kind of sketchy, though, and marked as unused. She thought her uncle looked a little sad when she asked why, but he just said it was complicated. Which was what grown-ups said when they didn't want to tell you stuff.

There were a whole bunch of 'interview' and 'treatment' rooms, mostly on the levels below and above this

one. She noticed there were two basement levels, too, which he tried to distract her from. Which probably meant they'd be especially good to explore. But she was extra careful not to look *too* interested in them.

Finally, he helped her unpack her clothes and craft stuff. By that time, though, her tiredness had come back and she could hardly keep her eyes open. At last he said goodnight and left her to clean her teeth. She clambered onto her bed and fell straight to sleep.

From his office, Harmon activated the holovid he himself had concealed in Sara's room.

She lay on her bed, surrounded by a scattering of the smartsheets to which they had 'printed' all the pre-Un-folding and copyright-expired children's vids and books they had downloaded. And the free superhero trids and movies she had been so keen on. He focused his trideo camera upon her little form, until her small face floated in the air before him, just within arm's reach. She seemed tired still, and slightly confused. The more he considered that fact, the more it indicated a problem.

Deep in thought, he tapped a stylus against his teeth. The conclusion, unfortunately, appeared quite clear. She still suffered from the effects of his magical adjustments in the nun's office. Although... perhaps that was as interesting as it was annoying? The spark he sought to fan to life, though unquenchable by normal means, seemed in some ways delicate when shaped by the currents of magic. It *could* be interpreted as striking confirmation he was on the right track: that the human spirit itself was akin to the paranormal patterning of magic. Perhaps even, was constituted of the same stuff.

He stared at the girl, tapping his stylus. Shutting his eyes, he mulled the possibilities.

And gently, slowly, drifted into sleep....

He stood in an American forest – old, undisturbed. Searching. Searching for something he had trained, some animal. Down dark trails he traveled, following faint scents. Gradually, though, he grew aware of an-

other presence; and sensed that it, too, felt *him*. Searched for him: hunting. His pulse quickened as he realized he had come too far, that he needed to leave. He turned, retreating.

It followed.

He ran, knowing it drew closer, gaining ground.

Running, bushes tearing at him, he burst from the forest, heart pounding in fear. Turning to look back he saw it emerge from the trees: a mountain lion. With feline grace it padded closer, jaws a little open. He met its eyes. And saw Death.

It gathered speed, padding faster, accelerating, but now he stood transfixed: the eyes were not a cat's: the eyes were amber-flecked – Sara's. A growl escaped its throat as muscles bunched for the attack.

The noise broke his paralysis. Suddenly free, he wrenched himself around, leapt-

And sat up straight in his office chair, panting.

A dream!

His heart still raced. He also realized he felt strangely disturbed, and had the beginnings of an erection.

Dismissing the physical reaction and shrugging off an odd feeling of unease, his fingers drummed as he contemplated the rest of it. Perhaps... could his dream have taken him through the strange layers of the Imaginal? Had he in reality tapped into the great Unconscious?

On his video feed Sara, asleep, moaned as if in frustration.

CHAPTER 3

At breakfast the next day, eating her second bowl of muesli, the girl seemed fully recovered. Harmon tried to mull all the various possibilities, but thoughts of the upcoming session with his most challenging patient kept distracting him. His wristcomm chimed, and he took the call from the Director.

“Just checking that you’d seen your patient’s latest missive, Dr Harmon.”

He didn’t need to ask which patient Professor Sanders referred to: ninety percent of his attention went to the Institute’s most troublesome case. “You mean last night’s one, where he wrote of sensing a ‘disturbance in the Force?’ Rather mixing his metaphors. You are aware, Director, that it’s a quote from a very old Hollywood movie?”

“Really? Odd timing, though – matches your arrival last night. The Synchronicity Effect, you think? We know he can’t sense beyond his cell. Not through *those* Wards.”

“I agree, Director. I really don’t see that it would be possible. I’ll check their integrity however, as always, when I see him.”

“Good, good. Do take care, though.” The Director disconnected.

Sara looked ready to burst with questions, but he waved her off. “Just my work.” He ignored her pout, easing back in his chair as he recalled ‘Godsson’s’ arrival.

Not that he would ever forget it.

Five years ago Godsson had been brought in, not by ambulance, nor police escort, nor even by FBI helicopter. No, Godsson had been carried in, unconscious, in the arms of a Chinese man. A man whose arrival had made all the Barriers at the Institute’s boundaries flare into alert, clawing at the pair as if they were spirits rather than corporeal beings.

The magical Barriers were only there to counter arcane intrusions. At the time, they had assumed the trespasser was attended by unseen entities, now held at bay beyond the walls. Otherwise, he could not have entered....

No one who had raced out to confront the intruders

had had the slightest idea how they'd arrived: there had been no vehicle of any kind. Just the front gates wrenching open and the powerfully-built oriental man stalking up the long winding road to the main entrance, somehow traversing the half kilometer in under a minute.

It had been Harmon and the previous Director – and at that time, the more-numerous orderlies – who had faced the fellow, then, on the graveled path.

The sheer force of will radiating from the man had been disconcerting, even as Harmon had noted the strange injuries to them both – not burns, or cuts, or bruises, but stranger *alterations* – patches of skin with a glassy sheen, the flesh itself a sheath over something black underneath. Twitches and movements where there were no muscles or tendons; disturbing ridges....

He still didn't like to think too deeply about that.

There was something strange about the man's eyes, too: as if tiny chips of gold gleamed in the near-black irises. A cosmetic alteration?

"It is done. Melisande d'Artelle is dead. We won."

It was only then that they realized who he was. Who *they* were. Harmon remembered how Director French had gasped beside him, as they all belatedly recognized Lord Lao Pi Shen, the New Emperor of China and self-proclaimed dragon. He and his small team – the second team to make the attempt – had been missing, presumed lost or dead now for three months.

"This is... Benson?" the Director had asked. "But what of your third member? The monk?"

The golden motes in the man's dark eyes glittered as he stared at them, considering.

"Victory, as ever, came with a cost. My companions fought bravely, but...."

The powerful voice shivered, almost cracking. Hearing *that* had been strangely disturbing; seeing a fissure in the indomitable certainty that wreathed him. In the sudden silence, Harmon had found himself wishing the man would hold back the words on his lips, as if he expected a curse.

“She had chosen to retreat to a place where no... person... should ever stand. A place that casts long shadows. Where every action has consequences. It was well for us all that she reached it only shortly before we did.”

No one spoke.

“And there we slew her.”

He had gazed at Harmon then; and as if the man had spoken, the young magical researcher sensed that there had been some *other* price for that death; a price as yet unpaid. Those dark eyes had held his before tracking very deliberately down to the young man held casually in his bronzed arms. Harmon felt his own eyes dragged down to the unconscious, innocuous-looking man cradled there. Held out now to him.

Your problem now. The words sounded inside his head as the man, or dragon, stepped forward and Harmon found his own arms lifting without conscious thought to accept the burden. Which suddenly lightened, though Harmon had seen just the sketchiest motion of spell-casting.

“What- what’s wrong with Benson? I thought, that is, his reputation, surely...?”

Some had said Benson was perhaps as powerful as Shen; perhaps as powerful as d’Artelle herself. Harmon struggled to marshal his thoughts. “Why did you bring him *here*, to us?”

“Because here is where he needs to be.” The *satisfaction* in the accompanying smile made Harmon’s hackles rise. “Unfortunately, his mind has broken and he now represents a great danger to us all.”

“But why not keep him in your own country? Surely, you are better placed...”

There was the slightest twitch to the eyebrows, the faintest gleam of malicious pleasure in the strange gold-and-black eyes, and he stopped, sensing that every word he spoke somehow made him appear more naïve in the eyes of the dragon. Who, somewhat to his surprise, answered his question. In a fashion.

“Well, since the Fey-born declined to help, she can

hardly object to hosting her replacement during his... convalescence.”

Again, the faintest emphasis on the final word made Harmon feel he was missing something important. And who did he mean by ‘the Fey-born?’ Surely not the trillionaire, Morag Feyborn – she’d been dead a decade. And what did he mean by ‘her replacement?’ Was he claiming the deceased Feyborn had been one of the two strangely-anonymous companions who’d made the first attempt, with him, to track down the Enemy of Mankind?

Shen’s statement raised more questions than it answered. Before Harmon could ask more, however, the man was moving.

“Come. We will need to strengthen and improve your Barriers. I will show you how: I will do that much, at least, to ease your burden.”

And with regal self-assuredness despite his tattered silk clothing, he swept past them and up the wide steps as if the building were his own.

Which was how, minutes later, Dr Alex Harmon, 36, had found himself assisting the man who was now very likely the most powerful mage on the planet as he constructed a series of towering, interleaved magical workings Harmon scarcely understood.

Lao Pi Shen had also worked with Harmon to mend the younger man’s disturbing injuries. Or perhaps *alterations*? A second working of magic, even subtler this time, and Harmon felt uncharacteristically humbled as he saw it wasn’t only the strength of the man’s magical power, but his knowledge and skills which clearly exceeded his own by at least an order of magnitude.

It had been humbling, yet also enlightening. It made him the only person still alive, as far as he knew – with the probable exception of their newest inmate – who had worked magic with the sorcerer who had recently come to rule China.

Harmon had dared to ask, then, how the third member of their team had died. The dragon lord had re-

mained silent so long he had decided there would be no answer, when their visitor finally responded.

“There are some humans whose spirit make even one such as I, humble. We would not have succeeded without his sacrifice.”

But after that, the dragon had spoken no more. Except, as he left – surrounded, to his apparent amusement, by a hastily-assembled group of State Department officials and FBI agents – to wryly observe that he thought their government would be wise, in the circumstance, not to hold him to task over his lack of a passport.

Harmon had half expected the man to depart as mysteriously as he had arrived, but instead, the Emperor of China had simply bent his frame elegantly to enter the provided limousine.

Harmon snapped out of his reverie, blinking, as Sara’s insistent tone ended his introspection.

“What is this place, anyway? Are we under the ground?”

“This is the Institute of Paranormal Dysfunction. I study magic, Sara, and what it means when it goes wrong inside people. Indeed, at the Institute we have one of the most skilled and powerful mages of our times. Unfortunately, something damaged his mind and he is here now to *be* studied: not to study *with* us.

“And no, we are not underground at present – although this building is such a maze of corridors it would be easy to imagine you were. Would you like to go outside into the fresh air?”

“Yeah!” She pushed her chair back and jumped up, ready to leave at once.

“*After* you have finished your breakfast, little one.”

She cocked her head to one side, staring at him. *Her eagle look*, he recalled with a smile. Structuring his will and thought, he gestured, and her chair returned, turning round a little toward her. Her eyes widened at the casual display of magic. Impressed and showing it, she returned to the table. “Do some *more* magic!” she demanded.

He cocked *his* head to one side. “Say *please*.”

She considered the command, pouting. He looked away, twirling his fingers idly, and had to conceal his satisfaction when at last she broke. “Please.”

“Very well.” He gestured again, frowning slightly in concentration. She dropped her spoon as it suddenly twisted in her hand, then gazed at it wide-eyed as it drifted down into her cereal bowl. Her eyes followed it avidly as it dipped to ladle up a mouthful and then float up to her mouth, which she opened with a delighted grin.

He almost jumped when she unexpectedly snapped forward, trapping the spoon. Then slowly, gently, drew back to slide it from her mouth, her eyes locked on his all the while. A spark seemed to leap between them.

Harmon felt quite... strange.

CHAPTER 4

She kept an eye on her new uncle, just in case he did more magic, while eating her cereal as fast as she could. But it still took *ages* to get outside.

Blinking in the bright sunlight she pushed open the too-slowly opening door, pausing on the top step and drawing in great big breaths of the air. It smelled weird but good, all kinds of rich scents that were nicer than those back in the city. They were somehow familiar though, and she frowned as she tried to remember where from.

Jumping down the steps two at a time, she raced across the gravel and onto the grassy area beyond, stretching her arms out in eagle wings to swoop in a wide banking turn, a single “Aaark!” escaping from her, that she just couldn’t hold inside. She paused then to look back at the building and the strange man who’d adopted her. As his hooded eyes watched her intently, she wondered what he’d be like, as... as an Uncle. Would he get married one day? Give her a... uh, an *Aunt*?

She watched him standing there all stern and serious, in his white coat like a proper doctor, or maybe a scientist. She tilted her head sideways, considering him. Could he be a *mad* scientist? That’d be pretty cool.

Except mad scientists didn’t get married.

She stared up at the building. It sure was big! It even had those up and down steppy-things running all along the edge of the roof. She wondered what it would be like to run along them. It did look a little bit dangerous, though. Maybe when her legs were longer, she decided.

He was *still* making his way toward her, so she ran back to him. “It looks like a castle!”

He turned and actually looked at it, which was nice. Most grown ups just ignored what you said, except to tell you you were wrong.

“It was Victorian, originally, but there *has* been a mish-mash of later extensions. I suppose... it is reasonably old.”

From the corner of her eye, she saw something run across the lawn between two trees, and grabbed his

hand. "Look, look!" she squealed, but he just stood there like a lump. She darted off toward it, but it disappeared before she'd gone more than a few steps. She turned back to him, wondering if he'd seen it too. "What was it?"

"A squirrel, Sara. There are many small animals in the grounds."

A squirrel. So *that* was a squirrel. She wondered how hard it would be to catch one? What would they be like to hold? Could you pet them? It'd be nice to have something to cuddle. Quietly, she stalked toward the tree it had run up, then stood at the bottom, checking out the hand-holds. It didn't look like it'd be too hard to climb.

She looked back at her, uh, her uncle, and he had an odd expression on his face, like he was studying her, maybe deciding something. But he looked interested, too. Which was kinda nice.

The sky was blue, the smells so nice. It was like she'd moved to live in a castle in the middle of a forest. She wondered if maybe there'd be a wicked witch lurking somewhere? She turned in a big circle, taking it all in, amazed by just how clear and sharp everything was, right to the horizon.

She stopped, at the sound of steps coming around the side of the building behind them. Only a man, but by his side....

"Oh, wow, who's *that*?"

"Hmm? Brian Shanahan, our security-"

But she was already in motion, racing toward the sleek and powerfully-muscled dog. Its glowing red eyes had locked on hers with such interest, and its tail had already thumped once in hopeful anticipation.... She could tell straight away the robo-dog needed someone to play with: its eyes – *her* eyes – said how alone she was, and how happy she was to see Sara.

"Sara, stop, don't-!"

Her uncle was shouting dumb stuff, as if he couldn't see how much the girl dog looked like HyperGirl's companion, Argon. She had the same sleekly bulging

weapon pods at her shoulders, but without the rocket thrusters at her hips. Probably he didn't watch *Heroes, Inc.* She wondered if she had unfolding wings like Argon, too.

The man ahead of her was also shouting at her to stop. She had to dodge as he reached down and tried to grab her while barking orders at 'Faith' to 'stand down' – but he was too slow. 'Faith's' lips curled back in delight-

And then she was past the grasping hands, her own arms wrapping around Faith's furry neck to hug her tight while she inhaled the rich doggy smells. With her head pressed into the hard muscles, from the corner of her eye she could see the tail thumping madly. Her arms couldn't quite reach around the large chest. "Oh, Faith, we'll have *such* adventures, just wait and see! Come on, I'll race you to the building!"

She broke away, pausing to slap her thigh for Faith to follow, then took off at a sprint. Behind her, she heard the whine of turbines spinning up, then Faith appeared at her side, head cocked briefly to see what *she* was doing, before the turbines whined higher and Faith bounded ahead.

She couldn't help but squeal in delight, laughing as she put her head down to chase the dog even harder. "No fair!" she called out, "You've got robo legs!" Then saved her breath for running.

Behind her, the men's shouting had finally stopped. She'd showed *them!* As if Faith was going to hurt *her*. Grown ups could be so dumb, sometimes.

When she and her faithful companion finished their first ever patrol circuit of the building together and loped back up to the two men, of course the two grown ups blahed and blahed for a while. She rolled her eyes at Faith. As if Faith would shoot *her*. Good grief! While the men complained, she and Faith secretly agreed to meet up later – that was obvious by the thumping of her tail and the way her long tongue lolled out happily over her steely teeth.

Eventually the men stopped talking. After a while

she guessed they were probably waiting for her to say something.

“Uh. Sorry? I won’t do it again?”

After a little more blah, Faith and her man headed off, while her uncle stared down at her.

He didn’t say much, but she got the impression he was secretly pleased. Which was kinda surprising, but nice. The nuns would have been telling her not to run around like a crazy girl, or worse. Maybe he really was nicer than he looked? It was just his heavy eyebrows and how they made his eyes look like dark caves that made him look so fierce. But *she* could look fierce, too!

She wanted to stay outside and explore, but he pointed out that the building inside was quite interesting in its own right, and even had a display that would give her an overview of the Institute for Parra Normal Dis Numpton’s – or whatever it was called – ‘considerable acreage.’ Which just meant ‘a lot of land,’ he explained. *And*, he’d added, it’d be a good idea to get a tour of the building itself so she could learn which areas were safe, and which to avoid.

Safe? Now *that* sounded interesting, but she was extra careful not to let her interest show. Was it the *wrong* people that were the danger, or was it because they did mad-scientist experiments here? Or maybe it was both? They could have secret labra-tories or underground lairs, or anything, here! She had to hug herself to convince herself it was all real. *I’m so lucky!*

Looking back as she followed her uncle inside, she saw Faith turn at the same moment. Their eyes met before Faith turned back to concentrate on her duties. But her tail was wagging!

And the woods beyond! Sara gazed out at the forested area inside the walls of the Institute, and had to hug herself again. So many new places to explore!

At lunch-time, much later, sweaty and grubby from her explorations, she ran back into the cafeteria, suddenly stopping at the sight of a long, gift-wrapped parcel lying just beyond her place-setting. *Ohhh! He got me a present!* Her new uncle had a smile on his face,

though it was a bit funny-looking.

She looked at the parcel. It was wrapped in colorful paper, and quite long – longer than her arm. She ran up to the dining table. “Is that a present for *me*?”

“Yes, Sara.”

She reached over for it.

“No, Sara. *After* lunch you may open it.”

She looked at him. *Maybe if I just grab it...?*

His smile disappeared and he looked very big all of a sudden. And mean. She shivered and sat down. She didn’t want to look at him as she ate, and kept her eyes on her food – though whenever he wasn’t watching she sneaked a look at the gift. It was wrapped in gay paper which molded over a tantalizingly curved shape. Fairy-tale castles crouched amidst bright green rolling hills and darker forests, under vivid blue skies with cotton-wool clouds.

She didn’t get many presents. Even at, even at...? She struggled to remember. Oh, yeah. At the orphanage. Maybe uncles gave lots of presents? That’d be nice.

But she’d rather have hugs.

She tried again to guess what was inside from its shape. Her fingers twitched, desperate to open it. She checked him again.

Rats.

She stared down at her cereal, deciding what to do. All right. But if he was going to be a meanie and stop her opening it straight away, she wouldn’t talk to him at all.

It was silent then, apart from the clink of her spoon and the quiet crunching as she chewed her muesli. While she ate, she looked up at him from time to time through her fringe. He had a stupid expression like he was laughing at her but thinking she couldn’t tell. Annoyed, she concentrated on the bowl in front of her.

At last she finished her cereal.

“You may open it now, little one.”

Huh. He couldn’t tell *her* what to do. Instead, she poured herself another helping.

"Another bowl of muesli, Sara?"

"I'm hungry."

"It seems you have a good appetite."

"That's cause *I* do stuff."

Silence again, then. She didn't speak, and he didn't, either. She wouldn't even look at the gift. Finally, though, she finished the second bowl.

Cross with him, she nevertheless pulled the parcel toward herself and carefully started to open it, mentally daring him to try to go back on his promise. She looked up, and he had this really annoying look on his face, like '*Oh, yes, now you have my permission*' and stuff, but suddenly, a squeal somehow escaped despite herself when she saw what it was. She tore into the paper.

Ohhh. "A bow and arrows!"

She ripped the last piece of paper off and pulled it all out – bow, arrows, even a quiver. And a large, folded-up piece of paper. There was a string, too, with loops already made at each end. She slipped one end on and tried looping the other over the notch at the other end of the bow, but it sprang straight out of her hands, jabbing her between the eyes.

"Ow!"

She tried again, and *this* time the bow twisted and stabbed into her shoulder! Biting down on a cry, she tried again.

"Would you like me to do that for you, little one? I don't think you're strong enough, yet."

"I am too!" *Does he think I'm a baby?* She didn't need *his* help! She'd do it by herself even if it took days.

In the end, it took five minutes plus getting cross with it for the last bit.

She then turned her attention to the arrows.

At the end where the plastic feathers fitted, each arrow had a slot for the bowstring. That made sense. But a flexible black cup was attached to the other end where the point should be. She poked her tongue thoughtfully into her cheek, trying to puzzle it out. Tried to twist the rubber cap off, only to find she couldn't.

Finally, she flung herself back in her chair and stared crossly at her uncle, waving the dumb arrow at him. "What are these bits for?"

"They make the arrows stick when they hit a smooth surface," he explained, picking one up and stamping it down on the table where it stood, quivering. He bent it over and let it spring back upright. "You see."

She just stared at him. Was he serious? "What good is that? Animals don't *have* smooth bits."

He looked at her oddly, and for a moment she thought he might be doing some more magic – but nothing happened. Then he leaned forward, his voice lowering. "Nor does the thing that you can use these arrows on."

Ohhh.

She leaned forward.