

DESCENT

Book 1: Descent from Man



Phil Geusz

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Written by Phil Geusz

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I hate driving rental cars. They're full of squeaks and rattles, the controls grow loose and sloppy from long abuse, and though they probably *do* receive regular professional maintenance just as advertised you can tell just by looking that no one really loves them. Take the econobox I was sitting in at the moment. A clicking noise emanated from the right side of the dashboard at any speed over forty miles an hour. The driver's seat leaned to the left, mute testimony to a past driver's weight problem. For some reason it was hard to shift from second to third. And last night I'd discovered that half the dashboard lights were out. None of this reflected badly on the manufacturer, at least not in my opinion. The problems were the result of simple abuse. For example, my rental was just a little roller-skate of a car—no engineer could be faulted for failing to consider the possibility of a four-hundred pound driver levering himself in behind the wheel of such tiny vehicle. The second-to-third gearshift thing was most likely a linkage problem, probably created by some boy-racer type who gloried in speed-shifting. And, over the years I'd seen many rental-car drivers veer *towards* the deepest potholes they could find. "Look at me! I'm not paying for this!" the drivers' grins seemed to declare after the resulting impacts. This sort of thing explained the dashboard rattle and failed lights quite neatly. No, the manufacturer wasn't to blame for *any* of these failings. Besides, a skilled mechanic with simple tools could easily have fixed them all in mere minutes—heck, *I* could've done it! The real problem was that no one cared enough about the poor thing to make the effort.

Grinding my teeth in frustration, I carefully depressed the clutch (carefully, because the pedals had been designed for feet far smaller than mine) as traffic once more slowed and stopped. Normally, I enjoyed driving. But the evil combination of annoying rental car plus heavy traffic and hot weather were steadily sapping my patience. I

was also still pretty keyed up about other things—it'd been a *most* stressful day. At least the car's motor ran smoothly and its air conditioning blew cold. Focusing as best I could on life's small blessings, I set the emergency brake and waited among the now-stationary vehicles, engine idling. Then the inevitable happened. A child riding in the van I was trapped behind noticed me and pointed. Soon an entire pack of five and six year-olds had their faces jammed up against the rear windows. I waved back, my newly-altered hands still feeling odd to me. I always tried to make time for kids, even on bad days. They were curious, was all; it came naturally to them. The children laughed in glee and waved back. Then traffic began moving again. Eventually the van rolled forward, and I let the distance between us increase until there was a large gap in front of me. A grateful semi driver ducked into the opening. He waved at me too. But this time the gesture was merely a 'thank-you'. He didn't stare, something for which I was deeply grateful.

Traffic sort of froze in place for a long time after that, and the back end of a tractor-trailer offered little in the way of entertainment. So, rather clumsily, I switched on the unfamiliar radio. In doing so, I finally discovered something bad about my rental that I could legitimately blame the car's maker for. The left-rear speaker had an awful whine to it! It was probably far above the frequency range of most people's hearing, but to me it was a painful dagger in the skull. I tried to mute the thing, but my new hands and I still hadn't gotten to know each other very well yet so at first I made it louder. The racket was agonizing; I almost had bail out of the little car right in the middle of the highway. Finally I grabbed the key and twisted it, shutting off the radio along with the engine. Traffic still wasn't going much of anywhere, so I sat and practiced my deep-breathing for a minute or two until my heart slowed a bit—my therapist would've been proud of me. A horn blared out, but I ignored it for the moment. Only when I was certain that I was feeling better did I carefully turn the radio's

switch to the “off” position. Then I fired the little vehicle up again. The truck in front of me had advanced all of ten feet. I didn’t allow myself to grow angry at being honked at over such a trivial thing. Instead I nestled up close behind the big trailer again, then set the brake and toyed with the radio’s tiny controls. This time before switching it on I turned the balance knob all the way over to the right, effectively killing power to the screaming speaker. By now I was no longer in any mood for music, but every big town had a talk station that covered traffic problems.

This one proved easy to find. And I was lucky—the traffic report was in-progress. “...severe accident on Sixty-Seven,” a woman’s voice was explaining. “Northbound at exit ninety-two. There are no serious injuries reported, but long delays are anticipated as one of the abandoned vehicles is still underway and considered dangerous. Police on the scene suspect that pixie dust may have been a contributing factor in the accident, and are taking full precautions.”

“Oh, great!” I complained aloud, shifting painfully in my crooked seat. My spine and tailbone ached from the leftward tilt, and for once the orthopedic cushion I always used when driving wasn’t helping. But the only thing I could’ve done to ease the pain would’ve been to get out and walk around a little. Some of the other drivers already were, but I cringed at the very idea. Some days, especially after being startled by something, I felt terribly timid. The problem was worsening every day, and my therapists said it was something I needed to accept about myself and start getting used to. So I sat right where I was in my little car, trying to maintain a positive spin on the situation. At least I had air conditioning. At least I had a partially-working radio. At least I was going to go back home tonight to my own house and car. At least I was still pretty much myself, after what’d happened. Or so far as I could tell I was still myself.

That counted for something, didn't it?

Idly I listened to the rest of the news. The local mayor was fighting with the city council over school funding. Elf-wannabe environmentalist groups were blocking the construction of a new highway. It was intended to take some of the load off of Route Sixty-Seven, which everyone knew needed the help. But they were blocking it anyway. The city's sanitation workers were threatening to strike. The home baseball team had lost last night, seven to four. And there was no end to the current heat wave in sight.

Just as the news was finishing up, a fire truck roared past me on the highway's shoulder, siren wailing. The safest way to deal with pixie dust, I'd learned during my apprenticeship, was to flush it away with water. So even if the heat wave wasn't ending any time soon, at least the traffic jam would. For the next thirty minutes or so I sat patiently listening to a member of the local Board of Education discuss class sizes and teacher's pay in a dull monotone. It was excruciatingly boring programming, but better than anything else I could hope for. So I sat and waited, trying my level best to concentrate on a subject which interested me not in the least.

Because I knew that the moment I let my mind wander, I'd start thinking about the fingers I'd lost forever earlier in the afternoon. And then weep for hours.

I was late delivering my parcel, though at least the woman waiting for me was understanding about the delay. "Took sixty-seven, did you?" she asked with a smile as I stepped into her office. "That was a mistake!"

"Yeah" I replied, pressing my lips together in recalled frustration. "They were still hosing things down when I came through."

She looked at me searchingly. Like all of my relatives, Cousin Megan was familiar with the nature of my little problem. “You didn’t absorb any stray mana at the accident scene, did you?”

My eyes dropped. This wasn’t a subject that I cared to discuss, not even with family. But I couldn’t exactly lie to them, either. Not when the truth was so obvious for anyone and everyone to see. “No. Or not there, at least. They were almost done washing-down when I passed through. And I was all the way in the opposite lane from the contaminated truck. Still, it was a mess.”

Megan immediately picked up on the key words I’d spoken. “What do you mean, ‘not there’?”

I shuffled my feet, catching a hindclaw in the carpet. “Well... There was a security ward in the dropoff room. The thing was well-shielded, and twisted around in a way that I've never seen before. By the time I realized it was there, the damage was already done.” I set down the little briefcase I was carrying, then held up my hands for inspection. Where this morning I’d been the proud owner of two furry but otherwise human-looking hands, I now possessed a matching pair of rather pawlike mitten-thingies.

“Oh, no!” Megan whimpered, biting down on a finger.

I sighed. We didn’t see each other very often, and therefore my cousin wasn’t accustomed to dealing with the curse-thing. “It’s all right, Megan,” I reassured her, flexing my, well... Were the things at the ends of my arms still 'hands'? “I’ve retained the opposable thumbs. In fact, I drove all the way back here just fine. The car was a stickshift, too!”

“But... But...” she stuttered. Then her professional side took over. After all, like almost everyone else in my family she was a licensed thaumaturgist. “Was

there any pain?”

“No,” I replied.

“How about your mind? Is it clear?”

“Crystal-clear. Do you think I’m acting funny or something?”

“You *always* act funny.” She paused, examining me closely. “I think you’ve lost a little height. And your eyes are wider apart than they were.”

“I think so, too,” I agreed. My muzzle also felt longer, though I didn’t choose to share that little detail.

“Let me see your paws,” she demanded, not noticing me wince at her choice of words. So, to everyone else the things at the ends of my arms *weren’t* hands. If other people thought of them as ‘paws’, then it’d probably be best if I went along with them. Being realistic about this sort of thing was one of the keys to sanity under very trying conditions. But still, the forepaws were another waypoint crossed on my descent down the slope towards pure animalhood. I held up my mitten-thingies for her and she kneaded first one and then the other. “It’s the same pattern of change you’ve been experiencing for years,” she observed, quite unnecessarily. “Your body is progressing towards a lapine state in a series of tiny jumps.” She sighed. “Those paws don’t feel very sensitive.”

“They’re not. The fur’s pretty thick, especially on the, er... soles. And I’m going to have to learn to be careful of the claws. Heaven knows they’re awkward enough on my feet. Or on my hindpaws, rather” I hastily corrected myself.

Megan tilted her head to one side; she was on the verge of tears. “Oh, poor Gregory! *I hate* watching this happen to you!”

I shrugged. She hated watching it, I hated living it. But no known power on Earth could stop it. At age seventeen I’d been kidnapped and cursed by someone; we never found out who, though it was easy enough to guess why. The honorless cheat enchanted me anyway, despite the payment of a huge magical ransom. So far, the curse had proven immune to all counterspells. Even worse, exposure to any sort of magic only made things go faster. This tended to make my fellow mages reluctant to attempt much in the way of scrying or experimenting. Where once I’d been well on my way to becoming a prestigious and powerful sorcerer in the family tradition, now I was destined with absolute certainty to become a humble rabbit. A family pet instead of a family leader. In both mind and body.

But not *today*, I reminded myself as Megan finally gave in and threw herself into my arms to weep. *Today* I wasn't yet living in a cage, nor *today* would I beg for attention from friends and cower away from strangers. I still had months or possibly even years of near-humanity ahead of me. Depending on how one defined ‘near’, that was. Some would already say that I was more a near-rabbit than a near-human. Everything grows blurry pretty fast once you set out to define ‘human’ in a world with magic in it.

It was too much, having her weeping in my arms that way. All the pathetic little mental defenses I’d built against the horror of my situation broke down once my cousin’s tears wet my fur, and despair came rushing in through the cracks. So I finally broke down and wept a little myself, the wails emerging from my lips in the form of an eerie lapine cry. My distress vocalizations were one of the first things to change, almost as if to deliberately add insult to injury and deny me peace even in tears. For weeks afterwards I’d tried not to cry because

the sound was so embarrassing. These days, however, my wails were an accepted part of who and what I was. So now I cried freely whenever I felt it necessary. Not that crying too often was necessarily a good thing, I reminded myself. Too much weeping would mean that I was meekly accepting my fate, giving in to my creeping bunnyhood. And I'd resolved *never* to do that. Not *ever*! Make the best of things, yes. Be honest with myself and deal with matters realistically, yes. But I'd *never* give in! Not while I still had a human soul to fight back with!

And after that, I reckoned that it wouldn't matter very much anymore anyway.

Finally I finished my cry and forced myself to smile up at my cousin. She towered about a foot over me these days, where once our statures had been reversed. "Well... There's no use crying over spilt milk. What's done is done, and I'll deal with it somehow. So... How about we take a look at what I've brought you?"

She pulled away. "Yes. Of course, Gregory." Her manner slipped back into 'professional' mode. "We're going to have to do a more complete evaluation on you, of course. But that can wait a bit. What's in the package?"

"Nothing powder," I replied, a note of pride in my voice. "The real stuff, I think."

"Oh!" She reached down and grabbed the briefcase. "May I?"

"But of course!" I was regaining my usual self-assurance rapidly, stepping back into the highly-artificial devil-may-care persona that my self-respect demanded.

She placed the valise on her desktop and examined the latches.

“I’m going to take precautions, Greg. I hope you don't mind.”

“Naturally not,” I replied. “Everyone does.”

“I’ll have to call your mother. To monitor.”

The curse had strained my relationship with Mom badly, perhaps even ruined it beyond all repair. Not only did she blame herself for what I was becoming, but because I was so magic-sensitive and she was so powerful we couldn’t even meet face-to-face anymore. Her mere physical presence was enough to induce rapid changes in me. Long ago I’d come to understand that she was the true target of what had been done to me. And the blow had struck home hard. “I understand.”

“Good.” She picked up the phone. “Get me Aunt Clara please,” she ordered. “Right away. Tell her secretary it’s important.”

I heard the administrative assistant’s reply through the earpiece—“Right away, ma’am.” There were at least a few bonuses involved in becoming a lapine, and I made it a point to actively seek them out and embrace them. It was my way of making the best of things. I’d had rabbit-ears for almost half a decade by then, and would frankly miss them if by some miracle I were ever cured. The nose too, for that matter.

My mother was on the line in seconds. “What is it, Megan? Is Gregory all right?”

My cousin looked to me for guidance. I wriggled my nose for a second in thought and then nodded. There was no point in trying to hide anything when my problems were quite literally written all over my face. “He’s descended a little further, Aunt Clara. There was some

unexpected mana-exposure. But basically he's all right."

"Oh, gods!" I heard my mother reply. "How much damage was there?"

"He's shrunk a little..."

"Gods!"

...and his eyes are a bit further apart," she finished quickly, clearly not wanting to lay too much on her aunt all at once. "But his mind is fine!"

"Does he seem any shyer to you?" Mom demanded. "More timid or high-strung?"

"No," Megan replied emphatically. "Absolutely not. We'll get him a full evaluation later. But he's okay. Would you like to talk to him?"

I winced, but it was too late. "Yes!" my mother exclaimed eagerly. "Is he right there with you?"

"It's all right," I muttered. Then the phone was in my hand—er, paw. "Hello, Mom!" I forced myself to say cheerfully. "I'm just fine. Don't worry so much!"

"Gregory!" she exploded. "When are you going to learn to stay at home and quit taking silly chances? You're making things go even faster!"

I counted to ten, then decided to be firm. After all, we'd had this talk before. Like, a bajillion times. "Rabbits spend their whole lives sitting at home, Mom. Don't you think I'm going to have plenty of time to do that later?"

There was a moment's silence. Then, when Mother finally spoke again, it was if I'd thrust a spear into her bosom. "*Gregory! How could*

you?”

If I let her take control, I reminded myself, I'd end up living out what little life I had left in a sterile, peaceful clinic where I wouldn't be allowed to do so much as change my own sheets. In fact, it'd taken a Council order to break me out of such a place when I was nineteen. But that'd been years ago, and we understood each other's needs and feelings better now. Or at least *I hoped* that we did. “I'm fine, Mom. Believe me, I'm fine. Remember how we decided that the physical changes are progressing so much faster than the mental? A little more rabbitiness in the body doesn't even show that much anymore.”

She sighed, calming herself a bit. “It's just... This is so *very* hard for me. *I love you.*”

“I know it's hard, Mom. And I love you too.” I swallowed a big lump in my throat. The sentiments were very real, I knew. On both sides, no matter how easy it was to forget sometimes. “I wish that I could hug you.”

“Oh, I want so much just to see you up close! To touch you, to smell you! My little boy, in my arms once again. Not through binoculars!”

I'm little again all right, a voice in the back of my head reminded me. *And getting smaller all the time.* “Someday we'll beat this, Mom.” I changed the subject. “I made a buy today.”

“Oh?” she asked, her professional interest stirred. “What did you get?”

“Nothing Powder,” I replied. “Or at least I think so. That's why Megan called. She wants you to monitor things while she opens it. And that means I've got to go.”

“Call me again soon?” she asked, her hope evident in her voice.

“Of course,” I replied a bit guiltily. I didn’t call home nearly often enough, even by my own standards. It was too... Complicated. “I’m gonna go wash up. Bye, Mom!”

“Bye, Gregory!” she replied. “Love you!”

With a sense of profound relief I handed the phone back to my cousin. “This dye stinks,” I said, sniffing at my chestnut-stained arm. “I’m getting sick of it. Is there someplace I can wash up before I report in?”

Megan smiled. “I can do even better than that. There’s a groomer waiting downstairs for you with a warm bath and a blow dryer. I’ve been paying him overtime for hours.”

My mouth opened to protest, then closed again. A bath and a blow dryer sounded heavenly; I’d had a very long day. “Sold.”

“Good!” she replied, eyes twinkling. “I was afraid that you’d raise a fuss.”

“No,” I sighed. “Not this time. Thanks.” And with that I waved and turned away, heading for the elevator. During the one-floor drop my mind wrestled with an old dilemma. I enjoyed being bathed and brushed by a professional. Especially the part at the end where I spent a boneless half-hour or so melted into a little puddle under the blow-dryer. In fact, the truth was that I absolutely *adored* it. Yet I denied myself the pleasure regardless, to the point that most of the time my fur was dull, tangled and unhealthy-looking. Should loving every second of being petted and stroked and handled be considered a form of giving in to creeping rabbithood? Especially since in this case it was a sign of changes that absolutely *did* affect my mind and personality? Or, I wondered, was this another case where I should simply make the best of the inevitable and chalk it up to maintaining

good health? In my heart of hearts I never did decide which way was better. But there was absolutely no doubt as to what was more pleasant. And after the day I'd just had, well... This time pleasant was going to win out hands down.

II

I woke up the next morning still lying on the groomer's table. It wasn't unusual for me to fall asleep under the dryer, but I'd specifically left instructions to be awakened so that I could finish up my business with the Nothing Powder and fly home. I raised my head as the first step towards going to find someone to raise hell with...

...and immediately laid it back down, sighing. My Uncle Andy was sitting in a big easy chair on the other side of the room, studying a thick spellbook. Andrew was a pivotal figure in my life. Though gifted with far less inherent Power than most of my relatives, my father's brother struggled through an Apprenticeship regardless and become a fully qualified sorcerer. Then, not content to live out his life as a second-rate mage, he returned to school and earned a second doctorate in a field at which he excelled, medicine. His official specialty was researching shapeshifting phenomenon and related medical problems, but he actually served as my mother's top advisor on dozens of matters. Some people claimed that he was the true sovereign of the Sorcerer's Guild, mother's lifetime title notwithstanding. This was probably a fair observation. Mom never really got over Dad's death, and now my own little problem was wearing her down terribly. She didn't spend nearly enough time on official business anymore—not that anyone blamed her. Andrew was the youngest sibling of my father—he was only about seven years older than me. We'd always been close, and had become much more so since the cursing. Nowadays I was his sole medical patient, and he was the only person alive that I felt I could truly trust. “Good morning, Uncle Andrew,” I greeted him. “I can't say I'm that surprised you're here.”

Andrew lowered his book. “Good morning, sleepyhead! I hear that you've run afoul of a bit of magic. A security ward, in fact.”

I sighed. “Yes. But it’s no big deal. Just more of the same.”

“Of course not,” he replied. “By the way, I’ve been asked to inform you that the Nothing Powder you purchased was genuine. Congratulations! A whole bunch of folks want to ask you questions about it. But I’ve got first dibs. Would you mind if I looked you over? I’ve brought some gear; it’s set it up in the office next door.”

“Sure,” I agreed listlessly. “But would you mind if I nibbled on something first? I’m hungry.”

He smiled. “I’ve brought you some carrots. I hear rabbits like those.”

From anyone else, this would’ve been a mortal insult. In fact, I’d made it a point to let my entire family know that I absolutely *loathed* carrots. But it was a lie. I loved them more than anything else on earth these days. Only Uncle Andrew knew this. We’d made a bargain back when my curse was first diagnosed. He always told me the unvarnished truth about my condition, and in return I held nothing back. No matter how embarrassing something was, I told him all about it. And then we both kept our mouths shut to others about things they didn’t need to know. Our bargain and the scrupulous way in which Andrew kept it was probably why I was still sane.

The carrots were fresh and delicious. I bit off tiny bites and chewed until there was nothing left in my mouth but heavenly-tasting juice. Then I chased my meal down with a few quick gulps of water from the sink. I felt much better after eating. “All right,” I said after wiping my muzzle. “Ready to get started?”

”Let’s,” he agreed. And with that we stepped over into the office next door.

The room had been transformed overnight; there was no sign of the office furniture that'd been there yesterday, and Uncle Andy had brought in everything from a full-sized examining table to a portable x-ray machine. My family genuinely is an important one in the greater scheme of things, and quite wealthy to boot. But I'd never seen a greater testament to the value of Uncle Andy's time. The expense was stunning, but having all the equipment he might need there and ready ensured that he wouldn't waste a moment.

"Hop on up here," he ordered, patting the table. I glared at his quite deliberate pun, then complied.

"All right," he began, slipping into his professional persona. "First things first. Let's take a closer look at those hands of yours."

I held them up like a child proving that he's washed properly before dinner. "Mmm-hmm," he said thoughtfully, turning them this and way and that. "Mmm-hmm." Then he released them and I let my arms drop to my sides. "Next I want you take one of my hands in each of your forepaws and squeeze as hard as you can. All right?"

I sighed aloud. So Andrew thought of them as paws too—it seemed to be unanimous. I did as asked and squeezed furiously, but rather to my astonishment the pressure didn't amount to much. I still had thumbs, all right. But they were very weak.

"Mmmh-hmm," Andy repeated, disappointment evident in his voice. "How are your eyes?"

"I can't tell any difference," I replied. "But remember when they changed last time? I didn't notice anything until I got the ticket for driving without headlights."

“Right. I’d like you to see a specialist about them sometime within the next week. If I send someone out, will you see him?”

“Of course,” I replied. I’d do almost anything for Uncle Andy.

“Good!” he agreed. “All right then. Climb down and stand up as straight and tall as you can.”

I did so. Then, because by now I knew what came next I spread my arms outward as far as I could. It was a routine test...

...but this time the results weren’t at all routine. Try though I might, they wouldn’t extend straight out. I’d lost significant range of motion. Eyes wide in distress, I looked up at my uncle.

“It’s all right, Gregory,” he said in even tones. “There’s nothing new here. We’ve been through this before.”

I sighed and nodded.

“So let’s try the legs, then. Spread your feet!”

That was where I’d first run into the range-of-motion problem. Carefully, I let my legs splay out as far as they would go. Which wasn’t all that far. So far as I could tell things hadn’t gotten any worse on that front, though in all honesty there wasn’t all that much left for me lose. Even rabbits can spread their legs out a little bit, after all.

“Good!” Andy said encouragingly. “Now, let’s check for linkage. Fore-and-aft, if you will.”

Again, with considerable care I slid one big foot forward and let

the other move backwards. Rabbits tend to hold both legs at the same angle to the hip at all times. This is part of their natural bias towards hopping instead of running. While lapines can and do ‘uncouple’ their legs and move them separately, it’s clear to any observer that it feels unnatural and awkward to the rabbit concerned.

This time, *I* was the rabbit concerned. Almost as soon as I got past the normal spread I used every day in bipedal walking I felt discomfort. This was new, and my eyes widened again. Apparently, I was much closer to beginning my hopping career than previously appreciated.

My uncle read my expression, then tried to conceal his own by making notations in his little book. “Umm-hmm,” he said briskly. “Yes... Well. One more thing I’d like to check, if you don’t mind. Something new.”

I’d been given ‘new’ tests before. Each had marked an unwelcome new stage of descent. “All right,” I replied, forcing my tone to remain calm. “What’s your pleasure?”

Andy looked away again, then met my eyes head-on. “I’m afraid this might be pretty hard on you.”

I thrust my non-chin forward. “I understand. But it has to be done. So let’s just get it over with.”

“Right.” His face hardened. “Greg, I want you to try sitting down on all fours, bunny-style.”

My jaw dropped. “Hold on just a cotton-pickin’ minute!” I began. “How can you stand there and-”

He held up his hand before I could really get rolling. “Greg!” he interrupted. “*Gregory!*”

The last, spoken rather loudly, arrested me in midstream. “What?”

“How does your back feel lately?” he asked.

It ached, of course. And the discomfort was growing steadily worse. Yesterday I’d experienced even more pain than usual in the rental car. But I’d blamed it on the tilted driver’s seat... “Oh dear gods!” I whispered. This was... This was *terrible!*

Andy exhaled forcefully. He looked as if he wanted to slug someone—hard! Then with a determined effort he forced himself back under control. “Truth is truth,” he explained. “The end-game will be coming soon now. I’d never humiliate you on purpose, Greg. By now you ought to realize that. But the test is becoming necessary.”

I nodded, then looked down. “Of *course* you’re not trying to humiliate me. I know that, Uncle Andy! But... But... It’s just too *soon!*”

He shook his head. “You’ve already lasted considerably longer as a biped than we first projected. Remember?”

“Yes, but...” I swallowed through a throat suddenly very tight, then realized there really wasn’t a lot left for me to say. After all, I’d known for years that this day was coming. So with exaggerated care I squatted down and bent over until my brand spanking new forepaws were firmly in place on the floor. Then I lowered my hindquarters until I felt the fur on my tail brush the linoleum.

“How does it feel?” Andrew asked, his whole body tense. I think

he was afraid I might totally freak out. If so, he was fully justified in his concern. My heart was beating a mile a minute, and my chest was heaving as I drew in quick, ragged breaths. I closed my eyes and tried to relax; Andrew, seeing what I was going through, waited in silence.

“It’s bad,” I finally whispered as I settled my behind the rest of the way down onto the floor. “Just *awful!*”

“Bad?” Andrew asked. “Where does it hurt?”

“It doesn’t hurt *anywhere at all!*” I complained. “*That’s* what’s bad. My back feels better, my neck, my chest... Andy, I ought to be getting leg cramps from being all twisted up like this. But I’m not. Sitting here like this feels *good*. Restful even. Why?”

“Your leg and hip structure has altered itself considerably since our last checkup,” he explained. “It’s obvious to anyone with a professional eye.” Andrew hesitated uncertainly, then came to a decision. “Try to hop for me?” he asked.

My split upper lip curled in revulsion, causing my whiskers to bristle. “Do I *have* to?” The question was a snarl.

“Someday you will,” my uncle replied. “So why not today?”

The logic was inescapable. I rose to my toes and took a tentative little hop, then a second. “It’s awkward,” I said after thinking it over a minute. “Less so than I would’ve expected, though. A lot less.”

“You’ll get better at it in time,” Andy replied, looking away again. Often I wondered who was suffering more over this thing, my family or me? “Practice when you’re alone. But for now, I presume you’d prefer to walk? Even though it’s uncomfortable?”

“Oh, yes!” I agreed, rising to stand in the manner I was accustomed to. Instantly my back began to ache again. “Can you adjust my brace some more, maybe?”

My doctor nodded. “I think so. I picked it up from the groomer when I got in last night. We’ll save the fitting for last. Right now, I’d like to test your mental functions. Want to hop back up into bed again?”

“Sure!” Feeling less inhibited around Andrew than others, I gracefully leapt upwards in a single bound rather than clambering up the bedrail as a fully human person my size would’ve have done. Then I laid down on my side and curled up until I was comfortable. My hindclaws were only inches from my nose. Yet I was fully relaxed. It was a bit unnerving. ”Go ahead.”

“All right.” Uncle Andrew picked up a notebook and paged through it. “Who was the first president of the United States?”

“George Washington,” I replied easily.

“Good. What automakers are commonly described as ‘The Big Three’?”

This time I smiled. Andrew knew I’d loved cars since early childhood. “Ford, Chrysler, General Motors.”

“Fine! Now, what’s ten divided by two?”

I felt my brain lock up tight as a drum. “I... I... I...”

“Come on, Gregory!” Andrew encouraged me. “You can do it!”

Mathematical skills were among my earliest losses. Trying to manipulate figures felt like staring into a black hole. It was terrifying. "I... I... I..." Soon I was in actual physical pain and writhing about on the bed. Part of my head felt empty, as if a bit of brain tissue had been snipped away. Divided by? Divided by? What was that? I'd known once, could even remember what it'd been like to know...

"Come on, Gregory! Ten divided by two! You can do it!"

My uncle's voice grew more and more distant. Idly I found myself remembering the carrots I'd enjoyed for breakfast; they'd been so moist and tasty and....

...*WHAP!* The slap to my face took me totally by surprise; instantly my head was up and ears erect, swiveling about in their search for danger. But the only possible source of the blow was Uncle Andy, who couldn't possibly have hit me.

Could he?

My doctor sighed, looking at the floor. "Andy, I'm sorry. But you weren't here with me anymore, were you?"

There was a sudden chill in the air. "No."

"What happened?" he demanded.

I closed my eyes. "I... I really don't want to talk about it."

"I see." My uncle sat down heavily on the bed next to me. "You went feral, didn't you?"

"Yes. Or at least I think I did." I looked at my toes, still lying so near my nose. "It's never happened before. Honest!"

There was a long silence. “Last time I evaluated you, you’d have solved that problem.”

“I haven’t been able to do algebra in ages!” I countered. “This is nothing new!”

Another long silence. “Which is more, a quarter tank of gas or half?” my uncle finally asked.

“Half,” I replied with a smile. “That’s almost twice as much. Maybe even three times.”

“Mmm-hmm. And which is more, a quart of milk or a half-gallon?”

My mind raced again without getting anywhere, but this time I got the skid under control before losing traction entirely. “I never did know that metric stuff very well,” I answered, glad to be able to provide an answer that was at least acceptable. My mother was notoriously bad at metrics, in fact.

“Of course,” Andrew replied. “A lot of folks get confused over metric terms.” Then he sighed and wrote in his book for a very long time. When he was done, there was a tear in his eye.

“What’s the matter?” I asked. “You look like someone just died or something. I didn’t do that badly—I *know* I didn’t!”

“Of course not,” he replied, looking away. Then he stopped himself. “No, damnit! I won’t patronize you. I swore that I wouldn’t.” My father’s brother stood up, then turned to face me. “Son, brace yourself.”

Ice encased my heart. “I’m braced. Get on with it.”

“Your brain damage has progressed. Badly. You’ve lost your math skills almost entirely, and there are signs that the effects are progressing into related

areas as well.” He paused. “That’s the truth, Greg.”

My guts twisted. Was I really that close to the edge? “Can I stay out on my own? For at least a little while longer? I want to *live*, Uncle Andy. Not rot in a gilded cage.”

He looked uncertain. “Up until today... I’m not...”

“*Please!*” I whispered, terrified at his uncertain tone. Long ago I’d chosen him as the one to make the decisions about stuff like this, once I was too far gone. “Just for a little bit longer? I’ll be fine—I’ve always gotten by! And I’m working on the Nothing Powder project! You can’t afford to lose me now! No one else can take my place on that.”

“We’ll let you help pick out your nurses,” he replied, voice firm and certain. “And you won’t ever be a prisoner again, even if you do have a legal guardian. I swear it!”

This wasn’t what I wanted to hear. “But... Damnit, Uncle Andrew!” I paused to collect my wits. My algebra skills might be shot, but there was a lot more involved in who I was than just that, wasn’t there? I was... I’d once been... The world blurred for a moment as tears filled my eyes. Then I knew what I must say.

“Who was my father?” I asked firmly.

He blinked. It was out of character for me to speak in ritual language, though I’d once earned the right. “Gustavus Lombard,” he replied in answer to the traditional Guild question. “My beloved brother. Perhaps the most powerful mage who ever lived. And one of the noblest.”

“My mother,” I continued. “Who is she?”

“Queen of the Sorcerers,” he replied evenly. “Long may she reign.”

“And who am I?” I demanded.

He tried to look away again, but I was tiring of that. With a fuzzy forepaw I reached out and pulled his face towards mine. “Who am I?” I asked again. “Speak the truth.”

“You are Gregory Lombard,” he replied with tears pouring from his eyes. “Son of my brother and much beloved of us all. You are Gregory, whose potential was once so blinding and whose wretched fate is thus twice a tragedy.”

Anger coursed through me like fire. “My portrait hangs on the Family wall,” I observed. “Does it not? Next to those of my ancestors for a thousand years back?”

“Yes,” he whispered. “Of course it does. And it will *always* hang there, in a place of great honor.” He paused. “We aren’t ashamed of you, Gregory. You know that. You’ve faced this terrible thing with dignity and courage. No family could ask more of you.”

“I can ask more!” I growled in rage. “By the gods, *I* can ask a *lot* more! I don’t want to live out my life out as an object of pity, Andrew. And I’m not at all satisfied to know that for the next thousand years little Guild children are going to read about me and write sad poems about who I might’ve become. Do you hear me?”

He nodded.

“Once I stood next in line to succeed my mother. Now I’m nothing

and no one. I'm going to lose my body and I'm going to lose my mind, in that order. But do you know what hurts most of all?"

He shook his head. "No. I've often wondered, though. Because if I did, I'd move heaven and earth to ease your pain."

I barely heard him. "What hurts most is that I've been robbed of my chance to make a difference, to prove to myself and others that I'm worthy of my name and my line. Can you see that? Can you understand?"

"Yes," he whispered. "Of course. But you've proven yourself already. Through your courage in the face of... of..."

I reached out and grasped him by the collar with both forepaws, pressing my face up close to his. "Then *leave me be*, Uncle! Allow me to work on this Nothing Powder thing. Give me the chance to be remembered a thousand years from now not as the young Lombard whose destiny was stolen, but rather as the once-heir who managed to contribute something useful to the Guild *despite* the terrible thing that was done to him!" I paused, looking deeply into my uncle's eyes. "My future is going to be *hell*, Andrew. Sheer unmitigated hell. And I've not much time left. So please... Won't you let me go down fighting for our Guild? And for our family?"

The rest of the checkup was rather an anticlimax. Without promising anything, Andrew weighed me and x-rayed my entire body, giving special emphasis to the hips, skull and forepaws. Then he measured me for some alterations to the back-brace and I was free again, at least for the moment. I wandered down the hallway and rode up one floor. While Megan wasn't waiting for me at the front desk this

time—I could hardly expect her to be, after all—my cousin had left word to be called the minute I showed up and asked about her. I was still fussing with the way my clothing fit over the orthopedics hardware when she appeared.

“Hi, Greg!” she greeted me with a smile. “You look a lot better in white.”

I grinned. The chestnut-colored dye I’d been wearing stank and made my fur feel itchy-stiff, but it was an excellent way to hide my identity while I was out making buys. Though shapeshifting wasn’t all that common of a phenomenon, the world was also a very big place. There were more rabbit-people in it than one might expect. But so far as anyone knew, I was the only white one. Uncle Andrew claimed that given my family background it was inevitable that I’d turn into a white-whatever, white being the color of magic. “Thanks, cuz. You wanted to see me about the buy?”

She smiled. “Yes. I’ve set up a conference call. My office?” Megan waved her arm invitingly, and I led the way past the receptionist and into her place of business. As part of her official duties my cousin regularly entertained state governors, congressmen and senators; the décor was impressive and the furniture well-padded. But the guest chair was uncomfortable regardless. It was proportioned all wrong and cramped my tail.

“Uh... I’ll stand if you don’t mind.” I explained, hopping down. “Assuming this won’t take too long.”

Megan understood. “Of course, Greg. Make yourself at home and let me know when you’re ready to get started.”

“Now, I guess,” I replied, shrugging. In doing so I was reminded

that my shoulders no longer moved as freely as they once had. But what could one do?

“All right, then.” My cousin punched a couple buttons, then began. “Archie, Grace, Gwendolyn? Are you there? Prince Gregory has arrived.”

I pressed my lips together. I disliked being referred to as ‘Prince’ Gregory, and always had. Our little monarchy was magically locked into place by spells a millennia or more old. Breaking the True Line at this point would cripple the power of every Guild brother and sister in the world, or else we mages would’ve gone to some kind of elected council long since. It would’ve been a far more modern system, and fairer as well. In these better and more progressive times, it was a bit embarrassing so far as I was concerned to be a Prince by right of birth. But it was far worse now that the title had become a mere mockery, a promise that could never be fulfilled. Megan was correct in her behavior, however. Appearances had to be maintained when outsiders were present. And Gwendolyn was FBI, not family or Guild.

“Archie Blandon here! Hi, Greg!” Archie was a computer geek, distantly family but not magically endowed. I knew him slightly. There were better programmers for hire out there, but as a relation he was utterly trustworthy. And we needed somebody discreet in his job.

“Hey, Arch!” I replied.

There was a pause, then Grace spoke. “I’m here too.” Grace was a specialist in Nothing Powder, not an easy thing to find. She wasn’t family. But as a sworn Guild sister she merited equal trust.

“Excellent,” Megan replied. “Gwendolyn?”

“Here!” she finally replied after a long silence. “Sorry, went out for coffee.”

Megan looked unhappy, but I sympathized. “My apologies, Mrs. Matthews” I interjected. “Uncle Andrew took a lot longer with me than expected. Sorry to have kept you waiting.”

“I understand entirely” she replied. “Treating your condition comes first, Your Highness. I’m just sorry I was late getting back.”

“Quite all right,” Megan replied. “But we have a lot to accomplish here. So let’s get down to business, shall we? Everyone present should’ve been informed by now that Gregory successfully made a black market purchase of Nothing Powder yesterday afternoon. We have authenticated that the powder is genuine, and the packaging disappeared as soon as we opened it up. There is essentially no physical evidence save the powder itself, which is perfectly normal in every way. Would you care to describe the transaction, Greg?”

“Yes,” I spoke up, self-conscious of the rather high pitch my voice had taken on recently. My words sounded almost as if they came from a child, which did nothing to help me feel authoritative and official on occasions like this one. “It went down exactly as promised. The material was in a rented locker downtown, to which I’d been sent the key. They provided exactly what was paid for; someone is dealing honestly in unlicensed magical goods.”

“There was a security ward,” Megan pointed out.

“Yes,” I agreed. “More unlicensed magic. Whoever’s behind this knows what they’re doing. The ward vanished as soon as the transaction was completed.”

“A *magical* ward?” Archie asked. “Are... Are you all right, Greg?”

It was good to know that others cared, but the continual

explanations were irritating nonetheless. “Yes,” I replied as politely as possible. “Just fine. Uncle Andrew agrees.”

“Good!” he answered. “I’m very glad to hear that.”

“Yes, well... Anyway, there’s not much more for me to tell. No excitement, no troubles, no worries at all except for a traffic jam on the way back. I’m eager to fly home and get back to work.” There was a long silence after my words. Too long.

It was Gwendolyn who finally spoke up. “Your Highness, what do you have in mind as a next step?”

The same thing I’d always had in mind, of course. “Another buy. And another and another until we obtain some solid evidence regarding who’s behind this. Renegade Guilders, elves, it doesn’t matter. No one is perfect; a mistake will eventually be made.”

“I see,” the FBI lady said. She sounded unconvinced. “With all due respect, Your Highness, we’re taking a considerable risk here with your person. What makes you so certain that we won’t be the first to make a mistake?”

“Someone out there is selling genuine magical products,” I explained, trying to hold my temper. Didn’t these people *understand*? “This isn’t only almost unheard of, but is also incredibly dangerous. Nothing Powder isn’t healthy stuff to be around if you don’t know how to handle it.” I turned to my cousin. “How much was there in the bag, anyway?” I asked her.

“The full amount promised. Ten drams.”

“And how much mischief could you make with *that*, Grace?” I

asked. “Even if you were ignorant of the stuff?”

“Oh, my!” she exclaimed apprehensively. “Almost anyone can use Nothing Powder. You just blow it towards whatever you want to take the magic out of. With that much you could counter almost any magical spell, even a fairly powerful one. So the amount of potential damage would depend on what the original spell was intended for. The President has a magically-repaired heart condition, for example. It’d be fairly simple to reverse that spell from, say, a few hundred yards away. Though thankfully ten drams isn’t enough to reverse a disaster spell, like the one that the Guild put on Mount St. Helens. That’d take a lot more Powder than ten drams!”

There was more silence. “I didn’t know that,” Gwendolyn said eventually. “About the President, I mean.

“It’s no secret,” I replied.

“Then...” Gwen sounded irritated. “I just don’t understand, Your Highness. Why are you so insistent on handling this yourself? And why won’t you let anyone cover you? You’re taking incredible risks. I mean, I hate to be impolite. But the fact is that you’ve been kidnapped once already.”

And the FBI had utterly and completely failed to catch the party or parties responsible, I didn’t remind her. After all, my family had failed to catch them too. “First of all, I can’t be followed or ‘covered’, as you FBI folks put it, because we’re dealing with magic users. We can see things you can’t, Agent Farber, and go places beyond your imagination. If anyone tries to follow or monitor me, even a skilled magic user, they may well only succeed in getting me killed. Or worse. Which brings me to the second point. I completed four years of sorcerer’s training before the kidnapping. You knew that, did you not?”

“Yes,” Gwendolyn replied. “But-“

“No, I can’t be around mana any more. Still, the training isn’t entirely wasted. For example, could any of your agents have spotted the security ward yesterday? I’ll give you a hint: It didn’t exist in any of the ordinary three dimensions.”

I waited a bit for her to reply, but she was smart enough not to. “Not only is there that factor to consider,” I went on, “But all you have to do is look at me to see that I have an excellent reason for wanting to buy Nothing Powder. Trained sorcerers know that the stuff only works in one out of perhaps a thousand cases of cursing; in the rest it usually produces insanity or an excruciatingly painful death. Mundanes, however, often fail to understand this. A truly afflicted person will leap onto any bandwagon that offers hope. Selling cursed mundanes Nothing Powder is a lot like selling cancer patients laetrile. They’ll line up five deep for the stuff, based only on that one in a thousand chance. Besides,” I pointed out. “It was only through my on-line support group that we first heard about this stuff being on the market to start with. Archie has kept me anonymous there right from the get-go, to protect my privacy. And I’m still anonymous, aren’t I?”

“No one knows who you are, Greg.” he replied soberly. “Your video feed has shown you as a brown bunny from day one. And your true location is totally hidden. I wrote the software myself.”

“See?” I pointed out to the room in general. “There’s dangerous stuff out there. Only a cursed person who’s been in an on-line support group long enough to be well-known and trusted can hope to find it. Has any intact Nothing Powder turned up anywhere else?”

“No,” Gwen admitted. “Only around the cursed. Or their corpses.”

I shook my head. “This is part of something bigger; it’s just *got* to be. Nothing else makes any sense. But for now, I’m the only one I know of who can pass as cursed, who has the ability to detect magic, and whom everyone in a position of authority can trust. And as for the personal danger...” I paused and sighed. “Perhaps the rest of you don’t want to hear this, but it’s true regardless. I don’t have all that much to lose anymore, do I? Why shouldn’t *I* take the chances, rather than some other poor slob who still has a real life ahead of him?”

The meeting dragged a bit after that; both sides had pretty much having had their say. We argued for another an hour while covering no new ground, and I grew steadily more frustrated. Why couldn’t anyone but me see that the Nothing Powder affair had ramifications extending far beyond the deaths of a few cursed people? Why weren’t these other folks able to grasp that this was only the tip of the iceberg? And most of all, why couldn’t they see that I was clearly the right person to investigate? It was only when I caught Megan furtively glancing at her watch that I began to understand. There are none so blind as those who’ve been ordered not to see. When the discussion finally wound down, no further plan of action having been agreed upon, I wasn’t in the least surprised to find my Uncle Andrew waiting for me in the hall outside Megan’s office.

“Hello, Andy!” I greeted him.

“Hi, Greg!” he replied. “I’m headed for the airport. Want to ride back with me? I’ve got plane tickets bought for us both.”

“Certainly,” I agreed. “I’ve got to return my rental car first, though. We can meet aboard the plane.”

“No need for that,” my uncle replied. “One of Megan’s people can take care of it. That way we can spend some time together.”

“Fine,” I agreed. There was no point in arguing; I already knew which way the wind was blowing. “Where are you parked?”

“I rented a limo so that I could get some work done instead of driving. It's waiting out front.”

“I see,” I agreed again.

“Excellent!” Then he swept his arm in a grotesquely overdone flourish. “After you, my dear Alphonse.”

It was an old joke, but one that never failed to bring a smile to my face. “Non, non!” I replied in a phony French accent, shaking my head theatrically and gesturing with my own arm. “After *you*, my dear Gastone.”

"Non!" Andrew replied somberly, gesturing again. "I weel not hear of this madness! After *you*, Alphonse!" The silly game went on for quite some time, ending of course with both of us jammed in the doorway. Thus we shared one last happy moment together despite the fact that both of us were quite aware of what was going to be discussed during the long ride to the airport.

Which was, of course, the terms under which I was about to be declared incompetent to manage my own affairs.

III

I stared blankly out the limo's window, feeling nothing but emptiness inside. I'd known for a long time that this day must eventually come, but the words still stung like a thousand hornets.

"...not going to be all that intrusive, Greg," my uncle was explaining. "You'll still have your privacy, and you can live in your own house for a long time to come. Would you be more comfortable there?"

"Yes," I replied, my voice dripping with sarcasm. "I've got it all scent-marked the way I like it now. You may've read that we rabbits sometimes find it difficult to adapt to a new range."

My uncle stared at me popeyed for a moment, then spoke in reassuring tones. "If you really see it as your home range, Greg, well..."

"Damn it, I was *joking!*" The words were bitter in my mouth. Had I flubbed the algebra test *that* badly? "Yes, I want to stay at home for as long as possible. But that's because it's my *home*, not because it smells right. Human people like to be at home too, you know."

Uncle Andrew looked relieved, though not entirely convinced. Our easygoing relationship had grown very badly strained in the last few minutes. So strained, in fact, that it might never recover. "That much is settled, then. I'll have my people find you some live-in help..."

"I don't *need* any live-in help!" I declared for the dozenth time. "I'm not incompetent yet, can't you see that? Lots of people are bad with numbers, and they get by just fine. Why should I be any different?"

Andrew sighed. "No, you're not incompetent. Not quite yet. But

the point is, Greg, that you *will* be. And very soon at that. Right?”

When he put things that bluntly, I had a hard time arguing. “No,” I finally whispered. “It won’t be long at all. Will it?” Tears welled up in my eyes, and I wanted to whine.

Andrew laid a gentle hand on my knee and stroked my soft fur until the bad moment passed. It felt *good* to be stroked by someone I liked. “And when that time comes, someone should already be there, ready to help. Someone who already *knows* you. They’ll need to know where things are, what needs to be done, what you like and dislike. We can’t wait any longer.”

I flopped my head back onto the leather seat in resignation. “Part of me understands, Andrew. Really and truly it does. But this Nothing Powder thing...”

“...is no longer any of your concern” he finished for me. “You aren’t in any state to be running around taking any more stupid risks. Period. End of subject. I can’t believe you ever sweet-talked me into letting you make that first buy. It came near to ruining you, son.”

I stamped my feet, something I often did nowadays when angry or frustrated. A toeclaw caught the leather upholstery just right and punched a tiny hole, leaving me feeling guilty. The limo was a very nice car indeed. Certainly it didn’t deserve to be torn up by a badly-behaved animal...

The tears began to flow freely at last, and I was no longer able to choke back the wails. I curled up into a miserable little ball right there on the seat and wept as if I were the only one weeping for the whole world. Uncle Andy held me in his arms and gently stroked me behind the ears. “It’s all right for you to cry,” he reassured me. “God knows, son, it’s all right. We’re going to get through this...”

And then he broke down too, because the simple truth was that we weren't going to get through it, that I was well along the road to losing my mind and soul, that there could be no happy ending. The cards had all been turned over and I'd rolled boxeyes. Or something like that; I couldn't quite remember anymore. But in any event the game was over, and the loser was me. I cried until I felt empty and hollow inside. And then, rabbitlike, I slept deep and dreamlessly.

Not nearly long enough later, I felt myself being shaken awake. We were at the airport, and the chauffer was holding our door open. "We should hurry," Andrew explained. "We're running late. Can you walk? If not, I'll carry you."

"I'll walk" I replied gamely as I climbed to my feet, though my back was aching something fierce from standing all through the long teleconference in Megan's office. Unfortunately the pain didn't lessen any as we made our way through the seemingly endless terminal. "Why did you make our reservations with Global?" I asked him, after we'd already hiked a long way. "Their concourse is five miles from everywhere."

"Now he tells me," Andrew muttered in reply. When we finally arrived at security, my uncle made it a point to stop me a hundred feet away from the entry gate. "Wards," he explained.

"I know all about them," I replied, my voice a bit testy from the pain. "I fly all the time, you know."

"Just making certain. I'll go on ahead and get things set up for you." I nodded and watched as my uncle strode up to the nearest guard, displayed his sorcerer's badge and pointed his finger at me. The guard shook his head, and my eyes widened in surprise. So did

Andrew's. He then placed his hands on his hips and began to shout. "Shit!" I murmured under my breath. I didn't use profanity very often. But I simply was *not* in the mood for red tape just then, and clearly neither was my uncle. Not after the discussion we'd just had! Unfortunately, the guard was disposed to be obnoxious. He'd certainly chosen his victim poorly! Uncle Andy was a genuinely nice guy, but when his temper finally breaks the result could be a veritable tempest. In mere seconds his voice rose to a screech that didn't require a rabbit's ears to be plainly heard all the way across the huge lobby. "I'll be utterly and eternally *damned* if I'll subject my nephew to a personal magical examination!" he shouted. "Don't you understand? Due to his condition he simply *cannot* be subjected to mana! None at all, not even the tiny amount in a hand-ward. I'm a sorcerer; I'm paid to know these things! You lease those wards from my own Guild; you're supposed to listen to us regarding their use!"

"Mister," the guard replied, his voice cold. "If your nephew don't go through my checkpoint and get looked at, he don't get on the plane. No exceptions. No matter *who* you say you are." His mouth was firmly set.

"Get me your supervisor!" Andrew roared. "*Immediately!*"

"He's out sick," the guard replied with a grin. "I'm the senior man here today. Here at this security checkpoint what I say goes!" One of the other guards rolled her eyes at me; I smiled back in sympathy. My back was *killing* me!

"*God-Damn-It!*" Andrew roared, each syllable exploding as a separate thundering statement out of his barrel chest. "*God-Damn-It-To-Hell!*" He looked around, hoping to find someone with a fancier uniform than that of the useless man in front of him. But sure enough, there weren't any to be found. Enraged, he spun on his heel and

stomped back towards me. I felt my back tense up in just the barest hint of a panic reaction. Then the tenseness transformed itself into an agonizing spasm. I'd already stood and walked entirely too much for one day, my back was informing me in no uncertain terms. It was past time to rest.

Andrew was too angry to notice my pain. "I'm going to go find *someone* to get us past this imbecile before take-off time!" he declared with a shake of his fist in the direction of the security gate. "Wait here and I'll be right back."

"Sure thing!" I replied. Everyone in the place was staring at us by then. Usually even an obviously cursed person like me can get through an airport without making too much of a fuss via the simple expedients of keeping quiet and never stopping. But now I felt as if a spotlight was focused directly on me. Everyone was looking my way. And my back! Oh gods my aching *back!*

"Five minutes or less," my uncle promised as he passed. "I'm going to pull a string." Then he was by me and gone.

But the million staring eyes were not.

"Look, Mommy!" my sharp ears overheard a little girl saying to her mother. "A bunny rabbit!"

I tried to look away, but they were all around me, all talking about me. "Cursed," a man was explaining to his wife. "I saw a special on TV..."

"...part animal. He's a sign of God's wrath at mankind for using unnatural powers..."

"...wonder if he makes the girls happy? More likely it's two thrusts and..."

“...Mommy! I want to *pet* him!”

The muscles in my back were outlined in fire, and the pitiless meat-eating eyes glittered wherever I looked. I fought to remain calm, upright, human. A minute passed, then two and three and four.

And then five. And six.

My pain was absolutely terrible by then, the muscles quivering in their struggle to hold me erect. The back-brace fitted far too loosely now, and the new resized one wouldn't arrive for days. I rocked back and forth on my feet, looking hungrily at all the empty chairs around me. Each and every one of them was designed for human anatomy and therefore couldn't do me a bit of good. Unless I laid down across them, of course. On my side or stomach. But lying down wasn't what my body craved, needed, was screaming for.

It wanted me to sit down. Rabbit-style. Like an animal. Right then and there. It'd felt so good when I did that before!

The minutes dragged on. Seven, eight, nine... As the tenth minute of my agony ticked away, I knew that I was finally beaten. Against my will, despite the worst self-loathing I'd ever known, I lowered my forepaws to the floor and plopped my hindquarters down on the airport carpet, sitting as an animal would in front of dozens of strangers. I felt utterly degraded, humiliated beyond belief. For a minute or more I kept my eyes closed in shame, afraid to look upon the disgusted and revolted expressions that *must* now surround me. But something strange happened as the time rolled by. And that something was nothing. Strain my ears though I might, I could hear no new remarks being made, detect no insults being hurled. The bits of conversation I picked up were unchanged.

“...But Mommy! Why can't I pet him? He looks like such a *nice* bunny!

“...Lord have mercy on his soul, as he is suffering for the sins of...”

“...bet that fur really gets the women...”

Eventually I opened my eyes. Nothing had changed in rest of the universe. But inside me, nothing would ever be the same. I'd been beaten, really and truly beaten, for the very first time. And because of it, I now felt terribly small and afraid.

“I'm back!” Andrew announced another ten minutes later, stepping briskly up behind me with a smug note in his voice. “I had to call the Mayor's office directly and pull him out of a meeting. They're holding our flight. And any second now...”

A woman in an expensive dress and heels came stumbling down the concourse. “Dr. Lombard?” she cried out, looking turning back and forth desperately. “Dr. Lombard? Where are you?”

“Here,” Andrew replied, the word a near growl. “Think you can help us out?”

“Oh, *yes!*” she answered. “*Absolutely!*” She looked down at me. “And I presume this is Prince Gregory?”

“None other,” Andrew replied for me.

“I'm Cathleen Madison,” she explained. “With the airport executive staff. You gentlemen will be on your way in two minutes or less—I promise! Both of you have our deepest apologies—especially you, your highness!” Then two blue-uniformed airport cops came

striding up. Things were getting interesting indeed.

“Mrs. Madison?” one asked. “The Mayor’s office...”

“Yes!” she snapped. “We’re in a *tremendous* hurry.” She pointed at me. “This is Prince Gregory of the Sorcerer’s Guild, and his uncle Duke Andrew. His highness has a condition that makes it impossible for him to be subjected to any form of magical search. You *will*,” she declared emphatically, “get these two gentlemen to Gate Seven without any further delay, and without any such search. Their plane is being held.”

The cops looked at each other, then at the gate. “Who’s the idiot that wouldn’t let them through?” the older one asked.

“*Him!*” my uncle declared, pointing at his nemesis. Who, it was to be noted, was now looking distinctly pale in the face.

From that point on it was easy. In mere seconds the barriers were pushed aside and the wards removed from the checkpoint. Uncle Andrew rested his hand triumphantly on my head as we waited. “Gregory,” he said. “The royalty business is highly overrated. But there are times when hereditary titles are handy things to have.”

I nodded, Andrew’s hand moving with my head. It was incredible! Even my doctor seemed unaware of my feral, animalistic posture. Was I so far gone that it looked natural to everyone else? “Uncle Andy?” I whispered.

He looked down at me for the first time. “Yes? Is something the matter?”

“I... I...” My mouth was dry, so I swallowed and began again. “My back was hurting really, really bad. I *had* to sit down like this. I didn’t want to, but I *had* to.”

He cocked his head to one side. “And you weren’t ready for it? Emotionally, I mean.”

“No!” I whispered. “I’m not ready for this *at all*. *None* of it! It’s all too soon. *I’m only twenty-six!*”

Uncle Andy didn’t have much to say to that. But then, no one ever did. So instead he ruffled my ears and changed the subject. “Can you walk to the gate?” he asked. “If you have to hop, you have to. No one will say anything. I promise.”

The very thought of standing up again made me wince. “I *could* hop,” I agreed. “But maybe there’s a cart around here somewhere?”

“Good idea! Mrs. Madison can have us one here in two shakes, I’m sure.” He grinned evilly. “After all, they’re treating us like royalty.”

The cart proved to be a major blessing, as Gate Seven was located nearly at the far end of the long concourse. By the time we got there I felt able to stand again, though I leaned heavily on the railing in the jetway. Like the rest of the family, Uncle Andrew and I made it a matter of pride not to flaunt our wealth. This was one of our most important traditions. Most of the time, therefore, we flew in the back of the plane. But my curse made me an exception, one that everyone understood. I flew first class as way of maintaining my privacy. The passengers there were more discreet as a rule; I’d yet to meet one who stared or asked annoying questions. Besides, the far-front row in first class often had only two seats in it. Somehow Uncle Andrew had managed to reserve these for us. It was either a minor miracle or else a flagrant example of VIP ‘pull’. But I wasn’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth. We still hadn’t taken our seats when the plane began taxiing, and we were in the air almost immediately thereafter. From

the window seat I enjoyed the takeoff, then called for a pillow and took yet another nap.

The pilot set us down gently enough, but I woke up regardless and stretched. “We’re there,” Andrew pointed out unnecessarily.

“Yes,” I replied between yawns. “I know.”

Things went a lot smoother on the home end of our journey. Not only was there a lot less that could go wrong in the first place, but the people at the airport knew us by name. Uncle Andrew’s big white Lincoln was parked near the terminal in a reserved slot that the Guild rented for official use. It cost more than any of us cared to admit. But the simple fact was that our time *was* valuable. While no single one of us flew often enough to justify such an extravagance, the Guild as a whole generated enough traffic to keep our special slot in use just about full time.

“I guess you took a taxi?” my Uncle asked as I clambered in.

“Yeah.” My own house was fairly close to the airport.

“Good. I’ll drop you off.” We rode wordlessly through the parking lot and out onto the highway, then just as we were working up to cruising speed the traffic began slowing down to a crawl. “Shit,” Uncle Andy murmured. The Interstate gods certainly hadn’t been kind to me recently. In fact, they seemed bound and determined to make certain that I spent as much of what little time I had left as possible bound up in swarms of frustrated commuters.

This time things never did quite come to a complete stop. The left lanes continued moving, albeit slowly, and a lucky gap allowed us to

shift over and make progress once more. We crawled past perhaps half a mile of cars before finally moving up far enough in the pack to see what was the congestion was all about.

A band of elves was travelling down the rightmost lane. On horseback, naturally.

I wriggled my nose in frustration at the sight. No matter what arrangements were made for them, the elves caused trouble everywhere they went. The dwarves, the trolls, even the gnomes got along perfectly well both with us and each other. In fact, their unique talents made them especially valuable members of society. Who would've guessed, for example, that trolls would prove to have such an incredible knack for the advertising business? Sure, the pixies caused problems sometimes. But in their case people understood and made allowances. Pixies weren't fully sentient, and even on those rare occasions when it was destructive their kind of magic dissipated within a few hours. But the elves... They were a breed apart. No matter how hard they tried, they couldn't master any technology more complicated than a bow and arrow. Their culture had been in ruins since the loss of Atlantis back in late prehistoric times. Yet long after their sun had set the elves continued to see themselves as superior to the rest of us. We'd fought wars with them from time to time, just as the dwarves and the rest had. In fact the elves often attacked everyone at once. And invariably the conflict devolved into a one-sided slaughter, a massive spilling of 'fair-folk' blood. Bows and arrows, no matter how well handled, were no match for the machine-pistols favored by the rest of Earth's warriors. Besides, there were and perhaps always had been many more of us than them, especially we humans. Nowadays the pitiful remnants of the race wandered about the countryside in filthy rags, oblivious to and perhaps incapable of comprehending traffic regulations and trespassing laws and all the rest

of the fabric of modern society. They made excellent gardeners and game wardens, but only rarely stayed in one place long enough to hold a steady job. Then it'd be time for them to move on, urged along by some strange song no one else could hear.

Two or three cars up, a semi blared its air-horn as it finally worked free of the traffic jam. The elves' horses shied and reared at the loud noise, and as the riders attempted to regain control of their mounts the tallest elf, riding in front, made an angry two-fingered sign at the trucker. It wasn't exactly what might be called a polite gesture, and unfortunately the trucker knew exactly what it meant. He slammed on his brakes and squealed to a halt. Then he rolled down his passenger-side window.

“You did *what* to my grandmother?” he roared. “Well, maybe so! But while you were doing it my grandfather was cleaning the vermin out of Blythe!”

My throat tightened. Blythe was perhaps the most unfortunate incident in the long series of misunderstandings and out-and-out hatred that had marked human-elf relations since who knew when. The settlement was once the last elvish town in the world of any size. It no longer existed, nor did its inhabitants. This insult was far deadlier than the two-fingered gesture. In response the elvish leader stiffened in rage and wheeled his horse about as if to charge. But the trucker let loose another blast from his air horn, which sent the horses scrambling once more. Then, grinning victoriously, he threw his rig into gear and drove away.

I sighed. It was pitiful. Elves lived forever unless killed, and were highly intelligent in their own way. According to legend, mankind stole the original secrets of magic from elvish mages. There were even a few humans who idolized elves and their mysterious ways so much that they adopted their lifestyle and culture—a human man and woman rode with this particular band. But despite all their abilities, despite their physical beauty and avowed respect for all things living,

somehow elves had never mastered the trick of playing well with others. Not even the pixies willingly visited them. There was talk of setting aside an international elf reservation and confining all of the survivors there for their own protection, lest they be wiped out entirely. While the idea normally felt repugnant to me, right at that moment I'd have been hard-pressed to argue against the notion.

Traffic came to a complete standstill as the motorists in the leading edge of the jam halted for fear of hitting one of the bucking mounts. Then we began to creep by one car at a time again, almost as if ashamed. The human children openly stared at the beautiful faces and ragged cloaks, while most adults tended to look away. I joined the kids and filled me eyes as full as I wished, meeting the curiously inexpressive black eyes dead on. The elves were a beaten race, an also-ran in the Darwin Sweepstakes. Barring a miracle they'd never recover. Most of the rest of us felt pity for them. And to a degree, so did I. But I wouldn't have been human if the pity weren't at least somewhat tempered with anger and resentment. My curse showed every sign of an elvish origin, though there could be no certain proof. Elves after all specialized in magic involving plants and animals. Part of me was certain that somewhere out there among the ragged bands the elf who'd destroyed me was watching and waiting to strike again. Even after I became a pure rabbit, I hoped that my hatred would live on. Even with my brain gone, with me smaller than a housecat, I hoped that given half a chance I'd either rip *that* particular elf's throat out or die trying. He deserved no better, and I no less.

When we finally arrived at my place Uncle Andy pulled his big sedan up into my driveway and shut off the engine. "I can stay here with you tonight if you like," he offered.

"No thank you," I replied with a shake of my head. "You don't need to put yourself out. I'll be fine."

He smiled his crooked half-grin. “You’d tell me that regardless, wouldn’t you?”

I smiled back. “Of course.”

“Well, then... I think you’re good for another night or two alone. Until we can work out something better, at least. Promise to call me every day? And your mother too?”

“Sure.”

“Good.” He hesitated, then reached out and ruffled my ears. “It’s not over yet, Greg. Not by a long shot. We can still fight this. There are mages working on a fix every minute of every day.”

“I know,” I replied absently, my attention distracted. Something moving in the front yard had caught my eye. My body tensed, but the object was only a wild bunny come out to graze. She was anything but a threat to me, yet my eyes were drawn to her as if to a magnet. Her ears bobbed at such a graceful angle, her flank was so perfectly curved... And the way she moved in the silken moonlight! Andrew followed my gaze, misinterpreting my response so totally it was farcical.

“Greg!” he whispered urgently. “Don’t give up hope! You won’t end up like *that!*”

“No,” I whispered, the spell broken. “I’ll *never* give up.” But deep in my soul I just had. The rabbit invading my being *was* going to win, and take me over more thoroughly than I could even yet grasp. If there’d ever been any doubt, the doe had settled it. Because just for a fraction of an instant I’d found her attractive. In the physical sense, I

mean.

For better or for worse, it was almost over. I'd be fully a rabbit in no time.

IV

It's natural for both humans and rabbits to seek comfort in ordinary routine. I made myself a little dinner and then fired up the television. But not much was on. Full of nervous energy—as I usually was these days, around sunrise and sunset—I paced my little house over and over, searching for something pleasant to distract myself with. A car magazine had arrived while I was out of town, and I scanned a few of its articles. But I was still restless. Finally I turned on the computer and logged myself onto ThauNet, the computer network set up for victims of magical afflictions. Though I wasn't going to be pursuing the Nothing Powder case any further, I'd made a lot of friends along the way that I fully intended to keep. At almost any hour of the day or night, it was a fair bet that someone else with a fur coat much like mine would be online looking for someone to talk to. Sure enough, that night there were a dozen individuals present, every last one of them cursed just like I was. Sally Bjorn was just beginning to turn into a mouse. No one knew exactly why, as was often the case. Probably some distant ancestor or another had offended a mage. Back in the old days magic-users were much freer in the use of mana, and most likely one of them had laid down a curse that had activated itself so rarely down the generations that it was completely forgotten between manifestations. No one even knew anymore what the ancestor's offense had been, but that didn't stop the magic. Ditto for Harold Westerfield, a rabbit just like me. But they at least were retaining their intellects. It seemed likely that they'd never lose them at all.

Far sadder were the cases of Thomas and Eric Steinman, twin brothers who were almost finished changing into a matched pair of Clydesdales. Their icons showed up on the screen just below the brown rabbit representing me, but they weren't saying anything. Nor had they said anything in several weeks that I knew of. Their transformations had progressed much faster than my own, which was

perhaps kinder in the greater scheme of things. There wasn't any reason for further optimism; now they were horses, pure and simple. My guess was that a parent or caregiver had turned on the machines in their stalls in the hope that a word or two from one of us might generate a reaction.

"Hi, Eric!" I greeted them as cheerfully as I knew how. "Heya, Thomas!" How're you guys tonight?" The Eric icon tossed its tail and whuffled, which might or might not have meant something, while Thomas simply ignored me. A bright outline appeared around the icon of another friend—I knew from memory that it was red, though I could no longer tell. It meant that he wanted to chat with me privately.

"The twins haven't said a thing all night," Jonas informed me. He was almost done changing himself, into a gargoyle in his case. His mind was completely unaffected. The rest of us were happy for him, if a touch envious. "Not in several nights, in fact. Sorry." He knew of my own condition, of course, and therefore understood my special interest in the equines. In fact, he was probably my closest friend.

"Damn," I whispered. Then I shook my head and changed the subject. "How're you?"

"It's rough sometimes. I'm not quite solid stone yet in the daylight, so still have terrible, well... Daymares, I guess you'd call them. But it's not like what you..." He lapsed into silence.

"Yeah," I agreed, still whispering for no apparent reason. "I've got forepaws now, Jonas. And I can't do any algebra at all anymore. They say I need someone to take care of me from now on." Conversation sort of lapsed after that until Thomas and Eric disappeared from the channel a few minutes later.

“Wonder how long my parents will keep on trying after I’m gone?” Holly Himmel asked into the silence. She’d been Harvey Himmel until recently, when the hand of an angry and long-dead mage had reached out for yet another slice of revenge. Most people whose curses involved sex changes kept their old names and identities, but this would’ve been unusually difficult in Holly’s case. She was becoming a rather buxom pixie. “A week? A month? A year?”

“As long as it takes to be sure,” Jonas replied, trying to offer what reassurance he could. “And then some!” There was more silence on the channel for a long time after that. Though it was well-intended, the supportive comment rang false coming from someone whose own mind wasn’t at stake. We terminal cases had, very privately, discussed forming our own separate group several times. But somehow it’d never happened. Probably because the result would have been just *too* gloomy...

“I know,” Holly replied in her trilling voice. “Everyone will do all, all, all they can.” There was more silence, which I decided to fill with a lighter subject.

“Hey, I saw a bunch of elves today,” I commented to fill the emptiness. “They were moving camp right down a major highway during rush hour.”

“Silly elves!” Holly replied, tittering. She sounded terribly pixie-ish already, sometimes.

“At rush hour?” Campbell asked. He was British and becoming a bull mastiff, but apparently the term was recognized on both sides of the Atlantic. “They have no sense at all, eh?”

“Not much,” I agreed, simply making conversation. “You

should've seen them go crazy when a truck- that's a lorry to you, Campbell! - blew its air horn at them. The horses couldn't handle it at all."

Jane, an Arabian-soon-to-be, nickered in protest. Apparently at one time horse-cursing had been quite the fashion, as the form remained common even into the present day.

"No," I explained to her. "I felt sorry for the horses, Jane. And even for the elves, kinda. But... Well, the whole situation is a mess."

"Over here, too," Campbell agreed. "Blythe, you know."

I nodded. The famous massacre had occurred in the UK. Feelings were still harder there than in most places. "Everywhere, it's a mess. But what can anyone do?"

"At least we had normal lives once," Jonas pointed out. "We fit in and could do normal things. So we have an understanding of what it's like to be part of a working society. Those of us who're still able can find a way to fit in again someday. But the elves... Only the handful that remember Atlantis ever belonged to a truly viable culture. And that one is long, long dead."

"I can understand why they're angry," Holly offered. "At least pixies never get mad. When I get upset, I just spread my little wings and dance, dance, dance..." The conversation paused again as Holly's icon dipped and twirled. Once she got started doing that, the rest of us knew, she could be gone for hours. One day she wouldn't come back at all. But at least she seemed happy. Would I be a happy bunny, I wondered? For that matter, would I even be able to appreciate the difference between being happy and unhappy? No one knew.

I was thinking about that when something startled me. A little window way off to one side of my screen had appeared; now it was flashing insistently. There was no name or icon attached to it, and I knew from experience that if I tried to trace the thing it'd lead me off in fruitless circles. It was my Nothing Powder connection! Without thinking it through I reached over with my mouse and clicked on the icon.

“Did you complete the deal?” a deep voice inquired.

“Yes,” I replied. “I made money, you made money. Everyone’s happy.”

“Who bought it? Did it work?”

“Now, now!” I replied. “That’s my business, not yours. I respect your privacy, and you can respect mine in turn.”

The line went silent. I spent the time watching Holly dance her intricate pixie dance and wondered why I was still talking to the dealer. It was just going to get me in trouble, was all.

“Want more?” the voice finally asked. “Maybe for yourself, this time?”

I smiled. Nothing Powder couldn’t cure me; it’d already been tested in micro-dosages. A complex and powerful spell like my curse wasn’t something you could just halt in midstream without doing serious damage. “Maybe for me, maybe for resale. I might as well enjoy the time I’ve got left, and that’s a lot easier to do with lots of cash.”

“We’ve got more than we need,” the voice replied. “But there’s not much time. Ten grand in gold, and the deal goes down tonight.”

“Tonight?” I asked.

“Tonight. You won’t be hearing from us again, bunny rabbit. I’d suggest that this time you try the stuff on yourself. It’ll be your last batch.”

“Where?” I demanded. “It’s late, and there aren’t many flights-“

The voice gave me a location and I gulped; it was only about forty miles from my home, down an old highway that paralleled a river. It was a pleasant rural road, one that ducked and weaved prettily up and down the bluffs. I drove it frequently for pleasure, and knew the area well. Alarm bells began going off in my head by the score.

“Let me check the airline schedules,” I temporized, actually bringing up my favorite travel webpage in case they were somehow monitoring me. “I’ll need to see if I can get a flight out of Lambert Field.” My fake electronic address was in St. Louis.

“Right,” the voice agreed. “I’ll wait.”

My mind was spinning as I studied the airline schedules. I still had enough Family gold sitting in my wall safe to make another buy; it’d been stashed there against the very possibility that I might need it in a hurry, and no one had taken it back yet. If I decided I wanted to make this buy, all I’d have to do would be to drive out into the country and close the deal. But it seemed awfully fishy for it to be so close to home...

“There’s a 9:17 flight,” the voice observed. “Could you make that one?”

“No,” I replied. “It’s impossible; I’m too far from town. The first chance I’ll have is the 11:33.”

“All right,” the voice agreed, though it wasn’t happy. “We’re about an hour and a half from the airport. With you having to rent a car, I’ll figure to see you at about 2:15 AM. If you aren’t there by 2:30, I won’t be either.”

“Right,” I agreed. Then the connection was cut. I bought a ticket from the web page, just in case, then said my good-byes to the folks on ThauNet and shut down.

“Damndamndamn!” I murmured to myself, standing up and stretching my sore back. Adrenaline was flooding my system, so that I simply *had* to get up and move. As rapidly as my big feet would allow I strode up and down my hallway, thinking intently. There were about a million excellent reasons why I shouldn’t go out and make this buy, I realized. First and foremost, I’d told my uncle that I wouldn’t. I hated the idea of lying to him. And I had to admit that he had good reasons for not wanting me to take any more risks; with my algebra skills gone what part of my mind might I lose next? Surely another security ward would be waiting for me; it was almost a given. I’d be exposed to that much magic as a minimum. How much more damage would it do? Also, since no one would ever approve of my making another deal under any circumstances, I couldn’t let anyone know in advance where I’d be. And the location thing; was it *too* much of a coincidence? I lived in a fairly big city, after all, and the address wasn’t all that close. But still... Were the bad guys on to me?

On the other hand, I badly wanted to accomplish something before I became an animal; wanted to live up to the expectations that everyone had once had for me. I was tired of being an object of pity, and ashamed of how little I’d been able to accomplish. For heaven’s sake, I was a Lombard by my father and a Grisham of the True Line by my mother! Had I died in childhood my lack of accomplishment might be excusable. But here I was in my twenties and what had I

done? *Nothing!* What would I be remembered for? Becoming a goddamned rabbit! It was *intolerable* that my curse should win this final victory, should steal from me my legacy as well as my life! I ground my teeth in agonized indecision for what seemed like forever, then remembered that my fur was bleached back to its natural white again. Which meant that if I was to make the deadline, my new dye-job would have to start almost immediately.

For that matter, did I still have enough dye in the house to make me brown again?

It was the dye issue which ended up making the decision for me. I had two full bottles of brown in the cabinet, plus three half-bottles. It'd take three and a half bottles to do a good job on me, I knew from experience. But was what I had on hand enough? The stuff wasn't all that easy to buy; it was specially formulated for fur. Ordinary human hair dye didn't work well on me; if there wasn't enough of the special stuff on-hand then there wasn't any point in even considering further action. I lined up the bottles on my vanity, trying to decide. Was there or wasn't there enough? Just thinking about it made my head hurt. One bottle, two bottles... Then what? It was all so confusing! I hopped about my house, angrily shaking my head in frustration. What a silly, pathetic mess I was becoming!

Then finally it came to me. I'd begin the job, and if there were in fact three and a half bottles or more then I'd be the first to know, wouldn't I? If I came up short, I'd just explain to my family that I'd wanted to be brown again for a while. They'd not question something like that, not with everything else that was going on in my life. So I laid out some old towels, then climbed into the shower and got to work. Just as I was finishing up the soles of my feet the last bottle ran out. Perfect! I dried my fur on the towels, then turned on my blow dryer and rotated solemnly under it until the new coloration was

firmly set. My coat was getting a little frizzy from all the abuse, but it didn't really matter. I'd never be using the dye again, after all. This was absolutely the last time.

Usually I stayed under the dryer longer than was really necessary. The hot air blast was warm and pleasant, so much so that sometimes I laid under it simply to relax. But I was far too upset to appreciate the pleasures of warm air just then. The dye-problem hadn't been a particularly complex one. Yet I'd been totally unable to solve it, or even figure out how where to begin. Fraction-equations shouldn't require more than a few minutes, if I remembered right. It was yet another painful reminder of how far I'd fallen, on top of a day overfull of such reminders. Up until now, my inability to do algebra hadn't particularly bothered me. But now that I'd come up against the need for it in real life, my lack made me feel terribly helpless. Even...

I sighed to myself and faced the truth. It made me feel inferior, just as being forced to sit like an animal in public had. Less than human, in other words. Soon I'd be losing even more than what was already gone; the power of speech, the ability to reason, my dignity and independence, even in time my very identity. I wasn't gone yet. But it was coming all too soon.

It was sort of ironic, really; I'd planned to let the dye problem set my course of action, and it'd done so far more thoroughly than I ever anticipated. For now, after failing so miserably at algebra, I had my first real insight as to where I was going and what my life was going to be like when I got there. My family said I was strong and brave, but no one could be *that* strong and brave. Or at least they shouldn't have to be. The two most important facts of my existence were that my life was about to become a burden to me, and that so far I'd never accomplished anything I wanted to be remembered for. I only had one chance left to remedy that, as near as I could see. Sure, there were

risks. But even the downsides were really upsides, when you put things in the proper perspective.

The bottom line was, what did I have to lose?

Once I was settled on a course of action, the rest went quickly enough. I dictated my last will and testament into the computer, using the camera attachment to verify that I was indeed me. It'd stand up in court so long as no one worked too hard at challenging it. This I fully expected to be the case, since I had few personal possessions of any monetary value. I stated for the record that I thought Uncle Andrew would make an excellent Regent should I outlive Mother in my incapacitated form; no one was certain about how quickly I was aging or would age in the future. Then I sent a copy of the document to an online data-storage outfit with instructions to forward it to Mother in a week. If I wasn't back by then to cancel the mailing, she'd be needing it. I also took a moment to print out two copies of the conversation I'd had with my supplier, including the time and description I'd been given for the buy location. One copy I pocketed, the other I left lying in the center of the kitchen table.

Next I turned my attention to more immediate problems. For a moment I feared that I might be unable to open my combination safe, but simple numbers and counting were apparently still within my repertoire. I shoveled out eight tiny gold bars, the same as last time, and stuffed them carelessly into my jacket pocket. After hesitating for just the slightest second, I also picked up the snub-nosed revolver I kept there. Then I scowled and put it right back where it belonged. I'd only needed to hold the gun in my paw for an instant to realize that the weapon was now useless to me except as a poorly-shaped club. For I no longer had a trigger finger.

Next I walked around my little home turning out lights and making certain that everything was in perfect order. I'd become quite attached to the little place; it was very much my own even though the deed remained in Mother's name. I was never sure whether my strong sense of ownership came from lapine territoriality or simple human pride, but in the end it didn't matter. I loved my home, and if I failed to return it was important to me that that everything be in order.

Then, quite suddenly, there was nothing else left to do. I patted my jacket pocket to make sure I'd not forgotten the gold, then stepped through the door into my garage. Awaiting me there, looking almost as if it'd missed me, was the only thing I owned that really mattered to me; a half-restored 1968 Dodge Dart GTS Convertible still in primer gray. "Hi," I said aloud as I walked around the front of the vehicle. "I've missed you."

Hi, yourself! it seemed to answer back. *Want to go for a run?*

I grinned despite myself as, exerting all of my strength, I threw back the hood. The huge slab of metal weighed several times what the equivalent component on a more modern vehicle did, and as always I felt a shiver of excitement run up and down my spine as the cleverly-crafted springs counterbalanced the mass and then raised it over my head. I'd mounted a permanent work light on the wall that shone into the engine compartment; without even looking I reached out and flipped the switch. The 340-cubic-inch power plant, a miracle of technology, gleamed under a fresh coat of paint. When you're covered with snowy white fur and insist on spending much of your free time under the hood of a car regardless of the practicality of the matter, you can't afford to ignore even the tiniest leak. With infinite care I checked the oil and generally looked things over, then dragged a ladder over to the car and climbed up two rungs. As I continued shrinking down to rabbit-size, shutting the hood was growing more

and more awkward. This time I practically had to dangle from the front edge of the blamed thing before it'd swing shut. But it was well worth the trouble to me.

The top was already down, it being midsummer, and putting the ladder away was the work of only a moment. Then I was sitting behind the wheel, smiling in anticipation as the garage door rose automatically behind me. When it was all the way up I reached for the accelerator pedal, then frowned. It was too far away; I'd shrunk considerably since the last time I'd driven the Dart, it seemed. Sighing, I adjusted the seat to its extreme forward notch, then took my time adjusting all three mirrors. When everything was perfect I checked the gold bars one last time, cracked the throttle and turned the key.

"Rrr-rrr-rrr," the big brute of a motor groaned as it cranked ever so slowly over. The Chrysler workers who'd originally assembled my engine wouldn't recognize it anymore; I'd upped the compression, installed a more radical cam, fuel injected it, the works. My starter motor had to work extra-hard as a result, and the cam, optimized for performance instead of smoothness and reliability, made starting the Dart more of an art than a science. "Rrr-rrr-rrr... B-B-Baroom!"

My face broke into a grin as the big V-8 began thrashing away, its dual exhausts singing a tune all the sweeter for my sensitive lapine ears. I let it idle for a moment to warm up, then depressed the clutch and slid the gearshift into reverse. *Crash-Chunk!* my transmission said, and I grinned again. Modern cars had real wimps for transmissions compared to my rig. Sure, it was crudely machined, noisy, poorly synchronized, and had a sloppy linkage. But you could use its innards to pulverize a half-ton of gravel and the gearbox would soldier right on without missing a beat. To me this was American engineering at its finest, what domestic cars were supposed to be all

about.

I reversed down my drive, then shifted into first and idled along for a while. While my property was fairly extensive, the house itself was located near one edge so that my neighbor lived close by. At this time of night, she'd be trying to sleep. So I kept a tight rein on my Dart until I was out on the main road. Only then did I open things up.

It was glorious to be out and about in a convertible on such a beautiful night. The wind was warm and delightful; it rippled the fur against my soft skin and caressed my long, flapping ears. The night sounds and smells were crystal-clear despite the murmuring of the exhaust. My gauges all looked normal as I hit the interstate; with childish ease I accelerated to fifty, sixty, seventy, then eighty miles an hour on the deserted highway, tapping only the tiniest portion of the naked raw-edged power that waited patiently for me in reserve. It was perfectly safe for me to run a little fast with no one else around. Before I knew it the Dart and I arrived at our exit. Reluctantly we rolled to a stop at the top of the ramp, the engine loping badly due to the high-performance camshaft. A police car was sitting there waiting for someone to run the red light; I ruined his night by waiting patiently until it turned green and then signaling properly before making my right turn out into the countryside beyond his jurisdiction.

Once I was out in the hinterlands on a road I knew well I let the Dart have its head. Together we charged out of curves and ran flat out down long straightaways, the intakes generating such a roar that at times it sounded as if the hood would cave in under the pressure. The acceleration shoved me back *hard* into the seat, so that my arms strained to hold onto the wheel and my tail cramped in protest. At other times and in other places I might've been more careful. But tonight I had nothing left to lose, and there was no one else out on the roads for me to endanger. Did I enjoy driving fast so much because of

the rabbit in me? Maybe. It didn't matter so much to me anymore. Any more than it would've mattered had I run into a telephone pole. My seat belt wasn't fastened, and this was no accident at all.

At the rate I was travelling, I'd arrive far too early at my destination. Reluctantly, my head still buzzing with adrenaline, I slowed down and tried to calm myself. It worked; the need for speed was no longer so urgent and I resolved to simply enjoy the night air for the rest of the journey. Even so, I hit my first landmark at 1:07 by the dashboard clock, about twenty minutes early. I'd have to find something to do to kill time- there was no way that I could've flown in from St. Louis and arrived so early. I thought about driving past the small turnoff I'd been told to look out for and then circling back. But no, someone might see me come from the wrong direction. Or for that matter...

My jaw dropped. Oh my *heavens!* I'd almost made a *terrible* mistake! People don't rent primer-gray 1968 Dart GTS convertibles at airports these days, or at least not so often that you'd notice. I shook my head and pounded the wheel. What a hare-brain I was becoming! I thought furiously as I slowed the Dart to a crawl. There wasn't time to go back to the airport and rent a car, nor was there anyplace closer to get one. I was early, but not *that* early. Which left two options. I could either go back home and pretend it all never happened (*No!* part of my mind screamed) or else... what?

Hmm. I could park short of my destination and walk the rest of the way in. There was enough time for that, and it'd give me a good chance to do a little scouting before knocking on the door. The more I thought about this option, the more I liked it. I could explain to the supplier that I'd done it as a precaution, if he asked. And so, this became my best and only plan. But I was still blushing under my fur at having been so stupid in the first place.

What else, I wondered, had I done wrong?

The turnoff came up sooner than I expected, just beyond a moldering Standard Oil billboard. I throttled back and shifted down, then delicately eased my Dodge down a narrow gravel track that led across a pasture of sorts. The ground in the area was absolutely flat, though the river valley wall rose sharply to my left and I could smell the water nearby. As near as I could tell, I was rolling up the long driveway of a farm of some sort. Supposedly, I had two more miles of slow going before arriving at the old house trailer where I was supposed to meet my connection. I glanced at my odometer, then turned the headlights off. There was no sense that I could see in advertising my presence. Besides, the moon was up now and these days I could see pretty well in the dark.

For what felt like forever the gravel crunched under my tires as the Dodge and I crept forward. Then a steep, dark embankment loomed up ahead. I shifted to neutral, then scrunched my head up close to the dashboard until I could read the odometer in the moonlight. I'd come a mile and a half; near enough. And it was 1:45. The timing couldn't be better. So I shut down my motor, then reached for the door latch...

...only to stop my hand just in time. How stupid could I get? If I opened the door, all the courtesy lights would come on, illuminating the Dart like a Christmas tree. What I needed to do was climb out the hard way. Which wasn't all that difficult, the top being down. I shook my head at how closely I'd come to throwing all my advantages away. The mutter of my motor and the crunch of gravel as I drove in was bad enough. But to spotlight myself...

I sighed and rested a moment in the driver's seat. My pulse was racing, and it'd be best to get it under control if I could. I took advantage of the opportunity to think things through one last time.

What else was I doing wrong? I shifted my position a little, and the keys dangling from my paw jingled. *That'd* never do, if was going to be sneaking around! So I slipped them back into the ignition. It wasn't likely that my Dart would be stolen, out in the middle of nowhere and long after midnight. Then I shook myself more vigorously, listening especially for the gold bars. They rattled a tiny bit, but I was certain no one else would hear them. So, as nearly as I could tell, I was set.

One of the advantages of keeping your car in primer is that you don't fear minor scratches. I stood up and hopped into the back seat, then crawled across the trunk lid and lowered myself onto the gravel. Owning a convertible was so convenient sometimes! There were tall weeds in the ditches alongside the driveway, and I walked as close to the right-hand foliage as possible so as to break up my silhouette. No doubt anyone with eyes had already seen my car. Still, it was good practice and helped get me into the proper mindset.

The embankment up ahead was clearly artificial- a levee, I realized once I stood at its base. It ran off to both the left and right as far as I could see, and was thickly overgrown with brush. The driveway ran directly up this side and (presumably) down the other. Until I was at the top, I could learn no more. I sighed, then decided to try and find an alternative to the road. This took perhaps five minutes. In deer country, an overgrown area surrounded by good grazing soon becomes home to dozens of hooved residents. Their trails ran everywhere. I had to drop to all fours to get through a few tough spots, but once I made it to the top I was reasonably sure that no one knew where I was anymore, not even if they'd seen me leave the Dart. Moving carefully, not rustling a single leaf, I stuck my head out of the thick cover and looked down on my destination.

The house trailer was painted white, just as my connection had said it would be. The thing wasn't set up to be lived in, however.

Rather it sat abandoned not far from the driveway, still atop its travelling wheels and with tall weeds growing all around it. I squinted in the moonlight. There were no curtains in the windows; in fact, no signs of life whatsoever. I sniffed carefully at the air, and picked up only the smoke of a distant fire, then an equally faraway aroma of rotting fish. The river again, I figured. A stand of large trees swept across the meadow beyond the trailer, and I assumed they marked the near bank of the stream. There was no sign of any magic about, nor of any security wards of any kind. I gulped. I'd gained nothing from my reconnaissance, except to kill a few minutes.

And now it was time to make my buy.

With great care I moved across the top of the levee, then turned left to follow the weed-lined ditch down the steep slope to where it led almost right up to the front door of the trailer. No one seemed to notice me as I looked up at the entryway; there wasn't any reaction of any kind. The front door was open a crack; had there been the slightest breeze it would've been swinging back and forth on its hinges.

"Hello?" I asked, the sound barely escaping my tight throat.

There was a sudden motion, as if I'd startled someone. Then a deep voice spoke; I recognized it from Thau-Net. "Hello! We've been expecting you. Come on in!"

Suddenly trembling in fear, I scanned the open area around me with eyes and ears and nose. The ditch was only a few feet away. Reminding myself of this made me feel better, somehow. "I like it better out here," I replied with a tremor in my voice. "Please?"

The door opened slightly; apparently someone was standing just behind it. "In here or no deal," the voice replied sharply. "You need us

a lot more than we need you.”

My voice failed me entirely for a moment as the trembling became uncontrollable and the image of the friendly ditch filled my mind. But I shook it off and stood my ground.

The voice spoke again, this time more gently. “Come on, bunny! There’s only one-”

Then a net dropped over my head! Someone had sneaked across the roof while I was distracted! I pumped my legs explosively, tried for all I was worth to run, to get away, to find a safe place far, far away from the scary darkness and the deep voice! But my efforts just entangled me further. Two slight figures dropped alongside me—elves!— and wrapped me up tighter and tighter until, shaking with fear, I stopped fighting them.

“Get the gold,” the deep voice ordered in the fair tongue. Small nimble hands probed my pockets until they found the bars, and I watched the two net-throwers dance with glee as they held the fortune above their heads in triumph.

“Good,” the deep voice said with satisfaction. “Now, bring him inside. Let’s have a closer look at what the hunting gods have brought us this night.”

The door to the trailer was several feet off of the ground due to the travel-wheels; the two Elves tossed me up onto the living room floor like a sack of potatoes, then lithely scrambled up behind me. A short time passed while someone mucked about with flint and steel, then a single candle lit the room. I blinked in the sudden brightness. There were four elves in the room, or rather two true elves and two human converts. The two men towered above their adopted kinsmen. They were fully-accepted adoptees, as evidenced by the fact that their ears

were trimmed into crude points. The bigger of the two smiled, but his expression was cold and heartless. “So,” he rumbled in his deep voice. “We’ve snared ourselves a rabbit, have we? What’s the rabbit’s name?”

He didn’t know? Or perhaps he was testing me somehow? Either way, I could think of a fairly good answer, one that didn’t require much at all in the way of histrionics. “Ah! Ah! Ah!” I replied in a lapine wail, struggling pitifully against the net once more.

The big man-elf frowned. “Come on, Richard!” he demanded, using my fake name from the chat room. “You’re not that far gone. What’s your *real* name?”

I wailed some more, and the elves grew irritated. A rabbit’s wail is rather akin to the cry of a baby, and grates just as badly on the nerves.

“By the pimples of the gods!” the deep-voiced one mumbled to himself in elvish. Then he turned to the other human and continued in the same tongue. “Hekla, go tell Hirst that we’ve got the rabbit. He’s not talking yet, and I’m not sure if he’s faking or not. But it doesn’t matter. It’s time to move.”

“Aye, Henst” Hekla replied. His breath reeked, and I realized that he must have the devil’s own case of tooth decay. Natural-born elves don’t get sick, suffer from poor eyesight, or have bad teeth. Therefore human converts didn’t admit to suffering from any of these failings either, even when they really did. Besides, the cures required the use of ‘unnatural’ substances and technology, something unacceptable to the elvish lifestyle under any circumstances. Hekla must’ve been in continual pain, but if he was a typical convert then he’d die before admitting that he was any less an elf than one of the True Blood.

The dentist's nightmare went running off into the darkness, and then Henst barked out more orders. "Go get our horses, Hanni!" he commanded. The smaller true elf nodded and dashed out. Once he was gone Henst spoke again. "All right, Homma. Let's get the bunny untangled and ready to travel."

I tensed myself, then kicked and fought at every opportunity. But even the blood-elf was considerably bigger and stronger than I was, and in almost no time my paws were bound together and there was a noose snugged tight around my neck. "We'll have to watch him," Homma noted. "Look at those teeth! He could gnaw through a rope in no time flat."

I'd been thinking the very same thing, actually. But since I wasn't admitting that I knew Elvish, I didn't let my disappointment show.

"Yes," Henst agreed with a nod. "Too bad his arms won't reach around behind him anymore. He'll have to be watched every second. But it should be well worth the trouble. He's proven that he's rich."

Homma grinned, remembering the gold bars. "They rape Mother Earth of treasures that she wouldn't willingly give. But we'll take her goods back for her! The ransom should be *enormous* for one with access to so much gold."

I remained expressionless, though my mind was racing. Did they truly not realize who I was? Was this whole setup just a simple kidnapping? What did elves need money for, anyway? They never bought *anything*. Then again, they never used computers either, I realized suddenly. Or they never had before, at least. Yet somehow the Fair Folk had entered the information age. There was no possible mistaking the leader's deep bass voice. Not for someone with my ears!

Henst returned Homma's smile. "Yes." Then he paused, looking puzzled. "Where could Hekla be off to *this* time? He should've returned by now."

"I'll go find out," Homma replied. Apparently Hekla was often tardy. "If it's all right?"

"Yes, of course. I'll mind the prisoners. But be quick! The night is passing!"

Prisoners? Then there was at least one more captive! But who? Where?

Homma nodded in acknowledgement and vanished silently into the darkness, leaving me alone with the big human. He looked at me and spoke once again in English. "Hello? Do you understand me?"

Simulating abject terror, I cringed away from the sound. When you're a rabbit, such actions come quite naturally. They appear perfectly natural to others, as well. Which can be useful.

"Listen to me," he explained, leaning slightly forward. "We've no quarrel with you, Richard or whatever your name is. No one wants to hurt you. In fact, I feel true pity for you. It must be *terrible* to be cursed." The man-elf looked at me hopefully, but I met his gaze with stony silence. Eventually he continued. "All we want to do is ransom you. You humans have all the money and all the power. We won't demand more than your family can pay—I swear it! And you won't be harmed in the slightest. But the sooner you tell us who you are, the sooner we can let your loved ones know you're all right and begin the process of getting you back home."

Could it be true? Had my cover actually held? They really *didn't* know who I was! It felt like a major victory, albeit one won in the course of a losing campaign. I realized I'd been looking the elf in the

eye for much too long a time, so I cringed again and allowed myself to tremble violently. It worked; Henst sighed and turned away, picking up my leash. “Come along, then,” he murmured in English. “I’ve got some packing-up to do, and I’m not letting my eyes off of you for a second.”

I let him drag me along without putting up too much of a fight; after all, I still needed to learn more. With the candle held high Henst led me down the mobile home’s cramped hallway to a back bedroom. There was a tiny bathroom located there; someone had opened up a wall and exposed the plastic pipes that supplied water to it. Apparently the trailer had suffered from plumbing difficulties for quite some time before being abandoned. The elf tied me to a pipe there, making an excellent job of it. Then he stepped over into the opposite corner, squatted down, and got to work.

It was terribly frustrating. Henst was trying to block my view with his body, and between his efforts and the old bed located in the room’s center I couldn’t see a thing at first. Then I dropped to all fours—not in the least self-consciously, under these circumstances—and looked *under* the bed. This gave me an unobstructed view of my captor meticulously breaking down a tiny computer center consisting of a motorcycle battery, a laptop, and a cell-phone. Then he opened the window and pulled in a flat boardlike thingie that had to be a solar cell. It all made sense. Then Henst turned and checked on me; he wasn’t *about* to allow me enough private time to chew through my lead. I was ready though, and as the big man watched I rolled over onto my back, doglike, and snapped desperately at the rope. “You’ll get used to it,” he said mock-comfortingly. “That or a cage when we settle down again. Unless you want to talk?”

I kept right on chewing. The rope tasted terrible, and the cords were tough and stringy. Still, gnawing at it offered me a certain peace

of mind. Which was evidence of yet another change in my personality, and one very much for the worse. I was deeply disturbed, but didn't let my jaws slacken off their pace in the slightest.

Henst frowned, then returned to his work. There was a single saddlebag lying on the floor, and several old cloaks. Carefully he wrapped his paraphernalia in the cloaks, then tried to slide everything into the bag. But it was a tight fit, and his first attempt failed. “Midden of the gods!” he muttered in Elvish as I continued gnawing, more for show than out of any real hope of escape. “Gutpile of Narcus!” With the last he slammed down the empty saddlebag in frustration. It startled me terribly.

Apparently the sudden banging sound startled someone else as well. For in the next bedroom, my sensitive ears detected a small body stirring. And then a small child began to sob.

I don't know why, but I've always been very sensitive to the feelings of children. When kids cry at a restaurant, I can't eat. Uncle Andrew thought it might be part of the ears-and-fur package, but I knew better. I'd felt the same way while I was still fully human. The child continued to weep, and suddenly the rules of engagement changed. Up until that moment this whole escapade had been almost a game. A game likely to get me killed, true enough. But that hadn't mattered so much. Now, however, something far more important was at stake. They'd kidnapped a child! Henst and his crew weren't merely misguided, but genuinely evil.

I had to think quickly. More elves would arrive at any moment, and I now knew that my fellow prisoner—or at least one fellow prisoner—was located right next door. Plus, my captors didn't yet realize who I was, something that was sure to change in the next few hours or days. Circumstances weren't likely to get any better; this was

the best opportunity I was likely to have for some time. Maybe ever. Besides, we weren't far from a large national forest. Let a band of elves loose in *there*, and they'd disappear for years despite the best efforts of rangers, helicopters and dogs. It was their one great talent.

My mind raced furiously. So it had to be now; *right* now, even! No hesitations, no planning, no sitting and thinking it over. But how? It'd take time to chew through my bonds, more time than Henst would ever allow me. I had to find a way to cut them, or maybe slip out of them...

Then I had it. It wasn't a particularly *good* plan, nor one I found appealing. But it was quick, and it stood a fair chance of success. "Henst!" I whispered. "Please! I want to talk now. So I can go home!"

The renegade turned towards me. "Good!" he replied with a reassuring smile. "*I knew you'd come around. What's your name?*"

"Richard, truly! Richard Dennington. My family has lots and lots of money!" I made the last part into a nearly-indecipherable wail. If I could just lure him closer...

It worked. He stepped around the bed and placed a reassuring hand on my head. "We'll get you home," he promised. "Just take it easy until then. What's your phone number?"

My jaw trembled in fear. "876..." I stuttered. "876..."

"Yes," he replied, looking me dead in the eyes. "I have that part. Go on."

He was totally unguarded. So I reached out with my mind and submerged myself into the spirit beyond that laid beyond the body of Henst the elf. It'd been an awfully long time since I'd performed any magic. But my natural power level was extraordinarily high. Henst

was utterly and completely mine, once I'd decided I was willing to pay the price. I could've rendered him insane, destroyed his identity, or even cut off his soul from the body. It wasn't proper for a mage to be unnecessarily cruel to the mundane, however. So I merely put him into a deep, persistent sleep.

Then, inevitably, the payment for what I'd just done came due as my curse activated itself with a will. There was no agonizing pain, no theatrical snapping of tendons and breaking of bones. I shrank rapidly and immediately, however. My hips rotated within me, my neck twisted, my head changed shape and grew smaller and smaller. My thumbs disappeared before my eyes, and I felt my shoulders bend further forward on my frame. Actually using magic myself, my doctors had warned me, would prove to be the quickest way of all to accelerate my demise. And I'd just proved them right. But I'd also just freed myself of my guard and bonds. The rope that had been so tightly tied around my forepaws was lying limp on the floor when my head cleared. And the one around my neck dangled loosely. A single shake, and it was gone. I was free!

Free, free, free! I hopped about in pure exultation for a time. Free, free, free! But there were walls all around me still. I dashed about madly, looking for the door to the little bedroom. Then I found it, and made one, two, three leaps down the hallway towards freedom, accelerating with each until...

...I heard another cry from the other bedroom.

Instantly I skidded to a halt, my claws digging into the decaying carpet. This brought a smile to my face. Starting and stopping so quickly was *fun!* I *liked* hopping on this stuff! Rather dopily I leapt forward again, then darted to the right suddenly and spun right around just because I could. Then I leapt up high, high, high in the air, my

heart soaring with the sheer joy of leaping...

...and returned to earth with a crash, shaking the cobwebs from my clearly diminished mind. *Damnit, Gregory!* I told myself. *You're not done yet. You have a job to do! Then you can run and play for the rest of your life!* The thought was like a bucket of ice water in my face. For the rest of my life I *would* hop and play! I shook my head again, then pressed my nose up against the bedroom door. It swung open with a squeak, and I was in. The room was dark, but my new body was built with darkness in mind. I sat up on my hindlegs and spread my ears wide. The sobbing came from...

...over *there!* I hopped silently towards the sound, sniffing and listening every inch of the way. The child wasn't human; I'd never scented a whatever-she-was before. "Hey!" I whispered when my nose bumped up against the cage they were keeping her in.

The child stiffened in fear.

"No!" I exclaimed. "I'm here to help you!"

"Do you know my Mommy?" she asked.

"Yes!" I lied. Under the circumstances, it was the only thing to do. "She sent me to help you."

"You sound funny," she whispered back.

"That's because I'm a bunny rabbit," I explained. She sounded plenty young, whatever kind of being she was. "My name is Gregory. What's yours?"

"A bunny rabbit? Like Lagarth?"

“Uh-huh,” I replied voice bright and confident even as I wondered who Lagarth was. And for that matter, I also wondered just how much like him I'd become. I'd still not exactly had a chance to check myself over, after all. “What's your name, honey?”

“Tallismane.” It was Gnomish. No wonder she sounded so small!

“I need to get you out of that cage, Tallismane. Does it have a door?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Where is it?” I asked patiently. “This end?”

“Yes.” She rattled it.

I was on it in a flash. Elves are clever craftsmen at need when natural materials are involved, and I feared that the latch might be beyond my now-limited abilities to crack. But the cage was held shut by a hasp backed by a board too large for the captive to reach around. Simple and effective, but more importantly something I was able to deal with despite my altered state. I opened the door easily. “There. Come on out.”

“Oh!” she said as she crawled free. “Thank you!”

I felt my heart melting. It was terribly important that I please Tallismane, I realized suddenly. I liked her a lot. I wondered if she'd pet and hold me for a little while? I was just starting to cuddle up against her warm little body when I remembered again where we were. I shook my head again to clear it, making my ears flap. “You're a very silly bunny!” Tallismane observed.

“Yes,” I agreed. “And getting sillier by the minute.” I shook my head one last time. “We have to leave now, dear. Can you follow me?”

Maybe you could put your hand on my back and feel where I am?"

"So silly!" she replied with a giggle. "I'm a Gnome!"

Of course! Gnomes had infra-red eyes and could see perfectly in total darkness. They lived underground and mostly worked as miners. Silly was the word, all right, if I couldn't remember *that*. "Good! Then follow me. And if I run, I want you to follow me just as fast as you can. All right?"

"All right."

I hopped slowly out into the living room, Tallismane following obediently. The door was still open, and I dropped easily to the ground outside.

"Bunny rabbit..." the little girl said worriedly from the doorway behind me. "That's too far down. I can't jump that far."

In the distance I could hear hoofbeats approaching, fast! Something was after me! I hopped into the brushy ditch and took cover.

"Bunny?" The little girl's voice was terrified. "Bunny?"

It was so hard to speak aloud when my instincts were screaming for silence. But I did it anyway. "R-r-right here, hon."

"I'm scared!"

She thought she was scared! My heart was pounding, my breathing shallow and rapid, my eyes wide and staring... I forced myself to speak again. "Honey, you *have* to jump. It's the only way."

"But I *can't*!" she wailed.

I cursed under my breath. How could I ever hide properly, with someone making so much noise so close by? “Talismane, your mother told me you could jump. She said to *make* you jump. So, jump!”

“I... I...” The hoofbeats were growing louder. There were only seconds left.

“Jump!” I hissed. “*Now!*”

The gnome hesitated for just a second, then made the leap. I dashed out to meet her.

“I made it!” she declared, climbing to her feet. I scented blood oozing from her left knee, but not a terrible lot of it. Probably she’d just skinned the thing.

“Good girl!” I answered her, smiling. “Now, follow me!” I leapt effortlessly into the ditch, made two long low hops under a thorn bush, then turned around and stuck up my head to check on my charge. She was clumsily barging into the overgrowth.

“Bunny?” she asked. “Where are you?”

The horses were getting close, and I ground my teeth in frustration. Had I ever been so clumsy, so graceless, so damned *slow* while still walking on two legs? Clearly this wasn’t going to work out as planned.

“They’re coming!” I whispered urgently. “Just drop where you are! Now!”

“Oh, no!” the little girl cried out. I was afraid that she’d panic and run, but with only the slightest hesitation she dropped where she stood.

“Shh!” I cautioned, edging further under my thorn bush. The

horses came trotting up, four of them bearing a total of two elves. One of them smelled of rotting teeth- it was Hekla, the other human. The second I didn't know, but he dismounted with the fluid grace and ease of motion that was usually associated with elvish old age. "Henst?" the old one asked in a musical voice. "Gabra tone ing?"

I felt ice forming in my belly. I'd learned Elvish as an infant. The words should've meant something, but instead they danced just beyond the edge of a dark, dark place. I ran the words through my mind over and over again, unable to let the matter drop. Gabra tone ing? Gabra tone ing? Gabra tone ing? My head ached terribly, I suddenly realized. But there was a trickle of fresh water at the bottom of the ditch. It was cool and wet. I slurped some up, then turned my attention to the greenery around me. I couldn't eat the thorn bush, of course, but there were some nice young weeds growing near the water that...

I don't know long it was before I came around, though it couldn't have been more than two or three minutes. Tallisane was hugging me and sobbing, and I was chewing on...

...blech! I was eating a *weed*! Urgently I spat the stuff out. Who knew if it might be poisonous? And the water I'd just drunk- it was green and slimy and had bugs in it and-

-suddenly I wanted to vomit, not because of what I'd eaten and drunk but rather because of what I was becoming, through and through. My head spun and my stomach cramped. Then the moment passed. There'd be plenty of time for that kind of thing, the rest of my life, even. But not just now.

"Tallis?" I asked. "Are you okay?"

“Oh!” she whispered, hugging me tighter. It felt so nice. “Bunny! I was afraid that you weren’t talking to me anymore!”

“I’m sorry, honey” I apologized. “Really and truly, I am! But that happens sometimes. I can’t help it.”

“It’s all right,” she replied with the solemnity of childhood. “I understand.”

I felt warm and soft and fuzzy in her arms, safe and secure and... I shook my head again to clear it. “Are they looking for us?” I asked.

“Yes,” she whispered. “They went inside, then came out carrying the big scary one. Then there was a big argument, and one of them blew a horn. They split up after that. One of them took the sick elf away, and the other is looking around all over the place. He’s behind the trailer now. He looked right at us, bunny! But I stayed still and he went away.”

I nodded. “Which way did the one with the sick elf go?”

“That way,” she pointed. In the moonlight and shadows and thick growth even I could barely make out the gesture—no wonder they hadn’t seen us! I looked in the direction indicated...

...then realized I’d done so without turning my head. My face was all reshaped! My heart thump-thump-thumped again at this, but once again I refused to let it bother me too much. This’d been coming for a long, long time, I reminded myself. I hadn’t even noticed the change at first. So, how bad could it be if I hadn’t even noticed? At least I could still speak.

For now.

“Are you okay, bunny rabbit?” Tallismane asked me. I could smell

her sudden fear, spawned by my own.

“Fine,” I reassured her, blinking slowly. It was harder to make out details, now that I was thinking about it instead of just doing it. Everything was blurry. “We rabbits sure scare easy, don’t we?”

“I’m glad I’m not a bunny rabbit,” she answered. “I’m scared enough now!”

I smiled, then tried to think. The elf camp must be some distance away, or else I’d have seen it from the top of the levee. But it couldn’t be too far off. The elves would be back soon to look for their prisoners, in strength.

“We’ve got to move!” I whispered. “Right now! Away from the trailer.”

“Okay,” Tallis replied, her voice a study in total trust. I hopped out of the brush and looked around me as best I could. There was one obvious route of escape. The gravel road made a curve once it swept past the trailer, then ran alongside the densely-overgrown levee. There wasn’t much open ground to cross between the ditch and the good cover—perfect! We’d work our way down the ditch under the thornbushes, then make a lightning dash for the levee. Once in the brush, we’d be safe, safe, safe! I smiled and turned towards Tallis to explain everything...

...then shut my mouth before I could speak. How *stupid* I was becoming! Tallis was a bandy-legged gnome, short and squat and at home far below ground, not someone who could run free in the fields and forest! Her skin was already covered with tiny cuts and thorn punctures just from the few minutes she’d been hiding with me. This little girl wouldn’t be doing any dashing tonight. Nor any sneaking

either, for that matter.

I pressed my lips together. The hoofbeats were getting louder. And there! The horn again! There might be dozens of elves coming for us! Probably were, even!

But what could we do about it?

Once again there was no time to plan. If Tallismane couldn't move quickly or quietly, then I supposed she'd have to stay right where she was. My mind whirled as I turned over the possibilities. Elves were skilled trackers and hunters. But hunters normally pursued only one quarry at a time. Would they follow their habits reflexively? I could hope, couldn't I? After all the elves were being granted even less time for reflection than I was...

"Stay here, Tallis" I whispered urgently. "This is a good hiding place. I'm going to go away for a little while, and then come back. When I call, come running to me just as fast as you can. Okay?"

"No!" she whispered. "Don't go away, bunny!" The little gnome clung tightly to me.

I pushed her arm firmly away with my nose. With any luck, the elves wouldn't think to search so close to the trailer. But the gnome-girl grabbed me and hugged me tight to her again. I could've wriggled out of her grasp and left anyway, but for everything to work she had to remain quiet while I was gone. In other words, I needed for her to actively cooperate. "I have to go, honey. Really I do. I'll be back for you, though."

"Please?" she whispered. "I didn't like it in the cage. Don't go 'way!"

I sighed. “Honey, your Mommy told me that you’re the bravest little gnome-girl there ever was, and that you’d help me get you out of here. Now... are you brave like she said you are?”

“Uh-huh!” Tallis nodded vigorously.

I felt myself smile. I was glad I still could—it was something I suspected I was going to miss more than most other things. “I thought so. You’ve been *very* brave so far tonight!”

She nodded again. “Uh-huh!”

“So please be brave one last time for me. Okay?”

“Okay,” she sighed. “I guess.” Her arm dropped, and I was free to leave at last. But I rubbed up against again for luck anyway—I was rather growing fond of Tallismane. She was a real trouper, deep down. Then I was on my way.

Slowly, crawling almost flat on my belly, I sneaked my way down the ditch. But I wasn’t nearly as far along as I’d have liked when my old friend Hekla of the rotten teeth rode slowly out from behind the mobile home. He was sitting very erect in his saddle and peering out intently over the fields. “They can’t have gone far,” you could almost hear him thinking.

But thinking was the last thing I wanted him doing. So I put a stop to it. Explosively I broke cover, hopping directly toward him as confidently as if I’d been a quadruped all my life. Hekla’s jaw dropped, and far, far too slowly he reached for the net draped across his saddle. I drew up short as I approached the man-elf, pretending that I was confused. Then, my apparent panic only partly faked, I darted madly back and forth with tail high along a crazy zigzag course that took me right back into the ditch I’d just left.

The same ditch, maybe. But a good long way from where Tallis still lay hidden.

Goggle-eyed, Hekla sat in his saddle recovering from the shock. He wasn't the quickest-witted of elves. But eventually he came around and blew his horn in a long pure note. Another horn answered, and I knew that things were about to get complicated.

Hekla trotted his horse directly towards me, so obligingly I ducked out between the beast's legs, scampered madly about again, then dashed for cover. The exercise gained me a few more precious yards, and the hunter remained totally focused on me. So far, so good!

Then the rest of the band galloped up in a thunder of hooves. I tried to count them, but the effort made my head hurt. So I gave it up as beyond me. I was well into the end-game of my life now; there could be no more meaningful tomorrows. If I'd gained rabbit-cunning and reflexes at the expense of a few dozen IQ points, then given present circumstances it was a good trade. Hekla gabbled excitedly to his mates and pointed directly at me, but I knew that I was in no real danger so long as they wanted me alive for ransom. Knowing where I'd gone to ground was one thing. Digging me out, I expected, would prove to be quite another.

Still, the elves did a credible job at trying to wall me in. Many of them climbed down from their mounts and shoved themselves right into the brush with me. Had they formed a line shoulder-to-shoulder, they might well have succeeded. But it's not at all easy to move through thorny brush unless you can ease your way along under the stuff, as I now could. Even for an elf, it's not easy. By the time my pursuers had kicked and thrashed their way into a circle around my supposed position, I was long gone. At one point an adoptee almost

stepped on me without even realizing I was there. I sat and admired their technique from a little further down the ditch as the elves slowly drew their circle inward. A pair of real rabbits they'd trapped totally by accident came dashing out, and the confusion was tremendous. Elves shouted, nets were cast and one of the wild bunnies was actually captured, a remarkable feat considering the poor hunting conditions and time of night. But it didn't take them long to realize that the bunny they'd captured didn't look the slightest bit like me, and was quite a bit smaller to boot. They grumbled and muttered to each other, an ugly sound. Then they began to reorganize.

Which of course was precisely the thing that I couldn't afford to let happen. If they ever took the time to think about it, my pursuers would realize that attempting to catch one particular rabbit alive in the middle of the night in what might as well be his home turf was bound to be an exercise in futility. Had elves kept dogs, the story would've been a very different one. But the Fair Folk considered the domestication of any carnivores to be a particularly odious form of enslavement, and yet another reason to hate the humans who'd invented the concept. At the moment that attitude was just fine and dandy by me; I wasn't going to be a human all that much longer anyway, was I? So it wasn't my fight anymore; I had other problems. Such as keeping the elves hot after me regardless of their low probability of success. For if they gave up on me and went after Tallismane, or even worse split up into two groups, finding the girl would prove relatively simple. Then they'd probably head off into the woods with her. Henst had spoken of taking good care of me, and his voice had almost dripped with concern. But the cold truth was that these elves had kept the little girl in a cage and left her to cry alone in the dark. I couldn't let them recapture Tallis and get away; I just couldn't! My only hope was to keep them so worked up that they wouldn't make the intelligent choice, which was to cut their losses by giving up on me and concentrating on the girl.

So I showed myself again. This time I imitated an overly-docile cottontail seeking to graze in a suburban yard. Ears erect and eyes wide open, I hopped once into the open and sat. The elves didn't notice, so I took two more hops into the clear and plopped my bottom down once again. What kind of elves were these? Did they need flashing lights? It was Hekla's horse, whose legs I'd run between earlier, that finally took notice of me. She whinnied and snorted, and several pairs of bright black eyes turned my way.

"Unta!" several shouted all at once. "Unta! Unta! Unta!" Then the mad scramble began once again. I allowed one still-mounted elf to cut me off from the ditch, then whirled and weaved a complex dance out in the open to lure more and more of his brethren into the merry chase. They formed a circle once again, this time with me trapped out in the open grass and lacking anywhere to hide. My heart hammered in my chest and I feared for a moment that I'd pushed my luck *too* far. I hopped about madly as the circle shrunk bit by bit. Then one of the youngsters made a mistake. He cast his net while I was still too far away, so that as it fell I was able to dodge to the side. This left the hunter bereft of any means of snaring me.

So I charged him. The elf tried to grab me bare-handed, but he never had a prayer. Though I was still considerably bigger than a true bunny, making me a larger target, I was also proportionately faster and stronger and gifted in full measure with the lapine talent for wriggling and squirming. I was through his hands in a heartbeat, and as we parted I raked his lower arms with my hindclaws out of sheer spite. Then I was past him and accelerating like a bullet.

Unfortunately, my escape route had opened up on the wrong side of the circle. I'd planned on doubling back into the ditch one last time and drawing the elves still further away from Tallismane's hide, but after such a close shave I couldn't force myself take any more chances. The tangled growth of the levee lay dead ahead as I burst out

of the trap, and it was just too tempting. I hopped lightly underneath another friendly thorn bush, then turned around to see what was happening.

The elves were terribly upset with me and with each other, it seemed. For a time they shouted and fussed something awful! Then they turned their backs and left. There was no way they'd come after me again, especially now that I was in better cover than ever. *Damn!* And I hadn't led them *nearly* far enough away from Tallismane to suit me! I drummed my hindfeet in frustration. But there wasn't anything to be done about it, any more than there was anything to be done about Tallis's inability to move quickly or silently. I'd just have to accept things as they were and make do with what I had. Accepting things and making do was what I'd been doing on a daily basis ever since being cursed, after all. So without wasting another second, I turned tail and dashed away from the little meadow. The hardest part, both physically and mentally, was coming up next. Maybe I wasn't up to it anymore. But I'd give it my best.

I might be descending into a subhuman state; that couldn't be helped. But even we subhumans, I was fast discovering, still had pride.

The world absolutely flew by as I hopped over the levee and raced along the edge of the overgrown area on the earthen mound's far side. I made a few spy hops to make sure the coast was clear, then swerved out into the open where I could move faster. My car loomed up out of the darkness, and I skidded to a halt in the gravel. The Dart seemed *much* larger to me now than it had when I'd parked it. The slab-side of the vehicle towered over me like a cliff-face. My plans called for driving Tallis out, since she couldn't run. But now I wasn't sure that I could even get into my car, much less drive it!

I hopped around the Dodge in frustration, seeking a low point. But the vehicle's body rose straight and sheer above me on all sides. Rabbits aren't built to climb. For the moment, I was defeated.

Defeated! The word tasted like ashes in my mouth. I would *not* be defeated, I swore to myself, would *not* let Tallis be taken without a struggle! I pummeled the ground once more, thumpthumpthump!. I'd overcome so many difficulties since being cursed, done so many things that I was supposed to be unable to do. Surely I could leap one more hurdle!

Leap? Hmm...

Just how high *could* I leap, anyway? I'd not had much time to experiment. I flexed a hindleg experimentally; it felt like a coiled spring. The car seemed awfully tall, but perhaps I was strong enough to do it anyway?

The clock was ticking, and there wasn't a second to lose. Once more I raced around the Dart, trying to figure out where the best place

to land might be. That'd be the trunk lid, I decided, the same route by which I'd left the car. Not allowing myself too much time to mull things over, I hopped a short distance down the gravel road to allow for a takeoff run, then turned and gave it the works. The wind sang in my ears, my pulse throbbed, my body thrust ahead like a perfect machine...

...until my left hindfoot slipped in the treacherous gravel! It happened at the worst possible moment—there was a dull thud as my head rammed up against the unyielding chrome bumper, then everything went black.

I was lying on my side when I came to. My head was still ringing with the impact, and at first I couldn't move a muscle. Eventually my eyes opened; it was still dark. I'd not been unconscious very long, then. Rather queasily, I rolled over onto my belly and shook the gravel out of my fur. The motion drove a red-hot iron into my right cheekbone. Most likely it was broken; my eye was swollen nearly shut. I stood up, then hopped back and forth a little to see what else might be broken. Everything worked except my head, which simply wouldn't clear. It'd be wonderful, I decided, to lay down under the car and take a nice nap. I'd just closed my eyes when an elf-horn sounded in the distance. The single sweet note brought everything back to me. *Talismane!* I had to go get *Talismane!*

The swollen knot on my face was growing bigger by the second, and the sick feeling in my stomach was no laughing matter either. But I knew what had to be done, so all that was left was for me to force myself to do it. Once more I hopped a short distance away from the back end of my car, then turned and raced towards it! *No!* a voice that should've been strange and alien but somehow wasn't cried out in my mind. *Stop! Hurthurthurt!* Confused, I broke off my run and skidded to a halt. What was I trying to do to myself, anyway? I might *die* if I

rammed into the bumper again! Then I cursed my weakness, took a few steadying breaths, and tried again.

Leap, leap, LEAP! This time my toeclaws found good traction and I rocketed skywards. My chest caught the lip of the rear deck, but the momentum was enough to lift me the rest of the way. There wasn't much time for self-congratulation, however. I laid there with my shattered cheek pressed up against the cool gray metal for a few seconds; it felt very nice indeed. Then it was time to get going.

From there, getting into the driver's seat was a piece of cake, and the bucket seats only made it easier. Then I was behind the wheel and ready to go! With a smile marred only by massive swelling, I stood up proud and tall behind the steering wheel and placed my paws on the spokes. But soon enough the grin faded. There was something *terribly* wrong. I was in my car, yes, forepaws on the wheel just like always. Everything was perfect, absolutely everything.

So why on Earth wasn't I going anywhere?

I shook my head again; thinking was *hard*! So long as I was running away from people or figuring out how to get places, my mind was all right. Which made sense—these were the sorts of activities one expects from a rabbit and therefore I'd never entirely lose the skills involved. But as for everything else...

I wailed in fear and frustration. Damn it, I'd forgotten how to *drive*! The thing I loved most in all the world! Desperately I looked around the inside of the car, trying to remember. My head throbbed, and I grew more and more confused as I took in one meaningless control after another. Only the steering wheel made sense; I remembered *it* well enough. You turned it left or right. Experimentally I leaned on the spokes, but it wouldn't budge. *Oh no!* It wasn't working! Did I

remember wrong? Had I lost *everything*? I wailed again at the injustice of it all, then scowled and got back to work.

Looking down, I saw that there were feet-thingies too. I hopped down into the footwell and studied them. They were black and hard and very important somehow; that much I was certain of. I tried to count them, but it was no use. My brain wouldn't go there at all anymore. I stamped my foot, then grabbed the biggest lever-thingie in my teeth. I shook it vigorously, determined to make the nasty thing give up and submit to me. The sticklike-object sort of flopped back and forth...

...and as it did, the odd motion helped me remember something! The big lever on my right had to move at the same time that the far left foot thingie was pressed down. A living body can sometimes remember things, Uncle Andy had explained to me once, long after a damaged brain has forgotten them. Physical reflexes are every bit as much imprinted into the nervous system as other memories. We'd temporarily regained some of my algebra skills that way back in the very beginning.

I'd just recently lost my driving skills, right? Therefore the technique was at least worth a try. I sat down behind the wheel and tried to remember my trip earlier in the evening. I'd gone fast around an extra-sharp corner once; it was a happy memory. Coming out of the turn I'd...

My right leg jerked. I'd stepped on the right-hand thingie to go faster!

Well, *this* was a promising beginning! Already the Dart seemed much less mysterious and threatening. Any moron could drive a car, it seemed, even a bunny rabbit. All I had to do was figure out how to jigger the pedals...

This was easier said than done. I knew from my memory fragment that the far right pedal had to be pressed down in order to go forward, but there was no way that I could stretch far enough to reach it while also holding onto the wheel. Eventually I found an old plastic coffee cup under the seat and wedged it into place so that the pedal stayed down all the time. It wasn't quite all the way down, because the cup wasn't big enough. But it was pretty close. That might be enough, maybe.

Then I took the key into my mouth and twisted it; *everything* was coming back to me now! "Rrr-" the engine said, but as it did so the Dart lurched drunkenly forward. I'd done something wrong again. It was all so confusing! How could I have possibly ever *enjoyed* driving? You had to be a *geniusto* to figure all this stuff out!

I breathed deeply a couple times to calm down, then searched my memory for another time when the car had lurched forward like that. It wasn't easy; but eventually I found one. It'd happened the day I drove my car home for the very first time. I closed my eyes and smiled; the sense of pride and joy were overwhelming! The floorboards were full of rusty holes, the windshield was cracked, and the top in rags. But I was in love, love, love with my rare find! Slowly I'd crept up to a traffic light. Everyone stared at me, as much due to the white bunny ears as the ratty old wreck of a car. I was nervous at all the attention. The light turned green and I'd moved my left leg much too quickly. The car had bucked and jerked...

That was it! It was the thingie on the left! The bucking and jerking had something to do with the left pedal! Desperately I searched under the seats for another coffee cup or something to jigger that pedal too. But there wasn't anything! What was I going to do?

Well, I could sit on it, couldn't I? Somehow the solution felt right. Once I got the noisy-thing going maybe the car would start moving and I'd be okay. It was a long and awkward reach, but eventually I found a way to hold the pedal down with both feet while turning the key with my mouth.

"Rrr," the Dart said. "Rrr-Rrr-Rrr BAROOOOOOOOOOOM!"

Oh, no! It wasn't supposed to do *that!* The sound was much too loud, much too noisy! And scary too! It was going to blow up! Terrified I leapt up into the driver's seat to bail out...

...but as soon as my weight came off of the pedal the Dart's tires scabbled madly for purchase and the car surged forward so quickly that even I couldn't have kept up with it! The Dart had gone *mad!*

"BAROOOOOOOOOM!" my car continued to scream. We were already moving much too fast for me to jump out. Desperately I swung around in the seat and tried to get the raging monster under control. We were drifting off of the gravel road to the left; instinctively I twisted the wheel and straightened us out. The spokes turned easily now; maybe my crazy plan might still work! The levee loomed up in the darkness; despite my shattered cheek I grinned as we flew up the steep slope. Going fast was an awful lot of fun! But then the fun ceased as the Dart and I flew over the top of the mound. We were going *too* fast! Much, *much* too fast! And I hadn't the faintest idea of how to slow us down! With an elegant grace that belied its age, the heavy old convertible sprouted wings for a moment and flew. I floated, floated, floated above my seat...

...then came crashing down as gravity reasserted itself and we slammed hard into the gravel. I was slammed to the floor and everything went black again, just like when I ran into the bumper. But

this time I was only out for an instant. I clambered my way back up into the seat and took command once more. Everything seemed all right for a second or two, then I realized that the noisy-thingy was much quieter and we were slowing down! I ducked down under the dashboard again; the cup had been knocked out of place. I started to put it back, then realized that I needed to slow down soon anyway so Tallismane could get in. The trailer was just ahead; I'd pick her up, then drive her straight home. Wouldn't her parents be surprised and happy to see her?

There were elves all over the place, but their horses didn't like my Dart very much. And neither did they. They scattered like leaves before me. I honked the horn at them a few times—how could anyone ever forget about the horn?—and some of the horses went crazy. But there were still a few elves standing where I needed to stop. I pointed the Dart right at them, and they turned and ran as well. Probably it was a good thing that they did. I might actually have been able to hit them.

Tallis climbed out of the ditch at the sound of my horn, bless her. She was *such* a smart girl! I rolled the car up beside her and then hopped down to sit on the left pedal-thingie again. The gnome climbed in as I wedged the coffee cup back into place. “BA-ROOOOOOOOOOOOM!” my Dart roared in anger. But this time instead of being afraid of the noise, exhilaration filled my heart. *Nyah, nyah, nyah, elves! I'm faster than you all!* The back tires spun and caught, and once more my car exploded into motion.

I was going fast again, maybe even too fast. Did the Dart only have two speeds, too slow and too fast? And, I suddenly realized, I was headed in the wrong direction at that! The main road was behind me. Who knew where this little by-way might lead? Into a dead-end, most likely. Well, there was nothing for it but to find out. The more distance

between us and the elves before we ran out of road, the better. I turned towards Tallis and grinned. “Are you all right?” I asked her.

“Yes, but...” She looked uneasily down the road.

“But what?” I asked.

“My Mommy *never* drives so fast on little roads like this!” she said.

My ears were flapping in the breeze and I’d just successfully faced down a whole troop of elvish hunters. *Nothing* could faze me anymore! “Rabbits go fast everywhere,” I explained. “It’s just how we are.”

“Oh,” Tallis replied. But she sounded unconvinced somehow.

I wanted to explain further, but suddenly I ran out of time to talk. A turnoff appeared, but it was closed off by a very solid-looking gate. Most of the traffic took the turnoff these days, it was clear, because the supposed “main” road I was following began to decay rapidly. Then it petered out altogether, and without any warning at all I was barreling through the main body of elves, all packed up and ready to move camp. There were elf-women and horses everywhere! Most were screaming and some ran about hysterically as I slewed and dodged my speeding car right through the thick of things. By a miracle I missed them all. Once we were through them, things opened up a little. The ground was grassy and fairly level, except for one large rectangular patch of weeds marked off at the corners by stacks of cement blocks. This was where the mobile home had until recently been situated, I reckoned. Giving that area a wide berth, I wrenched the Dart around until we were bearing down upon the harried elvish baggage train once again. The women had mostly cleared out, but the animals were still running amok. Silly creatures; didn't they know that rabbits *always* circle back? This time I clipped a laden donkey, though

not too hard. It hee-hawed in rage, but seemed unhurt.

Then we were barreling down the gravel road again, practically flying. I looked over at Tallis and smiled, but the child remained frightened. Well, I reasoned, she'd been through a lot.

Then something struck the windshield and ricocheted upwards off of the angled glass. An arrow! Another shaft came flying out of the darkness, and another and another. But I couldn't see where they were coming from! How could I dodge what I couldn't see? My left forepaw twitched, and I remembered the headlights. Cars had lights on them so you could see things at night! I reached out and pawed at what I thought was the correct thingie, but the wipers switched on instead. Cursing, I tried again. But they only went faster. Finally, however, I hit the right switch and the whole field lit up as if the sun had suddenly risen. The Dart had really good headlights, I remembered now that I saw them. I'd paid lots and lots of money for extra ones. The elves ceased fire and grabbed at their eyes in pain. Before they could recover I was past them.

Now that the lights were on, I could see that the mobile home was just ahead. We were almost free!

Then a sparkling light appeared near one corner of the building, and something slammed into my car. The light blinked again, and two more blows shook the Dart. It was a shooter gun! We were being shot at!

Elves? I asked myself. *With shooter guns?* That simply couldn't be!

There wasn't much I could do about it, though, except keep right on going. We'd either make or we wouldn't. "Get down!" I commanded my passenger. "Hide, Tallismane! Find good cover!"

More bullets slammed into the car, and I hunched down as low as I could in the driver's seat. White smoke began to curl back towards me from the loud-thingie. It smelled funny, but it was smoke, sure enough! A fire! *Oh no!* We were in trouble now! The flashing light blinked again, and this time I could hear the shooter-gun over the car's moving-noise. I didn't want to hurt anyone, but we couldn't get away if we were on fire! And shooter-guns were *bad* things; if the elves used them we couldn't even run! So I bared my teeth and swerved towards the gunman. "Eat him, Dart!" I commanded. "Eat him!"

The elf stood his ground and fired again, even though the car must've seemed like the end of the world to him. But the bullets did him no good. My Dart was big and heavy and strong; he'd need a much bigger shooter gun than *that* to kill it! Too late, the elf realized I was right and tried to duck away. I swerved and slammed square into him; it was a terrible blow! But he had his revenge. I'd been so intent on feeding the elf to the Dart that I failed to look beyond him. The corner of the mobile home was looming up quickly. *Oh no!* I cranked the wheel, but it was too late. We slammed into the siding...

...and broke right on through, noisy-thingie still screaming and splinters everywhere! The blow knocked me down into the footwell; by the time I climbed back up the Dart was in trouble again. We were headed for the ditch! I tried to turn us away, but the wheel wouldn't spin that way anymore. The go-noise was louder and angrier than ever, but this time the Dart was finally beaten. First we ripped through the brush, then the front of the car dipped down and we stopped. The car jittered and shook and the roar went on and on, but we were snared. Reflexively I turned off the key, then collapsed onto the console. It was over. The Dart was wrecked, I was in no shape to run and hide, Tallismane would be recaptured and caged. I groaned in agony...

...and the brightest light I'd ever seen in my life stabbed out of the sky and struck me full in the face.

“DON'T MOVE!” a powerful voice from the heavens cried out. “YOU'RE UNDER ARREST. STAY WHERE YOU ARE!”

It was a police helicopter, probably responding to all the racket. Shooter-guns made lots of noise, and for that matter so had my Dart. The cavalry had come! But was it in time? There were still plenty of elves about...

“Tallis!” I croaked. “Tallis! We have to go hide just one more time. Ready?”

I was answered only by silence.

“Talismane?”

Oh, no! I sniffed the air, trying to penetrate the funny-smelling smoke that was masking everything. Now that I was making a deliberate effort, I scented blood. A *lot* of blood! I hopped down into the passenger-side footwell. Tallis had taken shelter there, but too late. A bullet had found her neck, and even as I watched a jet of blood squirted from the wound.

“No!” I whispered, looking around for something that might help. But there was nothing. The helicopter was still circling, and I could hear a siren in the distance. Help, however, would arrive far, far too late.

There was only one course left open. I pawed at the wound and examined it with care, then flopped the young gnome over and studied the exit point as well. My eyes might not have the capacity for detail

they'd once had, but what remained was enough to allow me to open the inner eye that was my birthright.

Someone moaned in the distance. Probably the elf I'd just run down. But I didn't have time for him or any other stinky old elf just then. If they wanted to kill us, let them. I was *busy*!

A nearly-forgotten inner ecstasy began to swell inside me. *This* was what I'd been born for, not hopping across fields! Mentally I spun and wove the mana that lay latent inside me, shaping it until it was a perfect fit for Tallismana's wound. Magic is easy to learn but difficult to master. Almost anyone with the Gift can perform a healing spell, but the inexperienced consume huge amounts of Power along the way. In advanced training a sorcerer learns how to conserve his strength by using incantations and wands and such as points of focus. But they're not essential. Healing Tallis would've been beyond the abilities of almost any other living mage denied the use of focus-points. The amount of mana required was tremendous. But I was rich in mana, even richer than my father had been. If I was willing to use everything I had, I could save this little girl.

And that was exactly what I was going to do, cost what it might.

I closed my eyes and laid one forepaw on each side of the gnome's neck. Then I smiled as the beauty of it all—Life, Power, Joy—washed through me like a crystal-pure stream. I poured myself into Tallismana's wound, healing and blessing and loving her every fiber, for a true healing merited no less. Then she was safe and no longer bleeding, and I was finally face to face with my ultimate fate. For now my full and complete cursing was finally at hand.

Straining with the effort, I prolonged the healing spell for as long as I could—I'd pay the price only after it was finally complete. There could be no miraculous escape. Nor did I deserve one. I'd come to this place hoping deep down to find a bullet, but instead the bullet had

found someone else. Therefore it was fitting that I should balance the scales. If I were destined to become a beast, at least this way I wouldn't decay by tiny measures and spend months grieving over what was forever lost. Not that rabbithood was the worst of all possible fates, I mused. I'd done pretty well for myself as a rabbit, hadn't I? *It could be worse*, I reassured myself as the mana ran thinner and thinner. *It could be worse...*

"Who are you?" a deep voice asked me out of nowhere. "I would know your name."

I looked up, startled almost to the point of losing the spell. "Hail, Henst!" I replied in the manner of the elves, though sadly not in their tongue. The renegade was busted up something terrible; it was a miracle he was even able to stand. His head streamed blood, and his left side was half caved-in. But the shooter-gun remained firmly grasped in his good hand. "Come to finish your work?"

"No," he replied, dropping the shooter. "Our contest is over, and I'm the loser. My goal was never to kill you, so there'd be no point. I've come to learn the name of he who has bested me. Will you do me the honor?"

I released a breath I'd not realized I was holding. Odd, how one clings to life even when a clean death is something to be coveted. "You might yet live," I pointed out. "Modern medicine does wonders. And you know many valuable things. Why are elves suddenly carrying guns and using computers, Henst? Why do you kidnap, when you could earn far more by working alongside the rest of us? For that matter, why must the struggle between our peoples go on and on, when everyone else would gladly see it end? You might become a bridge between humans and elves, Henst, and do elfdom a far greater service by living than by dying."

Henst smiled bitterly. “You humans are weak. You believe in nothing!” The big man bent over double in a spasm of pain, then stood stonily erect once more, face hard and expressionless. “I could easily kill you. Yet instead I do you honor by asking your name. Will you not give it to me?”

I nodded, feeling the last vestiges of mana depart from me forever. “Then hear me well, Henst, and if you chance to live long enough I ask you to share my name far and wide. For I am Crown Prince Gregory of the House of Lombard. My father was Gustavus the Powerful, and my mother is Guild Queen Clara, long may she reign. I’m proud of both my family and my heritage. Others must judge whether or not I lived up to my bloodline, though I know in my heart that I gave my all. I go to face my curse now, Henst, and here at the last I find myself both unafraid and unashamed. Please tell my family and especially my mother that I love them, and that they filled my last thoughts.”

Henst was confused, which was understandable enough. But I had no time left to explain. As my body began its final shift I accepted that I’d never know who’d cursed me or why, would never discover why the elves were selling Nothing Powder, wouldn’t live to know if someday the fair folk might learn to live in peace with the rest of us. In story and fable there always comes a summing up, an ending satisfying to the mind. But reality was different from fiction, I now understood. And if I regretted anything, that was it. For here I was at the very end, with a hundred things left undone, a thousand mysteries unsolved, a million potentials unfilled...

Then the curse struck me like a tidal wave. My body, my mind, even my soul twisted and writhed and became something else. “No!” I tried to scream, though the word came out as a wail. I fought as hard

as I could, trying to hold onto what remained of myself. It was hopeless, of course, and perhaps even foolish for the extra pain that it caused me. But the most important battles are always the ones you cannot win. "I am Prince Gregory!" I declared as my mind melted. Nameless fears tore at my heart, but I would *not* let them win! Not even now, when there could be no more shame. "I am Prince Gregory," I declared as Henst bore witness to my passing. "I am Prince Gregory. I am... I am..."

"I..."

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