



Brothers in Arms

by Deb Walsh

Peter Caine snuggled down against the silky smoothness of the pillow and sighed. The bed linen smelled of sunshine and fresh air, not some bottled fragrance intended to mimic the purity of the real thing. As he stretched luxuriantly against the softness of the sheets, he made a mental note to ask his mother if he could start bringing his laundry over to hang out in their backyard. If nothing else, it would give him yet another excuse to be around more until Paul got back. And Mom was always giving him a hard time about sending all his clothes to the dry cleaners.

Paul Blaisdell, Peter's foster father and police captain, had been gone for two weeks. His ties to some unnamed branch of government intelligence had yanked him back once again, and he'd left, with only hurried goodbyes, for parts unknown.

As always at times like this, the Blaisdell children, Peter included, tended to keep a closer eye on their mother, Annie, during Blaisdell's absence. Since the attack that had left Annie in the hospital, Peter, Kelly and Carolyn had maintained even closer surveillance, always making sure one of them stayed at the house with Annie. And Peter suspected that his natural father, Kwai Chang Caine, couldn't be too far away — Caine and Annie had hit it off immediately, and more than once had joined to gang up on Peter. Or so it always seemed to him.

Kelly had made plans for a vacation with friends from school months ago, and Carolyn had her husband Todd to consider, so Peter had stepped into the breach and moved into his old room for a few nights. The opportunity to spend some quality time with his mother, and the prospect of home-cooked meals without the emotional baggage dinners with his girlfriend Kelly Blaine always entailed, had appealed to his own emotional needs, as much as his mother's need had appealed to his protective reflex.

Now the familiar sounds of the house settling for the night lulled him toward sleep, the comforting presence of his mother in her room down the hall relaxing his tired limbs as nothing else could. He'd moved out of this house several years ago, and he enjoyed his independence, but this room, in this house, would always be home, even more than the temple of his youth. And home was always safe.

He couldn't have identified precisely what woke him — perhaps it was the introduction of a sound that didn't belong in the background music of the house he knew so well, perhaps it was the displacement of air as his bedroom door slid silently inward, perhaps it was simply a presence that was alien to the environment that was his parents' home. But Peter Caine was suddenly, alertly, awake, straining to place and identify the intruder. He lay on his back in the bed of his childhood bedroom, his eyes closed, his breathing regular, as he reached out with his senses and tested the air around him. He could feel in the tingle along his skin that this was someone who didn't belong here, and yet the trespasser felt familiar. Not necessarily friendly, but familiar.

The creak of a footstep on the floorboards at eight o'clock to his position told him that whoever it was had moved into the room. Mentally, he gauged the distance to the interloper, sized up the myriad clues his faculties fed him, and judged that his gun was out of reach, but the intruder was not. The air shifted as the man — he knew it was a man somehow, about his height or taller — bent toward him. With a suddenness that would have made his father — both of them — proud, Peter erupted out of the bed and caught the invader with a lock around the throat, bringing the stranger to his knees beside the bed.

"Christ, Peter, you're strangling me!" croaked a well-known, masculine voice. Dark eyes in a smooth, attractive Asian face glittered at him as the stranger twisted around in his grip.

Peter eased his hold slightly as he slid his legs out from under the blanket, pulling his captive up with him as he sat up. "What the hell are you doing in my parents' house, Chan?" he barked.



Chan gestured toward Peter's embrace, and the detective released his hold. "I was in the neighborhood, thought I'd drop by for a chat, bro," Chan whispered insolently as he smoothed his ruffled hair back in place, then straightened his collar, favoring his neck with a delicate touch.

The tightening of muscles in Peter's arms and upper chest must have communicated his intent to Chan, because the Asian man's smile faded and he shook his head. "I came to talk to you. Warn you."

"Warn me?" Peter repeated with a snort. "What for?"

"Your foster father. He's been captured, and the guys who have him are coming for your mother. And you'll be next after that."

Peter was out of the bed and across the room, grabbing his jeans before Chan could say another word. "Who? When? How?" Peter demanded rapid-fire as he struggled into his jeans.

"Some guys. Tonight. With guns," Chan replied in like fashion.

Shrugging on a shirt, Peter grabbed his Beretta and shoved it into the waistband of the jeans and straightened, spearing Chan with a fierce look. "Why? And how do you know?"

"Are we going to stand here playing 20 questions, or are you going to do something about it?" Chan asked, settling himself on the edge of Peter's recently-vacated bed. He glanced at his watch and shook his head. "If my information is correct, they should be here any minute."

The hand that still touched the Beretta tightened on the butt of the gun as Peter Caine looked closely at Chan for the first time. "What reason have I got to trust you, Chan?"

A slight, sour smile touched the other man's lips as he nodded in acknowledgement of the question. "None. Except my word. I owe you, Peter. You let me get off Li Sung's island without facing the Feds. I always pay my debts. And I'm paying you back now. These guys are good, but you might just be better. Now's your chance to find out."

Peter licked his lips as he regarded his old enemy, eyes narrowed as he judged Chan's veracity. "You gonna stick around for the party?"

Eyes widening fractionally, Chan considered the invitation. Then he nodded once, and twitched back his jacket to reveal a shoulder holster and weapon. "Why not?"

Shoving his feet into his shoes, Peter inclined his head and gestured toward the door. Chan nodded again, rising to follow.

The Blaisdell home was set back from the street behind a brick wall topped by a wrought-iron grill. A short, well-kept gravel drive led up to the house, and behind stretched a spacious backyard sloping off toward the woods. As perimeters went, it wasn't terribly defensible. As Peter led the way down the corridor in silence, he cursed his foster father for not thinking ahead to moments like this.

He paused at the door of Paul and Annie's bedroom, leaning against the jamb to listen for a moment to the soft breathing of his foster mother. He smiled faintly, easing the door open to glance quickly around the room. The silvery sheen of reflected moonglow gilded the surfaces of the room, leaching the color from the furnishings. His mother was sleeping, curled toward the side of the bed usually occupied by his foster father. She murmured to herself, her hand straying to the pillow where Paul's head should have been. Nodding to himself, Peter gently closed the door and motioned for Chan to follow him again.

Chan's steps were light behind him as he moved to the head of the stairs. Moonlight and distant streetlight filtered through the windows to cast weird shadows alternating with pools of light into the room below. He crouched low to avoid getting caught in the light as he made his way quickly and silently down the stairs. Halfway down, he stopped, his hand shooting out to halt Chan's progress behind him. Coiled there, he listened, breath held. He closed his eyes, the image of the first level's floor plan springing to mind as he identified the location of the faint noises which had arrested his attention.

Into the darkness, Peter Caine smiled. Paul may not have built his home to be a fortress, but then again, he had the advantage of local knowledge, and he was definitely motivated. Whoever these intruders might be, they didn't share his knowledge or his determination.



He held up four fingers to Chan, then, one pointing to the right, one straight ahead, and finally two pointing behind. Chan tapped him on the shoulder and pointed to the right, then twirled his finger to indicate coming round to meet Peter later. Peter gestured ahead of them, and the two men resumed their silent passage down the remaining stairs.

The soft sighing of the night breeze and the gentle whisper of fabric disturbed in the air told him that his first target was standing near the open doors to the patio. He'd have to take a look at the lock when this was done, and recommend something stronger. He folded himself tightly, moving silently along the living room furniture toward the man who stood framed in the doorway. Lookout. Out the back door? Into the woods? Curious, but he didn't have time to interrogate the man at this stage; there'd be time enough for that once he had them all in custody.

Peter had reached the edge of the last piece of concealing furniture; before him stretched a patch of light, and beyond that, a tall man dressed in casual clothes, the telltale bulge over his heart indicating a shoulder holster in use. Peter's eyes swept over the scene as he instinctively judged the distance. Almost without volition, his body tensed, gathering in on itself as he prepared to spring. Suddenly, he was slicing through the air toward the man, his left hand outstretched, fingers slightly curled. The sound of his movement caused the man to spin around, bringing his chest into line with Peter's hand. A faint crunching noise heralded the contact, and the man crumpled.

Peter caught him before he hit the floor, and gently laid him on the deck outside. He reached for his handcuffs, then shook his head ruefully. They were still up in his old bedroom. He cast about for something with which to contain the man, and spied a long extension cord. Moving quickly, he freed the cord from the lamp to which it was connected, and wound it round the man's wrists and ankles. Satisfied his first adversary wasn't going anywhere anytime soon, he turned toward Paul's study.

Inching up the hallway toward the closed door of Blaisdell's study, Peter was unsurprised to see Chan making his way from the opposite direction. In the faint light of the plug-in nightlight and the thin thread of light spilling out from under the study door, Peter quirked an eyebrow in Chan's direction. The other man shrugged, giving him a thumb's-up sign.

Peter held up his right hand, grasping his gun in his left. Holding up three fingers, he nodded toward the door, receiving a terse affirmative from Chan. They took their positions to either side of the door, each raising their weapons to shoulder height. Counting down from three, Peter reached for the doorknob and flung the door inward into the room. He followed quickly, positioning himself just inside the door, gun held steadily on the invaders as he announced, "Freeze! Police!"

Two men in business suits looked up from the wreckage of Blaisdell's files. One was older and gray-haired, wearing a dark pinstripe suit. His face was impassive as he glanced up from the file in his hands, his eyes dead as they flicked over Peter and Chan behind him, immediately dismissing them. The other man was younger and dark-haired, his suit a shiny silver tweed. He twitched nervously as he reached under his suitcoat for his gun.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Chan informed him wryly as he moved past Peter into the room. "Your friends are already down for the count, so it's you against us," he added, casually centering his aim on Silver Tweed.

"Mr. Chan. The leopard has changed his spots, I see," taunted Pinstripe, his voice heavily accented ... Russian, Peter guessed. "Or is that the alley cat?"

Chan shrugged, his aim held steady.

"Friends of yours, Chan?" Peter asked, not turning from his position covering Pinstripe.

"Business associates. *Ex*-business associates, I think," replied Chan.

Silver Tweed was glancing anxiously between Pinstripe, and Peter and Chan. New on the job, Peter decided, unsure of himself. That was the type that could be dangerous with a weapon in his hand.



"Drop it," Peter commanded. "And kick it toward me, slow and easy. I hate waking up at this time of night, and I'm a little twitchy. So you don't want to piss me off anymore than you already have," he elaborated with an irritated smile.

Silver Tweed looked to his pinstriped companion, who shrugged. The gun was tossed to the ground and skittered across the carpet toward Peter. Chan snapped a handkerchief out of his pocket and used it to cover his hand to pick up the gun. He slipped it into his pocket while he continued to point his own gun at the younger intruder.

"Now, move away from the desk and into the center of the room," Peter ordered. "Keep your hands where I can see them, and nobody'll get hurt." As they did as they were told, Peter stepped further into the room, moving carefully toward Blaisdell's desk. He knew the captain kept an extra pair of handcuffs in the bottom right-hand drawer. Keeping his eyes centered on the two men, he reached down to the drawer, slid it open, and found the cuffs by feel alone. Then he came around the other side of the desk to circle around behind the two men.

"You're under arrest for breaking and entering," he informed them. "You have the right to remain silent," he continued, careful to Mirandize them as he patted down first the younger man, then the older. He found another weapon on Pinstripe, and amended the charge to include "carrying a concealed weapon." Glancing between the two men, he judged Pinstripe to be the more dangerous of the pair, and pulled the man's hands behind his back, fitting the cuffs and locking them with a satisfying click. He shoved the man forward, where Chan took up position as guard, and took Silver Tweed roughly by the arm, herding them toward the living room.

"Peter, is that you?" Annie called from the top of the stairs, her voice plaintive and small as she stood uncertainly on the top step, her hand lightly touching the bannister.

"Mom, go back to your room," Peter answered, tightening his hold on the man in his custody as Chan laid a warning hand on the bound arm of Pinstripe.

"Something's wrong —"

"I'm taking care of it. Go back to your room, Mom. Please."

Just then, Pinstripe flung himself back at Chan, crooking his elbow to drive it hard into Chan's stomach. With a whoosh of air, Chan slammed back against the wall, and Pinstripe was running up the stairs toward Annie. Peter couldn't risk a shot that might hit his mother, and watched, horrified, as she backed up a few steps in alarm. As the man hit the landing, he executed an acrobatic maneuver, somersaulting to bring his hands up in front of him. Leaping up, he flung his arms over Annie's shoulders, pulling the handcuff chain tight against her throat.

"Mom!" Peter cried, his gun held uselessly in his hand, as the villain drew back on his hold on Annie Blaisdell's throat.

"You don't know what you're dealing with, young man," Pinstripe announced from the top of the stairs, his voice heavy with exertion. "Let my companions go. You let us walk out of here, and your lovely mother comes to no harm. You delay, and," he jerked back on his hands, biting the chain deeper into Annie's neck, causing her to gasp with pain.

There was no choice for Peter. Chan had gotten up, and watched the tableau tensely, his eyes flicking back and forth between the man at the head of the stairs and Peter. Peter held up his gun, released his fingers and let the weapon drop to the floor. He let go of Silver Tweed, and with hands raised, stepped back. Glancing at Peter, Chan followed suit, his expression clearly rebellious and, as he looked up at Pinstripe, apprehensive.

With a superior smile, Silver Tweed picked up Peter's gun, then Chan's and sauntered over to Chan to retrieve his own weapon from Chan's pocket. He backed up slowly to stand by the newel post, his gun centered on the space between Peter and Chan.

"Okay, let her go," Peter said tightly, his hands held at shoulder level.



"You must be joking, young man. Blaisdell doesn't have the information here — *this* is what we came for," he added, pulling back on the cuffs again to elicit a strangled gasp from Annie.

"Peter —" Annie pleaded.

"Let her go," came a calm but forceful voice from the shadows of the hall beyond the stairs.

"Pop!" Peter breathed. Caine stepped out of the darkness, his hand curving round Pinstripe's wrist as his other hand grasped the man's elbow, forcing it up and away from Annie. Caine released the elbow, his hand seeking the sensitive pressure point in Pinstripe's neck. Soundlessly, Pinstripe dropped to the floor as Annie pressed herself against the wall, sucking in desperate breaths. Caine stepped over to her and gathered her in his arms.

"Right," Peter decided, erupting into a sudden spin kick that sent Silver Tweed's gun flying across the room, smashing into a lamp, and Silver Tweed himself crashing to the floor, unconscious. Peter muttered, "Sorry, Mom," as shards of glass splintered onto the floor from the ruined lamp.

"A bit inelegant, but serviceable," commented a wry, British-accented voice from the house's foyer. "Been leaving the trash out again, young Peter?" asked John Steadman as he thumped into the living room, leaning heavily on his cane, and dragging the third of the interlopers by the collar behind him.

"Steadman! Where's Rykker?" Peter greeted enthusiastically.

The sound of a safety being clicked back into place answered his question, and Peter spun around to face Rykker, framed in the patio door. "Seems we weren't necessary after all," remarked the ex-mercenary.

Peter bent to retrieve his gun, tossed Chan's to him, and shook his head. Nodding up the stairs to where Caine assisted Annie down the steps, the unconscious form of Pinstripe crumpled on the landing, he replied with a smile, "I wouldn't go that far." He hauled Silver Tweed to his feet and dumped him on the couch, where the invader groggily struggled back to consciousness.

"Speaking of going ..." Chan offered, brushing his fingers through his hair, his eyes skipping warily from person to person.

Caine and Annie had reached the first floor, and Annie stretched a hand out toward Chan. "You helped Peter — and me. Thank you ... ah —"

"Chan," provided Peter with a quirked eyebrow toward his father; Caine shrugged, glancing curiously at their old nemesis.

"Chan. Please — stay," she invited warmly.

"I —" Chan choked, nonplussed.

"You can't refuse her, Chan. You might as well stick around for the end," Peter informed him, chuckling.

"One thing never changes — a gentleman cannot refuse a lady," Steadman commented with a grin.

Drawing her robe around her, Annie shook herself and nodded with satisfaction. "I'll make coffee — I don't know about you, but I don't think I'm going to get any more sleep tonight."

"Got that right. I'd better call Frank," Peter replied, dragging his hand through his hair as he turned back toward Paul's study.

"I will clean up the mess you made," Caine declared.

"Annie, darling, I'd love a cup of tea," Steadman announced, dropping his captive onto the couch with Silver Tweed, and following her into the kitchen.

Rykker flung the man Peter had trussed up earlier onto the couch next to his companions, and turned toward Chan. "And how did you find yourself in this menagerie?"

Strenlich was asleep when Peter got through, but the Chief woke up immediately once Peter identified himself. Peter could hear Strenlich's wife Molly in the background, questioning the Chief as he tried to explain.



"Look, Chief, I know it's four in the morning. But I just found out Paul's being held somewhere. A couple goons showed up at my parents' house to try to take my mother, too," Peter outlined quickly.

"Annie! Is she all right? Peter —"

"She's fine. My dad and a ... well, a couple of old friends showed up, and we've got four perps in custody. I could use a hand —"

"I'll be right there. Keep 'em on ice, and I'll be there with some uniforms as soon as I can."

Peter thanked him, and after a few questions about the identities of the invaders that Peter couldn't answer yet, he hung up the phone. The welcome aroma of fresh-brewed coffee drew him back out to the living room.

Chan was making himself useful by carrying the coffee tray into the living room, Annie, instructing him on where to place the tray, right behind. Caine was emptying the dustpan into a trash can, and Steadman was leaning against the television console, sipping his tea. Someone had brought Pinstripe down from the second floor landing, and he was now jammed onto the couch with his fellow criminals. Rykker, still wearing his dark overcoat, had settled into Paul's chair, and now sat eying the four intruders with distrust. Scanning the room, Peter realized that with the sofa full of villains, they were short on chairs, so he went back into the study to retrieve more.

Finally, everyone was assembled in the living room, villains, victims and saviors alike.

"I'm afraid I don't know the protocol about entertaining home invaders," Annie commented lightly as she poured coffee into one of the cups on the tray. Only the slight tremor in her hands betrayed the residual fear left over from her all-too-recent ordeal. "Peter?"

Stretching his legs out under the coffee table, Peter shook his head. "Don't know, Mom. Steadman?"

Steadman looked up from sipping his tea, and considered the question a moment. "Afraid that's out of my experience, m'boy. But in the old days, we found that civilized behavior didn't hurt. Give 'em some coffee. That young man Peter tied up with the electrical flex looks like he could use some."

Nodding, Annie set about filling four more cups of coffee, handing them around with Chan's assistance.

Pinstripe balanced his cup carefully, his wrists still captured in Paul's handcuffs. "You are most gracious, Mrs. Blaisdell," he told her, bowing his head in acknowledgement of her generosity. Although she couldn't see the gesture, she shuddered, and picked up another cup to mask her discomfort.

Electrical Cord's hands were still bound by the cord, and he held them out to take the coffee Annie offered. Silver Tweed sullenly turned down the coffee, and the fourth member of the party, whom Peter had dubbed Trash Man, accepted the coffee groggily, murmuring his thanks to Annie.

"Well, I guess this is as good a time as any," Peter announced suddenly, setting his coffee cup down on the coffee table. "You four are under arrest for breaking and entering, carrying a concealed weapon, reckless endangerment, assault ... am I leaving anything out?"

"Attempted kidnapping," Chan suggested, taking his own coffee from Annie.

"Yeah, I wanted to talk to you about that. But first ..." Peter proceeded to read them their rights, and confirmed that they understood them. He addressed each one individually, asking if any of them wanted to waive their right to an attorney. None did, which didn't surprise him. Sighing, Peter settled back in his chair, and spread his hands.

Just then, the doorbell rang, and Caine left the living room to open the door and admit their new visitors. He came back, followed by a weary-looking Strenlich, Kermit Griffin, and four uniformed police officers. Peter got up and joined them, informing the Chief that the Miranda warning had already been properly delivered. Strenlich gestured toward Kermit, and told Peter that Kermit had taken the call at the precinct. Eying Kermit's fresh-looking white shirt and neatly knotted tie, Peter asked, "Don't you ever sleep, Kermit?"

"Data never sleeps," he replied cryptically, brushing past Peter to glance into the living room, where the "alleged" criminals awaited transport. "Y'miss too much that way. If I'd known you were having a party, Caine, I'd've brought my own pretzels."



From the doorway, Strenlich gestured to the officers to take the perps into custody. Handcuffs were provided for the prisoners for whom Peter hadn't had them, and each prisoner was patted down again for weapons.

The Chief cast Peter a questioning look, nodding toward Chan, but Peter shook his head. Shrugging, Strenlich stepped aside while the officers wordlessly rounded up their prisoners and escorted them one at a time to the wagon waiting outside.

As Pinstripe was led to the door, Kermit stepped up to him, tapping him on the chest. "Didn't expect to see you again, Sergiu. Scrapin' the barrel now the KGB's history?"

"Still following in Blaisdell's shadow, Griffin?" the man now identified as Sergiu replied acidly.

"Still following where he leads if the direction suits me. Seen 'im lately?"

Sergiu favored Kermit with an enigmatic, self-satisfied smile, then turned back to Chan, promising, "You will regret your change in loyalties, Mr. Chan." He allowed himself to be led away by one of the uniforms.

Strenlich, Peter, and Kermit followed them out to the street, watching warily as the four men were loaded. Within a few minutes, the quarter was safely restrained and stowed in the wagon. Two officers got into the back with the prisoners, and the other two got into the cab. The three remaining police officers turned back to the house as the wagon pulled away from the curb into the night.

"You know that scum?" Strenlich asked Kermit as they reentered the house.

"In a previous life," Kermit shrugged. "Sergiu Luchian, Romanian branch of Soviet intelligence. Low-level muscle from the days before *glasnost*." Kermit rubbed the back of his neck wearily. "Thought he was still in Lubyanka." Following them back into the living room, he surveyed the assembled parties and waved.

"Seems the gang's all here. Hiya, Steadman, Rykker. Master Caine," he added, bowing slightly. "And Mrs. Blaisdell — looking lovely as ever." His gaze fell on Chan, and his brow furrowed. "Friend of yours, Pete?"

"Hard to say, Kermit," Peter replied, rubbing his lower lip thoughtfully. "So you know that guy, huh, the one in the pinstripe?"

Kermit nodded.

"Any idea who he works for?"

Chan cleared his throat, and all eyes turned toward him. Annie inquired, "You know something about this?"

"Chan knows quite a lot about this, don't you, Chan? He came here to warn me that these bozos were hitting us tonight."

Strenlich helped himself to coffee and sat down on the couch. "Chan, huh? Didn't you used to work for Tan?"

"In a previous life," Chan affirmed, borrowing Kermit's phrase.

"And now?" Kermit asked, peering over his glasses as he picked up a cookie from the tray and started munching on it.

"And now I do security work," Chan replied, challenge clear in his voice.

"And what's your connection with all this? You never did answer me before," Peter pointed out.

Chan considered his coffee cup for a moment, then set the cup in the saucer and placed them both on the coffee table. Licking his lips, he shook his head, allowing himself a bitter smile. "I was hired to set up security for an operation that came in from overseas." He shrugged, glancing from Caine to Peter, his eyes twinkling at secrets shared. "I've been working out of the country for a while, but I kinda wanted to get home, y'know? Anyway, this was no big deal — select a defensible site, seal the perimeter, install surveillance equipment, provide a little extra muscle for patrol duty. They picked me because of my local knowledge. That and the fact that I speak Russian."

Peter snorted. "You can't speak Chinese, but you can speak Russian?"

Chan spread his hands at the vagaries of life. "My misspent youth. I studied it at college."



"And?" Peter prompted.

"And I didn't know who their prisoner was before they arrived. But he was obviously a big deal. I found out later it was Blaisdell. The head guy — name's Alexandre Zhulin —"

"The figure skater?" Peter squeaked.

"You watch figure skating?" Strenlich demanded, chuckling.

"I watch the Olympics," Peter replied defensively.

"Peter watches it for me and describes the skaters," Annie offered.

"He's not the figure skater. He's some kind of spymaster. Kinda creepy — he's really obsessed with your foster father, Pete. Blaisdell's got something Zhulin wants, but he's not talking," Chan interrupted testily. "That's why they planned to take Mrs. Blaisdell — leverage."

"Zhulin," Kermit repeated with a tired sigh. "Now, I *really* thought we'd seen the last of him years ago."

"Another guy from your previous life?" Strenlich asked.

Kermit nodded. "Chan's got it right — Zhulin was what you'd call a spymaster. Ran a tight little network of spies and assassins. Only he wasn't in it for the glory and greater good of the Soviet Union. He was in it for the power. And the money. And the torture."

Annie gasped at that last word. "Torture? You mean this ... *animal* ... is torturing Paul? Peter, Frank — you've got to get him out —"

"That's the idea, Mom," Peter placated hastily, feeling his gut lurch at the idea of Paul under torture.

"Council of war, you know?" To Chan, he addressed, "So where is this defensible site, huh?"

"Farm out on Mott Road. About ten miles outside the city."

"Any other houses nearby?" Strenlich asked.

Chan considered a moment. "No. That was one of the criteria. It's set well back from the road, the road itself isn't very busy, and the nearest house is a good, oh, two-three hundred yards. A little brush on the edge of the road across from the property, but no real cover. Woods are pretty far from the house."

"Power lines?" Kermit offered.

"Yeah. Telephone, too. Why —"

"Good idea," Strenlich commended Kermit. "We can put a man out there on surveillance."

"I have some toys that might help us listen in," Kermit offered. "Not quite legal, but less, ah, noticeable than Blake's stuff."

"Do I detect the beginning of another 'dragonswing'?" Rykker inquired from where he'd been sitting silently.

"I'd say so, old friend," Steadman agreed. "Is this a cause that interests you?"

"Getting Blaisdell back and shutting Zhulin down? Oh, yes," Rykker replied, a hint of passion in his tone.

"So, we're four," Steadman observed, glancing around him and gesturing toward Caine and Peter.

"Five," Strenlich insisted.

"Make that six," Kermit amended. "If Zhulin's in town, I want a piece of him." He rubbed his thigh thoughtfully, adding, "I owe him for some past debts."

"Seven. Chan's in, too," Peter corrected.

"Hey, I'm just an innocent bystander," Chan complained, holding his hands up defensively. "I work for these guys — I've already laid my ass on the line by coming here and warning you. Those guys we just took down get out and tell 'em —"



"I'll tell the night desk sergeant to slow down their processing to delay them contacting their lawyers — that should keep your connection quiet for a while at least. And Broderick'll take care of them in the morning," Strenlich suggested.

Peter glanced at his watch; it was already close to five. "It is morning. Broderick'll be in in about a half hour, Chief." The Chief nodded at Peter, then turned back to Chan.

Chan still wasn't convinced. "I'm dead meat with these guys — Luchian recognized me, and there's no way you can convince me —"

Annie reached over and laid a hand on Chan's shoulder, pressing firmly. "Peter may not be willing to press charges, but I gather you were not invited into this house, whatever your reason for being here. You have information that they need. You know how the security system works. You will help them get my husband back safely. Or I *will* press charges, Mr. Chan."

Chan looked up, his mouth agape, at the petite blonde woman who smiled warmly down at him. Slowly, he closed his mouth and shook his head. "Anything you say, Mrs. B.," he agreed.

"That's a good boy," she told him, patting him on the shoulder, and straightening his jacket.

"Then we are seven," Caine pronounced. "An auspicious number."

"Seems like my lucky day," Chan said sourly.

"Cheer up, Chan — you'll be working with the best. Could open up a whole new chapter for you," Peter teased him with a grin.

"Yeah. Honest work," Strenlich pointed out.

"Hmmpf. I've heard of that," Chan replied.

Strenlich made his call to the precinct from Blaisdell's study, assuring Peter that he'd leave a message for Broderick to call as soon as he arrived. Peter took the opportunity to wander over to his father and whisper, "So, Pop — how'd you know to come here tonight?"

Caine gave Peter a warning look for calling him "Pop" once again, but he shrugged in reply. "I felt your distress. I sensed you were in danger, as was your mother."

"And those guys?" Peter asked, waving his hand toward Rykker and Steadman.

"Ask them yourself. I met them outside."

"How about it, guys?" Peter called, raising his voice to carry across the room. "How'd you end up here tonight?"

"I was wondering that myself, John. Not that I'm not happy to see you, as always," Annie added with a smile.

"Ah," Steadman replied, glancing over toward Rykker, who pursed his lips and nodded for Steadman to reply. "Well, one hears the odd detail here and there, you know. Word from the Circus was that Zhulin was out of prison, and that he was reassembling his organization. Then ..."

"What my verbose friend is trying to say is we heard through the grapevine that Paul had been taken, and that you, my dear, were next. We've been keeping an eye on your house the last few nights," Rykker concluded.

"And how come you didn't tell me? If it hadn't been for Chan here —" Peter protested.

"My young friend, your acting skills leave a great deal to be desired. We decided that if we told you, you would be unable to keep your ... disquiet? a secret from your mother. And upsetting Annie is the last thing I'd want to do," Steadman explained with a grin.

"I, too, felt something out of place. But I did not know what," Caine added.

"So everybody knew something was going on but me," Peter complained.



"Welcome to the big leagues, Pete," Chan remarked with a chuckle.

"Watch it — I can still haul you in for breaking and entering," warned Peter, wagging his finger at Chan.

"I'm losing my touch," Kermit interjected wearily. "I didn't even know Zhulin was out of prison. I could have warned the Captain —"

"Don't blame yourself, Kermit," Annie assured, reaching for his hand. "You're here now, and together, I have no doubt you'll get Paul back safe and sound."

"What're we going to tell Carolyn and Kelly, Mom?" Peter asked suddenly.

Annie thought for a moment, then shook her head. "I don't know, honey. Will we need to tell them anything? I mean, you'll get him back before that's necessary, won't you? Kelly's not due back until next week, and Carolyn's busy with her own life — she doesn't call every day —"

"That gives us a deadline, then, doesn't it?" Kermit offered, squeezing Annie's hand.

"Yeah, well, we'd better start mapping out our plan of attack," Peter suggested.

"First, you must get some rest. As should all of you," Caine pointed out.

"I can't sleep, Dad. Not when Paul's —"

"Your father's right, Peter. You won't do Paul any good if you go in there half-awake. This Zhulin person wants something from Paul. That means he's got to keep him alive until he gets it, right, Kermit?" Annie asked anxiously, squeezing his hand.

Kermit looked up at Annie, his face awash in the same adoration she seemed to inspire in everyone she met. "Right. Zhulin's not going to do anything ... well, terminal ... until he gets what he wants. He's a nutcase, but he's a practical nutcase."

"And what is it Zhulin wants, Kermit?" Strenlich inquired from the edge of the living room. "You know, don't you?"

"I can guess," Kermit allowed. "There's one person Zhulin hates more than the Captain. That's Yefim Kogan, his old section chief. Kogan turned Zhulin in for his crimes, and Zhulin went to prison for it."

"How does Paul fit in?" Peter demanded.

"Blaisdell helped Kogan defect. Things got too hot for Kogan once Zhulin went down — he had a lot of friends still working for him on the outside. So it was safer for Kogan to disappear."

"And Paul knows where this Kogan is?" Annie whispered softly.

"I doubt it. Blaisdell turned him over to the CIA, and the State Department arranged for a new identity and relocated him. Blaisdell only set up the original meet. But Zhulin obviously doesn't believe that."

"Well, Genovese agreed to take his time processing our four friends, and Broderick'll be in shortly. They'll both get booking to go along with it. Y'know, with the night crew, and then shift change, processing criminals can take all day ..." Strenlich concluded with an evil grin.

"They'll be screaming for their one phone call, you know," Peter pointed out.

"Don't really need to let 'em make it 'til they've been processed. At least that's the way Broderick'll see it. He'll watch our backs. So we've bought a little time. What's up next?"

The windowpanes were gilded with the light of the dawning sun by the time they started to break up. Despite Peter's protests, Caine and Annie had finally won out when Annie started to yawn hugely, the weariness and terror of the night finally taking its toll on her. Caine announced that he would stay with Annie, instructing his son to take to his own bed in his own home. When Caine also urged Peter to take Chan with him, Peter's frayed patience finally snapped.

"I'm not some twelve-year-old at the temple, Father!" Peter argued.



"No. You are a young man who has had a stressful night, who must soon face even greater danger to recover his father. Chan cannot go home — it is not safe for him to do so. He is needed to rescue Captain Blaisdell — you must ensure that he does not slip away. The pair of you are better off in your own home, where you can safely contain him."

Chan didn't bother to stifle the yawn that overcame him, and stretched languidly. "Way I feel, I'm not goin' anywhere until I've had some sleep," he commented.

"Count on it," Peter growled. "Okay, what about you?" he asked, turning toward Strenlich.

"I'm going into the office to arrange for some protection for Annie to relieve Caine later. Probably Skalany and Powell. You, Detective, are to go home and catch a few zzzs. You won't do the Captain any good if you're dead on your feet, Pete. Kermit? What are your plans?"

Kermit stood at the broad glass doors opening onto the patio, his hands shoved deep in his pockets as he stared out into the woods fringing the property. He slid his dark green glasses down his nose and peered over the bridge, his expression distasteful.

"Kermit?" Strenlich repeated, louder this time.

Kermit replaced his glasses casually, and turned around to bestow a dazzling smile on his companions. "Sorry. Wool-gathering. What was the question?"

"What're your plans, Kermit?" Strenlich demanded, clearly getting annoyed at Kermit's disinterest.

"I'm going to see if I can dig up anything more about Zhulin and his buddies. And some other players who might be involved," he added enigmatically. He glanced at his watch. "Damn. I missed the IRC on the net on data protection. Ah well," he added, favoring them with a lopsided smile and a shrug. "You look like hell, Pete."

"Thanks," muttered Peter in reply.

Rising stiffly from his seat on the couch, Steadman announced, "I suggest we all get some rest. And that we meet for lunch at my bar to plan our strategy. There's much to be done, gentlemen."

"Ah ..." Peter demurred, blushing.

Steadman smiled, placing a comforting hand on Peter's shoulder. "Katya rarely bothers with the bar during the lunch crowd, Peter. I expect you'll be safe enough."

Fingering his collar, Peter squirmed in discomfort. Katya was Steadman's daughter, an attractive woman with a fierce temper whom Peter had dated briefly after their last "dragonswing" to save his father and the Dalai Lama. They'd proved to be as volatile a combination as sodium hydroxide and water, and their breakup had been spectacular and expensive — the last time he'd seen her, she'd managed to smash just about every glass in evidence in her father's pub.

"I'd recommend body armor, myself," Rykker put in with a wry grin.

"You would," Peter muttered.

Stretching, Chan told him, "You can tell me all about it on the way to your place, Pete. I'm dead on my feet — let's go."

"What is it?" Strenlich asked quietly, joining Kermit at the patio doors after Peter and Chan had gone.

Kermit's mouth quirked in a sour grimace, and he shook his head. "Too soon to tell," he answered softly.

"That's not an answer, Detective," Strenlich warned irritably.

Kermit turned toward him and smiled. "No. It isn't. But when I know, you'll know, don't you worry, Chief." With that, he walked away to give his regards to Annie, and bow once more to Caine. "Coming, Chief?"

"One of these days, Kermit," Strenlich promised under his breath, but he turned and joined his subordinate at Annie Blaisdell's side. "Don't worry, Annie," he told her, capturing her hands in his. "We'll get the Captain back."



"I know, Frank," she agreed, mustering a brave smile that cracked only slightly around the edges. "I know." He glanced at Kermit and shrugged, giving in to his impulse to kiss Annie on the cheek. "Call us if you hear anything. We'll do the same. I'll send Skalany over later this morning to relieve you," he directed to Caine. "We'll see you at Steadman's."

Caine bowed briefly, pressing fist to palm. "I will see you there," he agreed.

With a few more words of farewell, Kermit and Strenlich left the Blaisdell house. In their wake, there was silence. Annie's hand shot out, groping for Caine's. He caught it and lifted it to his lips. "I am here," he told her gently. She turned into his arms then, her shoulders quivering with the tears of fear she had kept inside for too long. "We will find Paul," he assured her. "Our son ... has a talent for dragonswings," he added with a faint smile.

She nodded against his chest, her voice indistinct as she murmured assent. He held her until her tears were spent, and then he guided her back up the stairs to her room, where he told her to rest. Then Kwai Chang Caine closed the door softly behind him, and folded into a lotus position on the floor outside that door, standing sentinel over his son's mother.

A sullen silence hung between Peter and Chan as they drove back to Peter's apartment. Chan had dragged himself into the car, hauled the seatbelt into position, and then slumped down wearily. Peter wasn't thrilled to be sent home like an errant schoolboy, and he'd simply flung himself into the driver's seat, snapped his seatbelt on, and roared out of his parking space. Now they pulled into his slot in the parking garage, and Peter reached across to nudge Chan awake.

"Huh? Oh. It wasn't a dream," Chan muttered.

"Yeah, and I'm not Prince Charming. Wake up, Sleeping Beauty," Peter snarled.

"Y'got that right," Chan replied under his breath, but he pulled himself groggily out of the car and followed Peter to the elevator, boarding it in silence.

Peter glanced over at Chan, took in the advanced state of Chan's decay, and shook his head. "When did you sleep last?"

"Hmm? Oh, about 24 hours ago, I guess. I put in a full day at Zhulin's before I came over last night — I wanted to make sure I had the time right," he answered with a shrug.

"Just why did you come over, Chan?" Peter inquired as the elevator car shuddered to a stop. The door opened, and Peter led Chan down the hallway to his apartment.

"I told you. I owed you. I always pay my debts."

Unlocking the door, Peter found himself staring into the business end of a revolver, the light filtering through his curtains making the burnished barrel gleam with a deadly beauty. "Do I have any credit left?" Peter gulped as he raised his hands slowly.

"I think you might be on the debit side, but we can arrange easy credit terms," Chan replied, glancing nervously toward Peter.

The gun moved out into the hallway, gripped in a fine-boned hand disappearing into an elegant cuff. "Peter Caine?" asked a pleasantly deep voice.

"Who's asking?"

The man holding the gun stepped into the hall, his face visible now that he wasn't backlit by sunlight from the apartment windows. He was tall, about Peter's height, with thick gray hair and a deep tan. Crinkling lines formed around his brilliant blue eyes as he smiled. "Friend of your father's," he answered, dropping the gun to his side. "From the ... ah ... old days," he added with a slight shrug. He looked over to Chan, his eyes narrowed. "Partner?"

"You still haven't introduced yourself," Peter pointed out, slowly returning his hands to his sides. "My father — which one would that be?"



The older man chuckled, slipping his gun back into his shoulder holster. "Your foster father, then. Paul Blaisdell. I'm sorry — I'm Vince Crawford," he greeted, tugging his suitcoat back into position, then offering Peter his hand.

Peter stared at the proffered hand, then raised his eyes to meet Crawford's. "Yeah, okay, I saw you having lunch with Paul a few months ago. But is there any reason I shouldn't arrest you for breaking and entering? That door was locked when I left yesterday."

"You could, but you wouldn't want to involve my employers, Detective. Shall we?" he suggested, pulling back the hand Peter hadn't accepted, and waving toward the apartment's interior.

Chan and Peter exchanged glances, but followed in silence. Once inside, Peter closed the door behind him, and stood in the entryway, waiting. "Why are you here, Mr. Crawford?"

"Paul," he said simply. "We know he's been taken by Zhulin. We know Zhulin tried to take your mother last night. You're next on his list, Detective."

"Tell me something I don't know," Peter growled.

The smile Crawford flashed was made up of perfect white teeth; Peter felt a stab of envy for the kind of paycheck that would make such dental work possible. "All right, then. Your friend here — John Chan? Head of security for Zhulin's operation outside of town. Quite a history, has your young friend. Would you like me to go into specifics?"

"No need. Chan and I are old enemies."

"Allies, for the moment," Chan corrected.

Crawford laughed. "Strange bedfellows, indeed. A cop and a career criminal." He snorted. "Paul said you didn't have what it took to be an operative — I think your foster father was wrong. You'll do whatever it takes to get your father back, won't you, Detective? Legal or not."

"Is there a point to this?" Peter challenged. "Because if there isn't, we've had a rough night, and I'd like to get some sleep." He walked back to the door and opened it, waiting for Crawford to join him.

"There's a point," Crawford conceded, his voice suddenly flat. "You're planning to go up against a dangerous man, Detective. Zhulin is good, very good. You might get very dead in this situation, and that won't do Paul any good."

"So, what? You're warning me off?"

"On the contrary. I'm offering my services."

"In exchange for?"

Shrugging, Crawford told him, "In exchange for your occasional assistance. Rather like your father provides."

It was Peter's turn to laugh. "You want me to be a spy? Yeah, right. Look, Mr. Crawford, it was nice meeting you, but I don't think we really have anything to discuss. I'll get my father back, don't worry. I've got resources at my disposal that beat anything you can offer."

"An ex-mercenary? An ex-MI6 operative? An ex-Marine? A priest? And a criminal? Oh, yes — and a computer nerd? Please, Detective — you love your father, don't you? Would you really put his welfare in the hands of such a team?"

"Any day of my life," Peter answered vehemently, his voice low and dangerous. "Is that all?"

Crawford's smile broadened as he tilted his head to one side to consider Peter. Then he shook his head. "For now. Keep in touch. I won't be far. And give my regards to Kermit."

He brushed past Peter on his way out, and Peter could feel the crackling energy that surrounded him like an aura. A powerful man, a man who revelled in that power. Peter shuddered, but stood at the door watching him until the elevator arrived. Crawford turned and waved regally before boarding the car, and was still smiling as the doors slid shut. Peter slammed the door closed and stalked back into the living room.



"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Pete," Chan murmured, a strange expression on his face.

Peter turned to glare at Chan. "Spare room's back there," he stabbed his finger in its direction. "Couch is there. Take your pick. John's through there. I'm going to bed."

"Good morning to you, too," Chan muttered to Peter's retreating back.

"Just got off the phone with the County Sheriff's office," Strenlich announced as he came into Kermit's sanctum. "They're short-staffed, so they cheerfully turned over jurisdiction to us."

"Oh, goodie," Kermit commented, not looking up from his computer screen. "I've located the transformers attached to that area. I think maybe we're gonna have a little downtime," he added with a grin.

"I don't want to know," Strenlich said, shaking his head. "Is any computer system safe from you, Kermit?"

"Probably not," Kermit admitted. "What'd'ya think — full brownout, or intermittent? Intermittent, random pulses," he answered himself. "Full brownout and they might vacate the premises." He studied the readout on his screen. "Hmm. No critical power requirements in the area ... this'll be annoying for their neighbors, but not fatal. Set it to start ... two o'clock this afternoon? We should be ready by then, don't you think, Chief?"

"We're scheduled to meet at Steadman's at one. Who do you want to assign for this?"

"I'll do it myself, Chief. I want to get up-close and personal with Zhulin."

"You never do field work, Kermit," Strenlich protested.

"This work is in my field, Chief," Kermit pointed out. "Two-thirty. Get out there by three, set up by three-thirty ... d'you suppose they have power company uniforms in green?" he asked, grinning.

"I'll call and find out," Strenlich replied, rolling his eyes.

"Good," Kermit responded, turning his attention back to the screen, his fingers moving rapidly over the keyboard as he wrote the code to bring down the power in Zhulin's vicinity.

Strenlich left the office and returned to the squad room, calling out, "Detectives Skalany, Powell. In my office, now!"

Several hours later, Peter Caine stood in his shower, letting the water run down his face and into his open mouth. A few hours of extra sleep hadn't left him feeling refreshed; instead, he'd had strange dreams, dreams full of menace, a sense of the familiar and unfriendly. His dark hair clung to his face as he leaned into the spray, resting his head against the tile. He couldn't make sense of the dreams, and all he was left with was a vague sense of unease, of disaster looming just out of sight. "Too much coffee," he muttered to himself, and shook his hair out of his eyes. "Too much to do to let dreams haunt me," he added decisively, just in case he'd missed the first point. "Now I'm talkin' to myself. And answering. Shit."

When his alarm had gone off at nearly noon, the first thing Peter had done was check on Chan. Tan's ex-second in command had been sleeping peacefully, hugging the pillow, his face obscured by a fall of dark hair. He'd been none too pleased to be awakened from whatever dream he'd been having. It had obviously been better than Peter's amorphous and unsettling ones.

Chan was definitely an enigma. More Asian-looking than Peter was, Chan seemed to have a Western soul; a soul that had been drawn into Tan's orbit. And what? Corrupted? Or had Chan already been corrupt before Tan's influence? Could they trust anything he told them? Peter had the feeling that they could, at least for now. Chan's system of honor might not be Peter's, but Chan seemed to cling to it nonetheless. They could only hope that he'd cling to it for the duration, and not suddenly decide his debt was paid.

"Keep your friends close; keep your enemies closer," Peter murmured to himself, switching off the shower. "What do you do when you're not sure which is which?"

"You say something, Pete?" Chan called from the next room.

"Nah. Just thinking out loud," Peter answered, grabbing a towel from the towel rack and rubbing himself down. He dressed quickly and joined Chan in the living room.



"So, what does one wear to a 'dragonswing'? And you got any clothes I can borrow?" Chan greeted, raising his coffee cup in salute.

"Hop in the shower and I'll see what I can come up with. Is that coffee fresh?"

"Made it with my own fair hands," Chan affirmed as he got up to take his turn in the shower. "Leave any hot water for me?" he called over his shoulder.

"Smartass," Peter complained, then picked up the phone to call his mother.

"Caine, hello," purred Skalany warmly as Kwai Chang Caine answered the door at the Blaisdell house. He bowed slightly, smiling a welcome.

"Master Caine," Jody Powell hailed. She glanced between her temporary partner and Peter Caine's father and shook her head. "You guys going to make moon-eyes at each other all day, or can we get inside?"

"Sure," Skalany agreed, not moving.

"Great," Powell muttered, shouldering her way past Skalany, nodding to Caine, and making her way into the house. "Where's Mrs. B?"

"Annie is in the living room," Caine informed her, gesturing for Skalany to enter. "The Ancient is with her."

"Lo See? The gang's all here, then," Skalany said, shifting her shoulder bag, still smiling up at Caine.

"There may be another attempt to abduct her ... it seemed prudent to ... hedge our bets?"

Skalany shrugged. "That's what the Chief thought. We're to stay close until he gives us the word. What about you?"

"I must meet my son and his friends to plan our strategy."

"They call it a 'dragonswing'," Annie offered, rising and putting out her hands to Jody and Skalany. "Thank you for coming," she added. "Have you eaten?"

"Grabbed a burger on the way over," Jody answered. "Everything quiet so far?" she asked, glancing at Caine.

Caine nodded. "The, ah ... perps? may not try again until nightfall."

"But, together, we will stand off any attack," put in the Ancient. "And in the meantime, I am surrounded by lovely ladies. A pleasant way to spend the afternoon," he added with a grin.

Skalany and Powell exchanged glances, and Skalany chuckled. "You'd better get going — you know Peter hates to be kept waiting."

"He has always been impatient, even as a child," Caine agreed.

"He just called — he and Chan are running a little late. I'm glad to see that some things don't change," Annie commented, smiling. She turned toward Caine and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you. Be careful."

He bowed, holding her hands in his. "We will get Paul back safely," he vowed.

"I know," she replied, comfortable in the ritual formula.

As Caine exited through the front door, he heard Skalany say, "You might as well go about your usual routine, Mrs. Blaisdell. We'll check out the property."

Peter Caine and John Chan were close in height, but Peter was definitely bulkier than the slender Chan. Chan had been able to tuck the loose-fitting denim shirt into the jeans, but even with a belt, the jeans were baggy, and positively voluminous around the butt. "Not your usual sartorial elegance, I'll admit," Peter said, surveying the result. "Those are the clothes I wore after I'd lost a lot of weight — been in the hospital for a while. Best I could do, pal."



"What were you in the hospital for?" Chan asked, still attempting to make the jeans look less like hand-me-downs.

"Bullet wound," Peter answered. At the sharp look Chan shot him, he shook his head. "Not yours. This one caught me in the head," he added, gesturing vaguely toward his temple. "Junkie lookin' for a fix."

"Didn't hurt much, then," Chan commented, grimacing at the drape of the denim. "I hope no one I know sees me in this."

"We could stop by a men's shop on the way, if you like," Peter offered sarcastically.

"Thanks, but no thanks." He strapped on his shoulder holster, then looked up at Peter. "Got a jacket to go over this?"

Peter tossed him a Kings athletic jacket, and Chan winced as he shrugged it on. "I look like a malnourished jock," he complained.

"You *could* wear your own clothes, you know. No one's gonna care."

"I care. All right, let's go," he sighed, fitting his gun back into the holster. "I'm as ready as I'll ever be."

"Let's rock'n'roll," Peter suggested, waving toward the door.

John Steadman laid out linen napkins on the table, glancing around him to take in the effect. He shook his head, and pulled the napkins off, replacing them with paper napkins instead.

"What's all the fuss, then?" asked his daughter, Katya, from the doorway. "I didn't see anything scheduled for this room this afternoon."

"Nothing official," answered Steadman. "A meeting of the minds, as it were." He looked directly at her and said seriously, "Paul Blaisdell's been taken prisoner by an old enemy."

"Which means Peter Caine is coming to lunch," she shot back, her eyes suddenly hard. "If you expect me to wait on him —"

"I expect you'll be able to find something else to do, my dear. Paul is Peter's foster father, and one of my oldest friends. I'm not about to let him down."

"D'you want me in on this one?" she inquired, her voice gentler. "I mean, Peter's not a bad sort — we just didn't get on is all. Not really my type, is he?"

Steadman smiled. "No. He's an odd duck, our Peter. Not really of this world, and not really of the one he came from. A bit confused, I think. He'll find himself eventually, I expect."

"Yeah, I suppose so. Fights well, though," she commented, nodding to herself. "Well, you call me if you need me. I fancy I can spend the afternoon going over accounts, if that's all right with you. Germain's on at the bar, right?"

"Right. Oh — check on my supply of plastique, will you? I might need some more for this."

"Shall I run an inventory on your trinkets? Go shopping for extras?"

He favored his daughter with an indulgent smile. "If you wouldn't mind."

"All right, then. That should keep me out of trouble for a while. Glad to be useful," she added, chuckling to herself, and left the private dining room.

Steadman checked his watch; nearly one. The members of their dragonswing would be arriving soon. Just time enough to check in with the cook.

Kermit looked up from the back of the power company van and smiled at Frank Strenlich. "That's it, then," he announced, dusting off his hands.

"Blake sees those toys of yours, he'll be itching to get his hands on them."

"Most of it's illegal. Wouldn't want Blake to tarnish his reputation with the Mayor's office."



"You'll be needing this," Strenlich said, handing Kermit a shopping bag.

Kermit took the bag and peered inside. "Well, it's not my color, but it'll do. Power company's online with us?"

"I spoke with the regional manager. They'll log the fluctuation, but they won't send anyone of their own out." He glanced at his watch. "You about ready? It's nearly one."

"Oh, yeah," Kermit answered fervently. "Let's get this show on the road."

"So, you didn't tell me about this Katya person," Chan was saying as Peter pulled out of the parking garage.

"No, I didn't," Peter agreed.

"Well ... ?"

"Well, nothing. She's Steadman's daughter. We dated a coupla times, didn't work out. Didn't work out, bigtime," he added, shaking his head ruefully as he eased his car into the flow of traffic. "You missed meeting her in Germany — think my dad knocked you out before you had the chance."

Chan snorted. "That was a job. Fanatics," he added, practically spitting the word. "Nutcases, all of them."

"Like Tan?"

Lips pressed together in a bitter line, Chan nodded. "Tan was the worst of them all. Your father did the world a favor getting rid of him. Deserves a medal."

"Yeah, so you've said. So how *did* you get hooked up with him in the first place?"

"What, are we into the soul-baring stage of male bonding?" Chan demanded acerbically.

"Hey, inquiring minds wanna know," Peter placated from the driver's seat, keeping his eyes focused on the street ahead. "It's just that ... well, you didn't seem to quite fit in with him, y'know? Jack Wong ... now he's Tan's type."

"Jack Wong's a psycho. Really gets off on hurting people," Chan pointed out. He rested his curled hand on the glass, staring out the window. "Heard he came back to town after prison. Got out pretty fast. Been giving you any trouble?"

"He shows up now and again. He's small-time. Not a problem."

"No. Jack's got big ideas, but hasn't got the brains to make 'em reality. No staying power. Just a vicious streak a mile wide."

"Sounds to me like you didn't like any of your co-workers. So — the question remains ..."

"How did I hook up with Tan? You really want to know?" Chan turned from his study of the passing scenery and looked directly at Peter. Glancing over, Peter nodded. "Okay. What the hell? I was going to university here in town, studying poli sci. Had my eyes set on working in the diplomatic service."

"That why you studied Russian?"

"That, and the fact that I was fascinated by Russia. The Soviet Union, really. That day we met in Chinatown, at the town meeting? I meant what I said about Lenin being a boyhood hero. I hear they're going to shut down the preservation of his body now the USSR's history," he added wistfully.

"It's just a body," Peter told him reasonably, turning the car onto yet another street.

"A symbol. Of a bygone age. Of an experiment that failed, I guess. So, anyway, I was going to college, working on my masters. My mother got sick — yes, I had a mother. She had cancer, my dad was gone, and my younger brothers and sisters couldn't afford her treatments, so I was looking for a way to make some big money fast — while it could still do some good. So I took a job with Tan — runner at first. He liked to surround himself with Asians for some reason."

"And?"



"And when she found out where the money came from, she disowned me. Said I dishonored the family. The Chinese are big on family honor, I guess. She wouldn't take the money for treatments, and she died. End of story."

"I'm sorry. I never knew my mother — she died when I was two. So you stuck with Tan. Right up to the end."

"Yeah. Your father ... he said something about knowing Tan before. So did Tan — totally freaked out when he found out your dad was in town. What was all that about?"

Peter pulled up to a traffic light, and considered his answer in silence for a long time. When it appeared that he might not answer, Chan prodded with, "*Quid pro quo*, bro. I told you my deep dark secret. It's your turn now."

The light switched from red to green, and Peter guided the car through the intersection. "It's not that. It's just ... well, I guess I haven't worked through it all myself, yet. My father knew Tan before he came to this city. I knew him. He was Master Dao at the temple. I remember sitting — lotus style, mind you, we didn't have chairs at the temple — in class listening to him lecture about ethics. I remember him and my father being friends, and then ... I don't know," he shook his head. "Something happened. Something changed him. From that point on, he was always challenging my father, challenging the beliefs the temple was based on. I remember one day, Tan actually challenged him to a battle. Right in front of all of us. My father beat him. That day, he expelled Tan from the temple."

"So you hadn't seen him since then? Wonder how he ended up here."

"No. He came back. With a band of mercenaries. He destroyed the temple. I was told my father was dead. He was told I was dead," Peter said flatly, his voice empty as his hands gripped the wheel. Shaking his head, he added, "All to protect us from Tan." Peter snorted. "And who brought us together again? Tan."

"Tan was Li Sung's protege, you know. Maybe he had something to do with it."

"Probably. Whatever happened, Tan turned away from the Tao. Or rather, turned to the Dark Tao. He twisted everything he'd believed in."

"What's that? Like the dark side of the Force? I get it — Li Sung was the Emperor, Tan was Darth Vader. That makes your dad Obi-Wan Kenobi. And you must be Luke Skywalker."

Peter laughed. Up ahead was Steadman's pub, and he switched on his turn signal to pull into the parking lot. Strenlich's car was already there, parked next to a power company truck. "Who does that make you?"

"Han Solo," Chan replied jauntily. "Fitting, don't you think? He was a mercenary, too."

"Yeah, but he joined the forces of freedom and justice," Peter pointed out, spinning the wheel to bring the car into the lot.

Chan looked out the window, and saw a slender young woman, short blonde hair curling around her face as she lifted her hand to shade her eyes. "Yeah, and *he* got the girl."

Turning off the ignition, Peter followed Chan's gaze. "She's about as feisty as Princess Leia, too. That's Katya."

"Ah. Oh well. Win some, lose some. D'you suppose this Steadman guy brews his own?" he asked as he unclipped his seatbelt.

"No alcohol for you or any of us — we'll need all our wits for this."

"Hmph. I've got a bad feeling about this ..." Chan grinned.

"Trust the Force," Peter countered, and together they exited the car and entered Steadman's pub.

"I've asked the cook to prepare us a little something while we work. I trust that's acceptable to everyone?" Steadman was saying as Peter and Chan entered the private dining room attached to the pub.

"Great, I'm starving," Chan commented, rubbing his hands together.



Steadman beamed at him, gesturing to the two remaining chairs at the table. The other chairs were occupied by Strenlich, Kermit, Rykker and Caine. As Peter walked past his father, he laid a hand momentarily on Caine's shoulder, then seated himself across from him. "How's Mom?" he asked, leaning forward on his elbows.

"She is well. The Ancient is with her, and Skalany and Jody arrived before I left. She is in good hands," replied Caine with a slight nod.

"Good. That's good," Peter commented, his natural energy expressing itself in fidgeting with the silverware. "What've you guys come up with?" he directed to his fellow police officers.

Kermit spared a glance at Strenlich and grinned. "We've had a busy morning while you two have been counting sheep. I've got a little surprise planned for Comrade Zhulin."

"Great. Oh — some guy broke into my apartment. I saw him with Paul once. Claimed he knew you. Said to say hello. Vince Crawford?"

The smile on Kermit's face faded into memory, and his lips pressed together in a grim line. "I know him," he said, his voice flat.

"Not one of your favorite people, eh, Kermit?" Strenlich observed, leaning back in his chair to peer more closely at him.

"Vince Crawford," Steadman repeated. "That's not particularly good news."

Peter looked around the table, taking in the expressions on his companions' faces: Caine looked puzzled, but unconcerned; Chan was expectant, a tiny furrow in his brow; Kermit appeared downright dangerous, and Peter felt a pang of pity for Crawford; Strenlich watched Kermit warily; Steadman shook his head, leaning on his cane as he moved to take his seat at the table; and Rykker pushed back in his chair, his lips puckered in distaste.

"So, what's with this guy Crawford?" Peter prompted.

"What did he say?" Kermit demanded, his voice quiet but edged with steel.

"He knew Paul had been taken by Zhulin. He offered us his services —"

"In exchange for what?"

"Mine."

"Damn!" Kermit swore, balling his napkin and tossing it to the table as he erupted out of his chair. He stalked away, his fingers dragging through his hair.

"What the *hell* is going on, Kermit? Who *is* this Crawford?" Strenlich practically shouted, rising out of his chair to follow his detective.

"No one good," Kermit replied emphatically. "Oh, officially, he's on our side — he's high-ranking CIA. But if he's here now, he *knew* when Zhulin came into the country. He *knew* Blaisdell was a target. And he allowed him to be taken."

"Why? If he's CIA — he's connected to the Captain, isn't he? That's the agency —"

"We've done some work for the Company, yes. Blaisdell goes back even further than I do. Crawford's been calling the shots for years — always finding yet another job that only Blaisdell can do." Kermit paused, turning slowly back to face the men assembled around the table. He looked directly at Peter and shook his head. "He never got Blaisdell to do the really nasty stuff — the dirty tricks squad. But he's from that school — the guys that trade in countries and lives like so many baseball cards. He's always wanted Blaisdell on his team. The Captain's getting older now, he's not as sharp as he was ten years ago. Crawford wants the next best thing — Blaisdell's son."

Peter's cheeks reddened as he felt the eyes of his companions turn to him. He barked a self-conscious laugh. "That's crazy. I'm no spy. I told him that. Hell, I don't even know a tenth of what Paul's been doing the last 14 years. I'm no use to him —"



"You have a unique quality, Peter," Kermit pointed out in a soft voice. "You're Blaisdell's foster son. He trained you. You're also Caine's son. You've admitted that over the past two years a lot of your early training has come back to you — you're a formidable opponent — an expert marksman, a creditable martial artist, a good cop. From Crawford's perspective, that makes you extremely attractive."

"For what?" Peter challenged.

"Assassin," Kermit answered flatly.

"Oh, come on, Kermit — sure, I'm good with a gun, but there's no way anyone could see me as an assassin —"

"There is no honor in such a role," Caine put in quietly. "A warrior faces an equal or superior opponent. Never a combatant of lesser skill."

"Who said spies had any honor?" Kermit asked bitterly. He rolled his head, stretching his neck with a faint crackling sound. "Blaisdell told me Crawford was interested. He turned him down. In Crawford's twisted view of the world, if you have to turn to him for help in rescuing Blaisdell, you're sold, body and soul."

"Well, who needs him? I mean, we're gonna get Paul out, right?" He looked around the table, his eyes pleading for reassurance. "*Right?*"

"Putting Crawford in the puzzle complicates matters, yes. He's a wild card. But we're going to get Blaisdell out, ourselves," Rykker spoke softly into the ensuing silence.

"Why don't you tell us about your surprise, Kermit?" Chan asked suddenly.

Drawing a deep breath, Kermit nodded, and resumed his seat. A moment later, the cook entered the room with a cart laden with plates.

"I suggest, gentlemen, that we build up our strength. I've a feeling we're going to need it," Steadman advised.

"That's only going to work so far," Chan was saying after the plates had been cleared. "I anticipated possible power outages when I designed the system. There's a backup generator that kicks in after 30 seconds."

"What happens when the main power comes back online?" Kermit asked, leaning on his elbows on the table. He arched an eyebrow, just visible over his glasses, toward Chan.

"Generator shuts down and we pull from the county supply."

Kermit shrugged. "Fine. That means that we can't necessarily shut off the power to the security system. But the power outages give me an excuse for some surveillance."

"Wiretapping?" Chan asked.

"Of a sort. Trust me — you haven't seen this equipment before. Some of it, I designed myself."

Chan nodded, and picked up a pencil to sketch on paper Steadman had thoughtfully provided. "The generator's in an out-building, here," he told them, tapping the page with his pencil. "Cables run underground, directly into the house," he said, pointing to the drawing of the main house he'd made earlier.

"Is the generator under guard?" Rykker inquired, hooking an arm over his chair and leaning back.

"Not normally. But if there's trouble with the lines, they'll probably put someone on it. That's what I'd do." He glanced over at Kermit and smiled. "Just because your neighbors are also having power outages, doesn't mean they aren't out to get you."

"Touché," Kermit responded with a faint smile.

"Is the building shielded in any way?" Steadman questioned, peering at the drawing.

"No. But it's well-built — the whole place dates back to the last century, so the walls are pretty thick, definitely sturdy."



"Sturdy enough to withstand a bomb blast?" Steadman pressed.

"Unless you can pitch like Nolan Ryan, you'll never get close enough. The entire perimeter is under lights. Surveillance cameras are here, here, and here," he indicated spots along the exterior of the house. "And the control center is here," he added, pointing to a room toward the back of the house.

"Okay, so maybe we don't go after the generator. Maybe we go for the control room, instead," Peter offered.

"We have to get near the house to do that, Peter," Kermit reminded.

"I can get into the house," Caine spoke quietly.

"How, Pop?" At Caine's upraised eyebrow, Peter merely smiled and shrugged.

"By knocking on the door."

"They'll never let you get that far," Chan argued. "The perimeter guards'll see you before you get to the door —"

"No, they won't," Peter interrupted, his voice full of wonder. "My father has ways of not being seen. Like when those assassins were looking for you last year."

"What — a cloak of invisibility?" Chan scoffed.

"A man can choose not to be seen, just as some choose not to see," Caine replied.

"It's kinda like your eyes just slide off him — he's there, but you can't see him," Peter explained.

Caine nodded. "Yes. I can get to the door," he asserted calmly.

"Y'gotta teach me how to do that, Pop."

"Don't call him Pop," Kermit said absently. "Okay. So you get into the house — what're you going to do then, Caine? Pardon me, but high-tech isn't your forte."

Caine inclined his head in acknowledgement. "I can ... cause a distraction?"

Kermit grinned. "Oh, yeah. I'll bet you can."

"We might be going about this the wrong way," Chan interrupted. "Chief — has Luchian been able to call anybody since you took him into custody?"

"No. We've got all four of them cooling their heels in a conference room while their paperwork is being processed. Can't help it if we're short-staffed on clerical help," he added with a tight smile. "And I've got a man on your apartment —" his smile grew at Chan's surprised expression; Chan hadn't given them his address. "No one's gone in or come out."

"It's simple then — I just drive up to the door," Chan suggested, spreading his hands and leaning back in his chair in self-satisfaction.

"Hey, wait a minute — last night you were bitchin' about being dead meat with these guys — now you're talking about driving right up to their door?" Peter protested.

"Last night — or rather, this morning — I had no guarantees you guys could actually pull it off. Forgive me, but my experiences with law enforcement efficiency haven't been universally inspiring," Chan retorted, leaning back in his chair and spreading his hands philosophically.

"What — and now you think different?" Strenlich challenged.

"Let's say you've earned my trust."

"Great. The trust of a career criminal. The mayor'll love it. That's worth a commendation or two," Strenlich growled.

"So, let me get this straight — you propose to drive right through the security perimeter — by yourself?" Peter pursued.



"I own a van — for transporting security gear. I drove over last night in my Probe, but the van's at my apartment building. Speaking of which, the Probe's still parked near your mom's house, Pete. If I get a ticket, I hope you'll take care of it. Anyway — there's room for *at least* one more in the van."

"A modern-day Trojan horse?" Kermit asked, and Chan nodded.

"You don't think they'd search it? When were you scheduled to be on duty, Chan — even if they don't know your connection to us, you've been gone all day," Peter objected.

"I'm a consultant, not a guard. I come and go, no fixed schedule. If there are power fluctuations, it's logical they'd call me. Which means, I can get out of these ridiculous clothes and pick up some of my own when I pick up the message."

"You can pick up the message remotely," Peter pointed out.

"I hate to admit it, but Mr. Chan's suggestion has merit," Rykker observed. "At least two of you could go in with him. Caine could go in from the rear."

Caine nodded toward Rykker. "And what will you do, my friend?"

"I think Steadman and I should watch your backs," the ex-mercenary replied evenly. "We're getting a little old for the frontal assaults."

Steadman grinned and added, "I've been wanting to try out a few new toys ... airborne. These gadgets of yours, Kermit — they wouldn't interfere with remote radio waves, would they?"

"Give me the frequency, and I'll see to it. I do have one question, Chan — where's the Captain?"

"Here," Chan answered, pointing to a room at the front of the house on the second floor.

"You're kidding — he's in a room that can be seen from the road?" Strenlich objected.

"That's the way Zhulin thinks — force his captive to look at the world he can't escape to," Kermit explained. "That's good, though — once I install my equipment, I'll be able to keep an eye on Blaisdell. There's no point —" he cut himself off suddenly, his eyes sweeping up to look at Peter.

"No point in what?" Peter demanded, his expression suddenly uneasy.

"There's no point in mounting a rescue operation for a man who's already dead," Rykker completed.

"He's not — I mean, you don't think — Kermit, Frank —"

"Steady on, old chap. Plan for the worst, and you're always pleasantly surprised."

"He was alive when I saw him last," Chan interrupted quietly. "A little battered, dehydrated maybe, but ... he was alive."

"Battered?" Peter nearly squeaked.

"Zhulin's from the old school of nastiness — he doesn't play daintily," Rykker pointed out. Kermit nodded agreement.

Peter cast a desperate look toward his father, anguish radiating from his expressive face. Caine reached across and touched him lightly on the back of his hand, laying his hand over his son's. "We will rescue Blaisdell," Caine affirmed, squeezing his son's hand. Peter's hand turned and grasped his father's in a fierce grip as he closed his eyes briefly and nodded.

"Yes, we will," Steadman agreed, his pleasant voice laced with determination. "So, what do you think — dusk?"

There was a murmur of agreement around the table, and Steadman nodded decisively.

Kermit glanced at his watch. "It's almost two-thirty now. I'd better be on my way. Got a date with a power line. It'll be electrifying." He folded his napkin and tossed it on the table. Half out of his chair, he turned toward Steadman and grinned broadly. "My compliments to the chef, Steadman. See you at the starting gate."

S



trenlich followed Kermit out to the power company truck, double-checking the timing as they went. Finally, they stood next to the van, and Strenlich dug his hands into his trouser pockets. "You think this Crawford could gum up the works?"

"I think ... I think we may have the advantage. Vince thinks linearly. He expects cause to have effect, in predictable measure. The last thing he'll've planned on is Kwai Chang Caine."

"Who the hell does?" Strenlich remarked.

Kermit laughed, and clapped the Chief on the shoulder. "Who, indeed? I'll call in when I'm set up, Chief. I know Zhulin — the Captain's alive." Kermit opened the door and grabbed his power company uniform from the front seat. Hidden from the road by the van door, he quickly pulled it on over his suit. "How do I look?"

"Like a wolf in sheep's clothing," answered the Chief.

Kermit grinned. "Oh, yeah."

Strenlich stopped to use the phone, then returned to the pub to find Steadman clucking over Peter and Chan's argument over returning to Chan's apartment. "Give it a rest, will you?" he demanded as he re-entered the dining room. "Take 'im to his place if he wants, Pete."

"But, Chief —" Peter protested.

"Luchian's on ice. I just checked in with Broderick. Seems we may need to call in the State Department — our buddies don't all have current visas. That wasn't your department, was it, Chan?"

Chan grinned and shook his head. "No. Just security. Personnel was somebody else in their organization."

"Disorganization, it would seem," Steadman offered with a smile. "Well, gentlemen — are we ready?"

"I must return to Chinatown," Caine said.

"I thought you were going back to Annie's, Pop —"

Caine merely looked at his son, then answered, "If Captain Blaisdell has been injured during his ... stay," he sighed, "then I must bring medicines to ease his hurts."

Wide-eyed, Peter nodded. "He'll be okay," he whispered. "He's gotta be." Caine nodded gravely.

Mott Road was a quiet, rural artery lined by large properties just beginning to feel the pain of subdivision. As Kermit drove down the road, he noticed a large sign proclaiming, "The new home of Swanson Estates." A list of astronomical home prices filled out the sign, and Kermit shook his head. The gentle, unhurried sense of calm evoked by the carefully patterned fields, the utilitarian simplicity of the buildings, the space ... all would be gone in a few years, as urban dwellers sought to capture it all in a bottle. With the subdivisions would come civilization, and with civilization, congestion, traffic, smog ... all the things the prospective buyers sought to escape. The price of progress.

Tall electrical poles punctuated the roadside, their surfaces weather-beaten to a nondescript gray-brown. Power lines sagged alongside phone lines, looping from pole to pole in a scalloped edge framing the sky. The road was lined in scraggly brush on the other side, rising into a close-grown stand of trees. Ahead, he saw the farm Chan had described, nodding to himself as the details Chan had provided meshed with reality.

The first few random pulses scrambling the power to this area had already hit, and he'd confirmed with the power company that complaint calls had been logged. None had come from this customer, just as he'd expected. But they were feeling the inconvenience of his little program, and the disruption would throw them off-balance. It was a pity that their neighbors, presumably law-abiding citizens, had to suffer the power outages, too, but Kermit considered that an acceptable downside. This far out, only a few properties were serviced by the line he was disrupting. The sight of a properly labelled power company truck on the road nearby would offer no surprise, except perhaps at the power company's unexpected efficiency.

Grinning to himself, Kermit pulled the truck over to the side of the road, a few feet from a power pole not far from the property's edge. He sat there for a few moments, small field glasses raised to his eyes as he



studied the terrain, eyes roving over the house's facade as he searched out the room in which he knew Blaisdell must be.

It was a large, solidly-built farmhouse of local stone, set well back from the road, and surrounded by an old stone wall, about man-height, showing signs of recent repair. A small gatehouse, barely large enough for the one adult who occupied it, sat next to the wrought iron gate, and was crammed full of electronic equipment. Between the perimeter wall and the house there was an unbroken expanse of lawn, bisected by a gravel driveway leading to the house and circling around to a long, low building that must serve as a garage. Another building, small and squat, stood a hundred feet from the rear of the house, the new metal of its fire door fairly screaming its importance; the shed containing the backup generator. Smaller outbuildings, each secured with gleaming new padlocks, dotted the grounds. Behind the house stretched tilled fields, sloping off in terraced fashion toward another wood. Bounded on both sides by trees, the house was isolated in its exposure, centered in an open, uncrossable plain.

He could see the effects of Chan's security plan — powerful lights and cameras on swivel-mounts hugged close to the house, half-hidden by the overhang of the roof. A handful of men in casual dress, but with the formality of military parade, appeared to wander the property. The bulk of their jackets, all of similar cut, betrayed the weapons they carried.

Nodding to himself again, he got out of the truck and went around to the back, gathering his gear. It'd been a long time since he'd last done field work, but some things never leave you. Especially when you're motivated.

"Your father's a strange old dude," John Chan was saying as Peter pulled away from the curb. "My mother would've liked him."

Frustrated, frightened, Peter retorted, "Shut up, Chan. You don't know anything about anything." With more force than was necessary, he spun the wheel to turn the car into traffic leading to Chan's apartment.

"I just meant he's the kind of person my mother would've approved. Inscrutable. Chinese to the core. Unswervingly loyal. Good to the last drop. All that stuff."

Peter's hand shot out, grabbing Chan by the shirt-front.

"Hey, I'm on your side," Chan answered, holding up his hands in conciliation. Peter's hand spasmed, but released its hold on Chan's shirt. As Peter withdrew the hand, Chan smoothed down the shirt and shrugged. "Didn't realize you were so keyed up. Sorry."

Peter's hands gripped the steering wheel, and he shook his head. "Yeah. Same here. It's just —"

"Doesn't it confuse you, having two fathers?" Chan asked suddenly.

"Confuse?" Peter repeated. He glanced over at Chan, but the other man was awaiting Peter's answer with a bland face, the only expression mild curiosity. "Yeah. A lot," he admitted. "Two fathers, two cultures. Maybe mutually exclusive, I don't know."

"But Blaisdell — he's the one you chose to follow."

"There's not a big market in Shaolin priests," Peter pointed out with a bitter smile. "And I don't think I'd've made it, anyway. Too much nervous energy to achieve stillness."

"So you're a cop. A good one, too." At Peter's sharp look, Chan chuckled. "When Tan and I left town, he did some digging on you. Seemed to satisfy him a little, the fact that you were so good. He almost ..."

"What?"

"He almost took pride in it. I didn't realize then that ... well, that he'd known you when you were young, taught you —"

"I learned nothing from Tan," Peter snapped.

"Master Dao, then," Chan corrected.

"Yeah, maybe," Peter conceded after a moment.



"But it was your father that made him crazy. Well, no — I think he was always crazy, from the day I met him. But beating your father ... that meant everything to him. He went over the edge. Lost perspective."

"When a man wants something too much, that's the path to failure," Peter replied, his voice distant. "Master Dao used to teach that to us. He lost sight of his own teachings ..."

"That day ... the day your father got rid of him once and for all ... I almost thought ... well, there was a moment when you and your father were talking, we were watching on the monitors, and you hugged each other. The look on Tan's face ... it was like he was remembering something he'd forgotten. I almost thought he'd call it off. It was like some part of him was warring with the other. And then it was gone."

"Yeah. His daughter was a little like that. There were moments when I could almost think she was human," Peter nodded.

"You met Zia? Now there's a chip off the old block. That's one nasty bitch. The day I told her her father was dead ... I thought she was going to rip out my lungs and wrap 'em around my throat. Tan adored her, though. Gave her everything."

"Except a soul," Peter countered.

"Yeah. I suppose we should feel bad for him, and her, but it's hard," Chan commiserated.

"Impossible, more like. That it up there?" Peter asked, pointing with one finger while he maintained hold on the steering wheel.

"Home sweet home," Chan agreed.

Peter pulled the car into a spot in front of the building, while Chan breezed into the apartment building foyer. Glancing at the parking meter, Peter shrugged, and dug into his jeans for a quarter, feeding the meter. He looked up and down the street, spied the unmarked car and a familiar face, and nodded slightly in the officer's direction. He received a small affirmative in reply. Then he followed Chan into the building.

A few minutes later, they exited the elevator onto the sixth floor, and Chan led the way down the hall to his door. Everything about the building was modern, from the state-of-the-art security cameras to the polished chrome and glass elevators. The door to Chan's apartment was nondescript, reminding Peter more of a hotel than an apartment building. Chan let himself into the apartment and waved for Peter to follow.

Peter pulled his gun out of the holster and looked at Chan, who colored at his own complacency. "Okay. I'll check," Chan agreed to the non-verbal question, and took out his own weapon. Together, they made a quick search of the apartment. Like the building, it was modern, with little to elaborate on the man who lived there. A few prints in sleek black frames decorated the neutral walls, and small, sedate rugs softened the starkness of the black and white tiled floor. Everything was in muted tones, camouflage colors. Peter took it all in as he followed Chan from room to room. Nothing Asian appeared anywhere in the apartment, save for the one photograph sitting on an end table. An older woman, face lined with age or pain, and two younger women, both beautiful as only Asian women can be. Chan's eyes slid over the photo without registering Peter's curiosity, or perhaps rejecting it. Chan stood in the living room and announced, "No one. And it doesn't look like anyone's been here, either."

"Message light is blinking," Peter pointed out, slipping his Beretta back into its holster.

Chan put his gun away and went over to the answering machine, while Peter turned to study the volumes carefully placed on bookcases made of matte black metal and glass. Where his library was made up of books on martial arts, police procedure, and eastern philosophy, Chan's was made up of books like Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Marx's *Manifesto*, and other books on political and economic philosophies. A small smile tugged at Peter's lips as he bent to study the titles; where his search had turned inward, Chan's reached outward. They were, in their own ways, like yin and yang ...

A harsh voice emanated from the answering machine, tersely reporting power outages and a demand for Chan's presence at "the compound." Peter straightened and looked over at Chan; the Asian man shrugged. Checking his watch, Peter noted that it was already well past three p.m.; Kermit would be in position by now. Dusk was around seven ... less than four hours to kill until they were scheduled to rejoin the others. This was the part he always hated ... the waiting, the pause before the action.



"I'd better give Zhulin a call back," Chan was saying. "He called ... about fifteen minutes ago," he added, checking the time stamp on the machine readout.

"Not yet," Peter ordered him, wresting his eyes from his study of Chan's library. "He'll probably want you out there immediately — we need to hold him off until we're ready."

Chan held his eyes for a moment, then nodded. "Okay. Look — I'm going to go get changed. Fridge is over there — help yourself to something cold."

"I'm going to check in with the Chief," Peter informed him. "Let him know we're clear here." He walked over to the phone and picked it up; Chan shrugged, turned and exited to the bedroom, closing the door softly behind him.

Strenlich picked up on the third ring, sounding as though he'd raced for the phone. "Chief — Peter. We're at Chan's. All clear. And DeMarco's out on the street — no problems there."

"Good," Strenlich replied over the line. "Luchian and his pals are still sitting tight; I don't know how much longer we're going to be able to hold them bottled up — the Commissioner's gonna have my shield if this doesn't pan out. We've broken about fifteen laws so far."

"It'll pan out, Chief. You know it will. And Blaisdell will help us sort out the paperwork."

"Yeah. The Captain's good at clearing red tape." He paused, as though checking something. "Kermit should be out on Mott Road by now."

"Zhulin called to complain to Chan, so they're already feeling the affects," Peter told him.

"Good. Keep 'em off balance — that'll work for us. I'll keep in touch — I should be hearing from Kermit soon."

"I'll see you at the rendezvous then."

"Right. And Pete — watch your back. I'm still not sure we can trust Chan."

"I'm with you on that, Chief. So far we've got enlightened self-interest working for us. That and his weird brand of honor. He claims —" Just then, the bedroom door opened, and Chan, clad in a casual suit over a dark turtleneck, came out. "You got any of the plans for the security system here?" Peter asked Chan.

Nodding, Chan sauntered over to the computer desk tucked in the corner of the living room, while Peter listened to Strenlich say, "I'll let you go. Keep in touch."

"You, too. Thanks, Frank." He hung up the phone as Chan came back over with a roll of drawings.

"Want to look at them now?" Chan asked. Peter inclined his head, and Chan sat down, rolling out the drawings on the glass top of the coffee table. "A little more detail than I gave you at the pub, but pretty much more of the same."

"Yeah," Peter agreed, leaning over to study the diagram. "You'll drive up here," he said, pointing to the gate of the compound. "Any checkpoints?"

"At the gate. There'll be somebody on duty. Especially today."

"Likely to check the contents of your van?"

Chan considered this for a moment. "No. Not if I tell them there's sensitive equipment in the back. Most of these guys are technophobes — terrified of touching anything they don't understand. Zhulin's got 'em all scared shitless — they're afraid they'll damage something he wants. So, even though security should be beefed up as a result of the power fluctuations, they'll be even more nervous about fiddling with my equipment."

"Good. I want to swing back to my place and pick up a few things before we leave. Come on."

"I can follow with my van —" Peter's hard look choked off Chan's protest. "You still don't trust me, do you, Pete?"



"Consider it protective custody, if you like." At the closed expression on Chan's face, Peter relented slightly. "We're talking about the safety — maybe the life — of my foster father, Chan. I can't leave anything to chance. I need you in the right place at the right time."

Chan stared at him a moment more, then looked away, his face unreadable. "Okay. After this is over ... you and me ... we've got to go out and get seriously drunk together."

"More male bonding?"

"Consider it closure, if you like," Chan replied, echoing Peter's words.

"To what?"

"The past?"

"I can drink to that," Peter agreed. "C'mon — let's go."

Peter had insisted on dropping his father off at his apartment, rather than letting the elder Caine walk back. Caine had seen the futility of protest; Peter had needed the reassurance. Chan had been curiously quiet, and as Caine mounted the steps to his home, he found himself wondering briefly what drove the ex-lieutenant of Tan. He remained an enigma, a pool of opposing currents which swirled and receded, never remaining calm enough to let the water clear. Caine had fallen into the trap of thinking Chan simple, only to find himself surprised. Stripped of Tan's influence, the young man seemed to be redefining himself, unsure of his way, yet struggling toward balance.

Stepping into the cool quiet of his apartment, Caine let the lingering scent of incense tease his nostrils for a moment. It might be in the heart of this city, but the arrangement of his dwelling, the plants that thrived there, the simplicity of it renewed him. He didn't need to look around to tell that no one had been there in his absence; the sense of harmony was undisturbed, and so he knew that the apartment was empty of intruders. Peter had asked to come up to check; Caine had turned him away with murmured assurances. It was not that he did not wish to share this time with his son; simply, he must prepare, and his preparations might not please his son.

In his many years of wandering, Kwai Chang Caine had encountered many people, many destinies. He had seen and experienced many things. It was his path to wander. And in his wanderings, he had seen much evil, and much good. He had seen birth, and he had seen death. His son might think him innocent, unconnected with the world, but it was his very knowledge of the world that allowed him to step away from it. He had met men like Zhulin, and he had seen what they could do. Men of Zhulin's ilk were death. And he must prepare for that.

There were herbs that cured, and herbs that killed. And there was a point beyond which a man could not be recalled, when his essence had already begun its journey to mingle with the infinite, and the body remained only as a shell, a vessel emptied of its precious burden. If Paul Blaisdell had reached that point, then even he could not defy this universal law. But he owed it to his son, and to the man who had shouldered the task of raising him, to do what could be done before that point was reached. To prevent that point from being reached. It was not Blaisdell's time, of this he was certain. Not this day, and not in this way. And yet, he sensed that perhaps it might be ...

In silence, Kwai Chang Caine worked, exploring the reaches of his stores to assemble an aromatic arsenal against a twist of fate. He tasted one herb, rejected it as unfit; another, he crushed between his fingers and held the pungent dust against his nose, nodded in approval; yet another, he sniffed and accepted. In time, he sorted and selected, pushed away and rejected, until he felt confident he had chosen wisely. A sacred trust Paul Blaisdell had accepted, although he could not know then what it would mean to Kwai Chang Caine. Honor, affection, and respect required that Kwai Chang Caine do no less in return.

It took some time to distill the herbs he'd selected into a broth which could be taken cold. He worked with deliberation, with patience born of many years, as the medicine took form inside the kettle he tended so carefully. Finally, it was ready, and he decanted it into a small bottle.

Satisfied that he had the means to replenish Blaisdell's delicate balance, or at least to begin that process, Caine stowed his herbs and medicines carefully in his pouch. He glanced up to note that the sun had already begun its inevitable descent through the sky. At dusk, Steadman had said. It was time.



Kermit studied the map laid out on the bed of the truck, peering over the tops of his sunglasses to better read the fine print. It was a survey map, rather than an auto club map, and it showed all of the side roads and unpaved lanes in the area. The land across the road from Zhulin's compound belonged to the county, set aside in fatter years for development, but it had remained empty as the recession and its aftermath had hit. An access road cut through the property, and at its closest point to his position, it was only a few hundred yards from Zhulin's. He nodded to himself; it was perfect. Close enough to keep tabs through his gadgets, but screened from the compound itself.

He closed the map and went around to the cab of the truck, levering himself into the driver's seat. Checking the rearview mirror, he pulled the truck out into the road, and moved off to check it out.

A few minutes and several bruises later, he coasted to a stop at the head of a rise in the rutted road. Ahead, a dark, nondescript sedan was pulled over into the brush, its wheels half-hidden in the tall grasses. He didn't need to see its occupant to know who drove the car, and with a muttered curse, eased the truck down the incline to stand near the car. Turning off the ignition, he eased his Glock out from under his coverall, and slid out of the truck. He stood at the shoulder — such as it was — and scanned the landscape.

An instant's flash of sunlight on a reflective surface pinpointed his companion on this lonely road, and shaking his head, he set off in the direction of the flash.

"I could have dropped you the minute you pulled up," called a cultured voice a few minutes later.

"That's why I didn't bother with trying to be quiet," Kermit countered, not breaking his stride.

A snort of laughter answered him, and Vince Crawford rose from the unkempt foliage, dusting off his elegant gray trousers with one hand, while he held a gun on Kermit with the other. "Ever practical, eh, Kermit?"

"Good at conserving my resources, Vince. I can't say I'm happy to see you," he added, coming up to stand before the man.

"No? I'm glad to see you. Helping young Caine retrieve Blaisdell, are you?"

"You know I am. What's your interest in this, Vince?"

Crawford smiled, a harsh smile that had been known to turn grown men's veins to arteries of ice. "You know. Blaisdell must have told you."

"Let's assume he hasn't, shall we? It's always good to hear bad news directly, don't you think?"

Tucking the gun into his shoulder holster and resettling the cut of his suitcoat, Crawford shook his head. He gestured toward Kermit's Glock, still held in plain sight. "So you can kill the messenger?"

"I'm no king, and this isn't Marathon. Give it to me straight, Vince."

"Your classical education is showing, Kermit. Must've made your years in the field a bit ... schizophrenic? You never seemed like a man of action, more a man of letters." He eyed the gun, which Kermit conspicuously refused to put away. "And yet, you were one of Blaisdell's best. You were one of the ones he could always count on."

"He still can. Whither he goest ... but that doesn't answer my question, Vince. What's your interest in this?"

"Speaking of schizophrenia, this Peter Caine ... he's a fascinating case, don't you think? Raised in a Shaolin temple — they're not truly pacifists, you know, they simply don't precipitate battles. His real father's quite an accomplished fighter, isn't he?"

"Caine can hold his own," Kermit shrugged. "But he never takes on an inferior opponent, and he only fights when there's no other alternative."

"You're quite impressed with him, aren't you? But then again, you would be — you always were taken with excellence, weren't you. Like Constance — wasn't she wife number two?"

"Three. You were saying?"



"Yes. Peter Caine. Raised in the Shaolin tradition, one of China's great fighting styles. And he finished his education under Blaisdell, one of the world's great operatives. A formidable combination, wouldn't you say?"

"Of anyone other than Peter Caine, maybe. He's hot-headed, impulsive, a loose cannon — check his records. He's got as many disciplinary actions as he's got commendations."

"And you like him. I've checked his records, Kermit. And I've been keeping an eye on him — he's pulled off some creative and effective missions over the last couple of years. His father's influence, or Blaisdell's, do you think?"

"He's had help. Experienced help. I understand you offered him assistance, too, for a price."

"Well, there's always a price, isn't there, Kermit? Nothing comes free in this world."

Kermit glanced around him, his eyes sweeping over the landscape of overgrown weeds and plants, flowering plants and creeping vines, trees stark against the darkening sky. "Depends on what you want, I guess, Vince. Peter doesn't need your help."

"Because he's got you? Sounds like Blaisdell's worn off on him quite a lot. Paul always counted you as more valuable than ten men."

Still staring at the sky, Kermit answered, "Flattery, as they say ... I know where I stand with the Captain. I don't need you sucking up to me, Vince. And Peter doesn't need your help."

Crawford turned and looked out toward the trees, and the line of scrub that edged the road facing Zhulin's compound. "You could be right, Kermit. And then again, you could be wrong. Let me know when you find out, okay?" With that, Crawford brushed past Kermit, making his way back to the track where his car was parked. Kermit practically snarled at the man's retreating back, then shoved his gun away and followed, standing at the roadside until Crawford's car had disappeared in a cloud of dust. Then he turned back to the borrowed truck, and checked the quality of the signal his gadgets sent him. Once he was satisfied with that, he had a couple of phone calls to make.

Strenlich replaced the receiver in its cradle gently, belying the disgusted sneer on his rough face. In his years as a Marine, he'd done enough special ops to share Kermit's dislike for men like Crawford — smooth, cultured, soulless. The kind of man who sends boys into battle knowing they'd never live to become men. The kind of man who builds an empire on the wasted lives of addicts and hookers, for whom death is just the bottom line. At moments like this, he felt the passion which had led him to become a cop, was reminded forcibly of the reasons he had first joined the police force.

These thoughts led inevitably to the reason he stayed ... Paul Blaisdell. A man he would die for. A man he would willingly follow to the farthest reaches of hell. He might question and challenge the Captain, but he did it because he knew that's what Blaisdell expected of him. Like everyone at the 101st, he reached for his full potential because Blaisdell deserved no less.

He jerked himself angrily from his reverie, checked the clock on his desk, and hauled his muscular bulk from the chair. Kermit had set up his surveillance devices, and the signals were clear. He'd been able to maneuver his camera to zero in on the room Chan had identified as Blaisdell's prison. Through the lens, Kermit had managed to catch a glimpse of what he thought was the Captain, alive, but definitely not in sterling shape. Strenlich snapped open his drawer and drew out his service revolver, checking the clip, and reaching for a spare. Time to rock and roll.

"Chief, everything's fine here," Mary Margaret Skalany was insisting into the telephone. "Mrs. B is fine. The grounds are fine. The only visitor today was the postman, and he was fine, too, Chief. The Ancient's giving Jody kung fu lessons — any guy who messes with her is *not* going to be fine."

Jody Powell looked over to where Skalany argued with their boss and made a face, then went back to mimicking the Ancient's moves, practicing a t'ai chi form he'd been teaching her all afternoon.

"Is that Frank?" Annie asked from her place on the living room couch. "Let me talk to him, will you, Mary Margaret?" She got up and joined Skalany at the phone, holding out her hand for the receiver.



"Hold on, Chief. Mrs. B's here." Skalany placed the receiver in Annie's hand and wandered over to watch Jody and Lo See.

"Frank, what's happening?" she inquired urgently, slipping around the wall to stand in the next room.

"Everything's set, Annie. We meet in about half an hour. You hold tight — we'll get the Captain back," Strenlich vowed over the line.

"How's Peter holding up?"

"Full of piss and vinegar," answered the Chief of Detectives.

"Isn't he always? But honestly, Frank —"

"He's scared, Annie. We're all a little scared. That just makes us more determined. How are you holding up?"

Annie Blaisdell leaned back against the wall, resting her head against it, and sighed. "If Skalany calls me 'Mrs. B' one more time, I'm going to scream. She makes me feel so old, Frank!"

Strenlich chuckled, his voice laden with affection. "Never, Annie. You know if it weren't for Molly ..."

Annie smiled in return and said, "Lucky for that. You have good people on your team, Frank. Jody and Skalany have been wonderful to me. And the Ancient ... well, he's in a class by himself, I suppose."

"Hmmp. Just like Caine. Don't you worry, Annie — Peter's put together a good team, too."

"I know. I trust you all. But when Paul gets home, he and I are going to have a little talk about his extracurricular adventures. Dragging Peter into it ... I've put up with Paul's mysterious departures for years, but I'm not going to have my son following in *those* footsteps. And when you see him, you can tell him for me that I'm not at all pleased with him!"

"You're sure you won't need me on this?" Katya Steadman was asking as her father gathered up his toys and packed them carefully away in a specially-designed valise.

"My dear, I'm sure. You look after the bar — and hope we have reason to come back and celebrate. And make sure those ruffians of yours don't completely demolish the place — our insurance premiums are getting a little heavy these days."

Katya smiled at her father, and nodded. "Sure, Dad," she agreed, stepping over to kiss him on the cheek. "You take care now, okay?"

He favored her with a brilliant smile. "Don't I always?"

"No. Not always. But this time, okay?"

He leaned over and returned the kiss, patting her on the shoulder as he shifted the weight of the case. "If you like."

Rykker poked his head in at that point, glanced at father and daughter, and smiled. "Ready?"

"Once more into the breach?"

"Once more into the breach."

The sky was turning to rose as Peter pulled into the deserted parking lot behind Chan's van. Chan had finally won the argument to drive the van without a passenger, in case any of Zhulin's men saw them, and Peter had followed a few cars behind until they'd pulled off the main road.

Strenlich was already there, puffing away at a cigarette as he leaned against the hood of his station wagon; hockey sticks and toys left by his children littered the back seat. A dark car, reminiscent of an earlier era, stood beside Strenlich's more practical family car. Peter caught sight of Steadman waving out the window as he turned off the ignition. Rykker couldn't be too far away. Kermit's commandeered power company truck came in from the other direction, sliding into place behind Peter's car.



Their rendezvous was an abandoned truck stop off the interstate. The darkened hulk of the building was silent testimony to broken dreams, its once-brightly-painted sign peeling into oblivion. Vandals had smashed all of its windows, and the door hung on one hinge, slowly creaking back and forth in the gutted doorway.

Almost as one, the car doors opened, and Steadman, Rykker, Kermit, Chan and Peter made their way toward Strenlich.

"I used to come by here for blueberry pancakes," Kermit said softly, glancing at the desolate building. "They were terrible, but the service was good," he added, brushing past Peter to join Strenlich.

"Where's my father?" Peter asked no one in particular. Strenlich flicked away his cigarette and looked out at the road; outlined in the headlights of a passing vehicle, Caine made his way steadily down the shoulder toward the old diner. If he saw them, he gave no sign, neither quickening his pace, nor slowing. Peter relaxed a bit at the sight of his father, and turned toward Kermit.

"Did you see Paul?"

Kermit nodded grimly. "Oh, yeah," he answered. "He's in a bad way. Zhulin's men were working him over — probably payback for his goons going astray and not bringing back your mother last night." His uniform abandoned, Kermit was again dressed in dark suit, white shirt, red tie, and his inevitable sunglasses. The glasses hid his eyes, but the tautness of his face betrayed his anger.

Peter's jaw tightened, his fists clenching reflexively. He looked wide-eyed toward Strenlich, and the Chief replied to his unspoken question, "Annie's fine. I spoke to her before I came out. The Ancient's teaching Powell kung fu, and Skalany is driving your mother crazy calling her 'Mrs. B'. Makes her feel old," he added with a grin.

"Mom'll never be old," Peter countered passionately.

"Even in her eighties, Annie Blaisdell will be the most beautiful, the youngest woman I know," Steadman agreed.

"She's pretty cool," approved Chan, earning him a warning glance from Peter.

"Annie is a woman of great courage," said Kwai Chang Caine as he joined them, bowing slightly.

"Took you long enough," Peter complained, but it was obvious from his expression that he was relieved to see his father. "Are we ready?"

"I found a good location on a side road not far from the house. The signals from my equipment are clean, and we'll be screened from the compound. I'll show you how to operate the stuff when we get there," Kermit directed to the Chief.

"Me? And where'll you be, Detective?"

"Thought I'd renew an old acquaintance," Kermit replied, grinning ferally. "It's been a long time since I've seen Comrade Zhulin."

"Okay, that's you and me in Chan's van — what about the rest of you?"

"Guess I'm babysitting Kermit's toys," Strenlich answered sourly.

"Cheer up, Chief — high tech's in these days," Kermit cajoled, clapping his superior officer on the back.

"Sun's going down — we'd better get on our bikes," Steadman observed. "You set your equipment so it won't interfere with *my* toys?" he asked Kermit.

"Should be clear sailing," Kermit agreed.

Caine was looking around him, his expression mildly confused.

"What's up, Pop?" Peter asked with a puzzled smile.

"I do not see any bicycles," Caine replied.



"Ah. Old English expression — get on your bike — get a move on. Shall we, gentlemen?" Steadman invited.

"You can ride with me, Pop," Peter told his father.

"Do *not* call me Pop," Caine admonished, but followed his son nonetheless. Peter grinned, and held open the door for his father, closing it with a flourish. He tossed a thumb's-up sign toward their companions, and moments later, the cavalcade moved down the road.

"**W**hat've you got in your bag of tricks, Dad?" Peter asked as he maneuvered the car along the rutted track leading to Kermit's lookout point.

"Medicines. Herbs. Bandages," Caine replied simply.

"Kermit said Zhulin's goons were working Paul over. He's gonna need all the help you can offer," Peter said, his voice husky with anguish.

"All I have is his," answered Caine. "I can offer no less to the man who raised my son."

Peter's hand reached out toward Caine, and Caine grasped it warmly. "Thanks, Dad. You have no idea how much it means to me to have you with me on this."

"Where else could I be?" Caine's other hand curled around Peter's neck, and gently caressed it. "Paul Blaisdell is as much your father as I am, and he is my friend. I could not allow him to be kept against his will."

"Right." Giving his father's hand one last, ardent squeeze, Peter pulled his hand back to steady the steering wheel as they came up the incline toward their launching point. "Thanks."

The sun was an afterglow in the sky, hugging the western horizon as the air around them began to cool with impending night. Kermit was at the back of the power company truck, explaining the surveillance gear to Strenlich. Chan had his van pulled up behind, ready to accept some of the equipment Kermit wanted to take along. Steadman stood at the side of the road, frowning at the terrain separating them from Mott Road, while Rykker sorted out his weaponry.

"It's getting dark fast — we'd better get moving," Peter suggested, staring off toward the house, barely visible through the trees.

"I don't know," Steadman said. "I'm not sure my toys will make it through that thicket."

Kermit looked up from his lecture on equipment and offered, "There's a gully not far from the edge of the road. You might find that a better launching point."

Steadman nodded once, and turned back to his car to retrieve his goodies.

"I am ready," Caine announced, coming up to stand by Peter.

"You're staying here, Dad," Peter told him.

"I am going with you." He touched the bag slung over his shoulder. "I have medicines for Captain Blaisdell."

"I need you as backup, Dad. If anything goes wrong ... you'll know. You always know. I don't know how you know, but you do. And I know you'll be there for me. Okay?"

"But Captain Blaisdell —"

"We'll get Paul out — I think. You stick by the Chief —"

"Hey, wait a minute, Detective — if you think you're going after the Captain without me —"

"The young man is right, Chief. We need contingencies. We discussed this earlier, if I remember correctly," Steadman reminded equably.

"And you agreed to the plan," Rykker added.



"That's why I'm showing you how all this stuff works, Chief," Kermit pointed out.

"Yeah, but, that was before —"

"Peter's right, Chief. We'll go in — if we get caught, you're our backup. A frontal assault won't work with these guys — they're well-armed, and they're well-trained. This isn't a crack house full of addicts. These are the *real* bad guys. The Captain's best chance is for us to have backup on backup — think of it as redundant systems."

"Redundant!"

"Yeah. NASA uses 'em all the time — failsafes."

"So I am to be a failsafe as well?" Caine asked.

"The best safety against failure," Peter asserted. "You be ready to take care of Paul when we get him back. Okay, partner?" Peter asked, pressing his fist into his palm and bowing slightly to his father.

Caine looked at his son for a long moment, then bowed his head, answering Peter's gesture with his own. "Okay, partner," he agreed.

Strenlich had insisted on moving the truck deeper into the overgrown weeds, bringing it almost to the treeline. Seated at the console controlling Kermit's devices, he held his hands back from fiddling with the dials, switches, and keys, forcing himself to be still. Beside him, Caine simply sat, watching the displays intently.

One camera fed them a panoramic view of the compound, while a second focussed in on the room in which Blaisdell was kept prisoner. Four men patrolled the grounds at regular intervals, and a fifth stood watch at the gate in the small gatehouse. Occasionally, the lights flickered and fell dark, only to grow bright again after thirty seconds. Then they'd flicker again as the main power came back online. Some lights failed to return to full brightness, and Strenlich suspected that the bulbs had blown from the power surges. The lights in Blaisdell's room had come back on each time, but Strenlich couldn't see anything more than a vague figure lying on a large bed. They had no way of knowing at this point exactly what the Captain's condition was, but he was sure it wasn't good.

The third camera was poised on an electric pole further down the road, showing the approach to the compound. Chan's van came into the frame, slowing down as he approached the gate. Strenlich could make out Chan's arm thrusting out of the window, pointing some device at the gates; they swung inward, and Chan turned onto the driveway, pulling up to a stop outside the gatehouse.

There was some conversation exchanged, and Strenlich was frustrated anew at not being able to hear the words. He held his breath as the guard turned toward the rear of the van, but something Chan said must have warned him off, because he turned back to his post and waved Chan on. The gates closed automatically behind the van as Chan drove up to the house, maneuvering into a spot at the far end of the small lot in front of the garage. In a rush, Strenlich expelled his held breath, sagging slightly with relief.

"So far so good. Now they've got to wait for an opportunity to get into the house," he said, knowing the statement was unnecessary, but feeling the need to fill the silence that prevailed inside the van.

Caine nodded beside him. "They must make themselves one with the night. Darkness can be their ally."

"Let's hope so," Strenlich agreed. "I think Kermit's still got a few more tricks up his sleeve."

"As does Peter. As do we."

"Damn straight," Strenlich replied, sparing a glance in Caine's direction. The priest watched the screens intently, betraying nothing of his thoughts. "Doesn't it ever bother you? Peter's relationship with the Captain?" he asked suddenly.

At that, Caine did shift his attention from the monitors to Strenlich. "I am grateful that Captain Blaisdell chose my son," Caine answered softly. "The Captain — Paul — gave Peter what I could not. Peter was alone; Paul gave him a family. Peter was lost; Paul gave him direction." He shrugged, his hand held out,



palm upward. "It would do neither of us honor to deny what has happened. Paul is a part of Peter, as I am. To ... find fault ... with their relationship would be to deny our son."

"Yeah," Strenlich agreed doubtfully. "I guess you're okay, Caine."

Caine smiled at him then, bowing his head. "And you, Chief."

They'd made it through the checkpoint. Kermit and Peter had sat silently in the back of the van, hidden under a musty-smelling sheet, while Chan had persuaded the guard not to "mess with the equipment." It hadn't taken a lot of urging, but for a moment, they'd feared that the guard might press the point, and both detectives had carefully eased their weapons out of their holsters, holding them ready in case they'd had to bully their way into the compound. Peter had the sense that force would have meant failure, but he wasn't about to give up on Paul without a fight.

Now the van was positioned at the far end of the parking area, and Chan had gone into the house. He'd left them with a quick warning to keep out of sight, an unnecessary admonition. After he had gone, Kermit had flung off the sheet, and scooted around to a more comfortable position. He held a small device in his hand, and keyed in a series of numbers, muttered softly to himself as he worked. Outside, the spotlights flickered, dimmed, and went dark. A few seconds later, they flared to life again, bathing the cab of the van in brilliance.

"Rate we're going, the generator'll blow from the surges," Kermit commented, glancing up toward the lights, and then back down again at the gadget in his hand.

"How long're we going to wait?" Peter demanded impatiently.

Kermit looked up and smiled at him. "Didn't your years in the temple teach you patience?"

"Yeah, but my years in the orphanage taught me action," Peter countered.

"A walking paradox, Peter. That's what you are." A soft beep emanated from the contraption in Kermit's hand, and he breathed, "Ah."

"Ah? What's that mean, 'ah'?"

"It means, Peter, that you don't have long to wait."

"Good thing, too."

"We're gonna have to talk about reducing your caffeine intake when this is all over," Kermit observed. "I think you need to think about more herbal tea in your diet."

"You sound like my father. Give me the Ancient's concoctions any day."

"Soothing?"

"100 proof. What's that thing telling you, anyway?"

"It's what I'm telling it, my friend. And it should be answering any minute now ..." He held up his hand to forestall any further protest from Peter, then, as the house lights began to strobe on and off, he gestured toward the front of the van. "Now, I think."

"About time," Peter complained, clambering between the seats and ducking down in the cab.

"Oh, yeah," Kermit agreed, right behind him. "Let's go."

Silently, they opened the door of the van and slipped out. Crouching low, they circled around the van, Kermit in the lead. He halted at the bumper, hand upraised, and waited.

Behind him, Peter chafed at the delay. "Can you see with those glasses on, Kermit?" he hissed.

"Better than you can, boyo," Kermit shot back in a soft growl. Around them, the house and grounds were alternately bathed in light and cast in shadow as power surged and ebbed in the lines. A bulb popped, sounding like the crack of a gun, and Peter fell into a defensive posture. Kermit glanced around and chuckled. "The power surges are blowing out the lights. Just a minute more, Pete."



Another light failed, then another. One of the cameras mounted under the eaves ground to a halt. Inside the house, there were pools of darkness where bulbs had blown. And just as suddenly as the power had begun to fluctuate, it stabilized, leaving the house in semi-darkness. A shadowy path stretched between the garage and the house.

"Chan must have taken the main offline — they're running off the generator now. That's our cue," Kermit urged, and the two of them ran across that darkened plain, both folded low to the ground. They rose up, pressed against the outside wall of the house, just under the failed camera. Punching a series of commands into his toy, Kermit nodded toward Peter, and they began to inch their way around the house, toward the back door.

"Looks like friend Zhulin's having a party," Rykker commented from his position near Steadman.

"And he didn't invite us. How rude. D'you think young Peter and Kermit have made it inside?"

Rykker held his field glasses to his eyes and shook his head. "Can't tell. Too much is in darkness now."

"Then they've got a good chance, old friend. Help me with this, will you?" he asked, gesturing toward his satchel.

They could hear movement inside the house, barked orders and muttered curses as Zhulin and his men rushed to reinstate order to the chaos Kermit had created. Poised to either side of the back door, they waited until the voices receded, and then Kermit reached for the doorknob. The door was held in place by an electronic lock, but it gave easily; either the lock had failed under the onslaught of the power fluctuations, or Chan had left it unlocked when he'd gone out to the generator shed to switch off the main.

They'd just made it in through the back door when the hallway was blocked by several men, including Chan. A big man, broad-shouldered and barrel-chested, spearheaded the group, and halted them all with an upraised hand. His face was heavily scarred, and the elegant cut of his suit was at odds with his wrestler's body. Glancing from Kermit and Peter to Chan, he asked in a heavily-accented voice, "Friends of yours, Mr. Chan?"

Chan's eyes flicked between the police officers and the men surrounding him, his expression shuttered. "They thought so," he answered at last, shrugging. "You never know who your friends are these days, Mr. Zhulin."

Zhulin turned his attention back to the detectives. A slow, humorless smile spread across his pocked features. "Kermit. It has been a long time. A very long time. I assume all this ... petty inconvenience ... is your doing. I should have recognized your work. Stupid of me. No matter — I'm sure that Blaisdell will be delighted to see you." He moved his attention to Peter, and the smile became even broader and more predatory. "And you must be Blaisdell's son. This is excellent. You are to be commended, Mr. Chan. This is exactly the bargaining chip I need to get Blaisdell to cooperate. Especially since Luchian and his men disappeared without bringing me Mrs. Blaisdell." With a peremptory gesture, Zhulin commanded his men to take them.

"Chan, you bastard," Peter swore as Zhulin's men peeled off and surrounded him and Kermit. Large, dull-witted and obedient, they took the pair roughly by the arms, then waited for Zhulin's orders.

"Take them upstairs. Let them join Blaisdell."

As Kermit and Peter were manhandled down the corridor, Chan watched, his face unreadable.

Thick, hard fingers bit into Peter's upper arms, pinching the muscles with a sharp, numbing pain as he and Kermit were pushed up the stairs. Kermit's face had folded into a permanent scowl, and he grumbled to himself about being stupid and cocky. Mind racing, Peter stumbled up the steps, unable to find sufficient balance to shake off his escort.

The only thing that kept him from trying something completely foolhardy was the promise of seeing Paul. Keeping that thought foremost in his mind, Peter allowed himself to be frogmarched down the corridor and thrust into a darkened room. He could hear Kermit's grunt as he, too, was pushed into the blackness. Then



light flared, and he found himself standing warily in a large bedroom, white-washed walls bare of decoration, the only furniture a long, low bureau, a couple of straight-backed chairs, and a large, old-fashioned bed. On the bed, pale even against the white chenille bedspread, lay Paul Blaisdell, part of his face purplish with bruises, blood oozing slowly from a split in his swollen lip, breath coming harshly between those puffy lips.

Peter took a faltering step toward the bed, eyes wild and body coiling with anger. His fists clenched at his sides, a soundless cry of anguish welling up inside him. And then he was nothing but motion, no thought, as he rounded on their guards and rushed head-first for the closest man, ploughing into the man's stomach. He didn't hear Kermit's, "Peter, no!" He didn't see the second man raise his hands, two-fisted, and bring them down forcefully on the back of his head. And then Peter saw nothing, heard nothing, as oblivion took hold.

I

inside the power company truck, Kwai Chang Caine abruptly stiffened, his eyes widening as he clenched his teeth. The sudden movement caught Strenlich's attention, and he tensed at the sight of Caine's intense expression. Then normality returned to the priest's face, and Strenlich leaned back warily.

"What is it?" Strenlich whispered tightly.

"My son," Caine answered, rising from his crouch beside the Chief. He looked beyond the walls of the van, toward the house, his expression grim. "My son needs me."

"Caine —" Strenlich warned, but Caine was already opening the back door of the van, dropping lithely down to the ground. Strenlich got out of his seat, scrambling after the Shaolin. "Caine, wait, we'll go in together —"

Caine was already moving off at a steady lope toward Mott Road, covering the distance to the trees rapidly without appearing to hurry.

"Caine, come back!" The Shaolin did not turn, did not answer, but shifted his satchel on his shoulder and disappeared into the trees. Strenlich raced to catch up, freeing his gun as he ran. He broke out of the trees and found himself yanked down by a hand, turned wildly to face Steadman and Rykker.

"Steady on, old chap," Steadman soothed. "Where's our priestly friend off to?"

"Said Peter needed him — he took off, I tried to stop him —"

"Trying to stop Kwai Chang Caine when he's committed to an action is like trying to stop the change of the seasons," Rykker observed wryly. "Both will do as they must, in their own time."

"Philosophy, old friend? You have hidden depths," Steadman replied.

"Yeah, and Caine's walking into a dangerous situation. We don't know what's happened to Peter, even if something *has* happened. He's not even armed —" Strenlich protested, moving forward to follow Caine.

"He can take care of himself, Chief," Rykker pointed out, wrapping his hand around Strenlich's upper arm. "In ways you and I can't even imagine. We have our own parts to play. Let him play his."

Ahead of them, Caine crossed the road without glancing left or right. Soon he was lost in the trees running alongside the property.

"Y'know, I always thought Peter was headstrong. Now I know where he gets it from," Strenlich muttered to himself.

Chuckling, Steadman replied, "I imagine the boy's gotten it from both fathers. Paul has a stubborn streak, too. Peter never had a chance."

Kwai Chang Caine moved with the rhythm of the night, matching his footsteps to the sounds around him so that he passed in relative silence. He had heard the Chief's protests, but they held no value for him — his son was in danger, and he must go to him. As he made his way through the trees running alongside the property occupied by Zhulin and his men, he listened for the men patrolling the grounds. If he was to get Peter, Kermit and Blaisdell out of the house safely, he must first contend with the guards.



As he had watched the monitors with the Chief, he had noted the pattern used by the guards. There were four watching the perimeter, and rather than containing their interest to one sector of the property, they each made the full circuit, with about a ten minute gap between each pass. Most likely, the cameras Chan had installed swept the area, ensuring that no one could enter the property between patrols. He dismissed the devices; the only thing of concern was the men.

He stood within the shadow of the trees, as still as the trees themselves, and waited for the first guard to pass by. He heard the man long before he came close, and when he was sure the guard was near enough, deliberately stepped on a branch, grinding it under his sandal. The guard, alerted by the sound, halted, calling out softly. Caine made no reply, but stepped back further into the wood, making certain not to mask his movement. He saw the guard peer into the darkness, shake himself, and then, taking a tighter hold on his gun, walk into the thicket.

Caine moved out from behind the shelter of an old tree, blocking the man's path. The guard's expression was mingled surprise and humor; he did not measure Caine as a threat. Caine held his palm against his fist and bowed. The guard merely laughed. With a sigh, Caine stepped into a kick that left the guard sprawled senseless on the ground.

Peter's thoughts were a swirling mass, like the chaos at the dawn of creation. No, that wasn't quite right. In the beginning there was emptiness, and in that emptiness, a random thought created the source, the Tao. And from the Tao, the vast emptiness, sprang everything. He knew he wasn't experiencing that ultimate emptiness, and he knew he wasn't experiencing the technological concept of chaos, so it could only mean one thing. He'd been knocked unconscious. Again.

With that awareness came the awareness of pain, dull but insistent, at the base of his head. Ah. Another knock to the head. He was going to have to consider wearing a helmet on the job. He suffered more head injuries as a cop than he ever did playing hockey with the guys.

The pain focussed his thoughts, focussed the chaos into an ordered reality. And reality was that he was trussed up in a straight-backed chair, his hands secured behind his back, his torso exposed, his chin resting uncomfortably against his sternum. Something jarred him, and he realized that it was a nudge from his right side. A sound intruded, and he recognized it as Kermit's voice, whispering, "Pete! Wake up, Peter!"

Peter's eyes opened, and as the pain moved from the back of his head into his eyes, he regretted his precipitous action. A low groan rose up inside him, and he pressed his lips together to contain it.

"Ah," a voice approved from somewhere to Peter's right. "You are awake. How nice of you to rejoin us, Detective. We really couldn't start without you, you know."

Raising his head carefully, Peter searched for the source of the voice, and pinpointed Zhulin entering from the doorway. The ex-spy master paused and lounged against the wall, his block-like head tilted to one side as he considered his captives.

"You sound like a bad movie, Zhulin. Been watching too much western cinema?" Peter taunted, screwing his eyes shut as he rolled his head to relieve the kinks. The movement almost sent him back into darkness, and it took all his will to remain conscious.

A throaty chuckle answered him. Then Zhulin signalled to one of his men in the corridor to go to Blaisdell, who remained unconscious on the bed. "And I assume that you watch too many action movies, Detective. You assume that your ... smartass? attitude will anger me, and I will make a stupid mistake as a result, no? But movies are not reality, Detective. There is no director to yell, 'Cut!' and there is no cavalry awaiting your signal."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that, Zhulin," Kermit growled.

"Really, Kermit? You're not with the Agency anymore, and Blaisdell's wing shut down years ago. All of the men have moved into public service, have they not? Your own police commissioner, your SWAT chief, a senator. Commendable, no doubt, but you don't have the resources you once did."

"No," Kermit admitted. "I've got better."

A moan from the bed arrested their attention, and Peter strained against his bonds to see Blaisdell.



"Lift him up. Let him see," Zhulin commanded.

Zhulin's man roughly pulled Paul by the upper arms into a makeshift sitting position, earning a gasp and a groan from the injured police captain. Blaisdell's hands flailed uselessly, his head lolling back. Zhulin barked, "Hold him up!" and the hired muscle grabbed Blaisdell's head and held it up in his large hand, moving around to get a better hold on the semi-conscious man.

"Peter!" Blaisdell croaked, and the weakness in his voice sent another wave of pain, beyond the physical level, through Peter. The Captain sagged against his captor. "Kermit ..."

"Haven't you done enough to him? He needs to see a doctor —" Peter demanded.

"Oh, I agree, Detective. Blaisdell's injuries aren't exactly life-threatening, but untended, they could lead to infection, and possibly death. But I have no interest in damaging him further. His will is too strong — he refuses to give me what I want. But you are his son. Not his flesh and blood, but his son nonetheless. A man can withstand any amount of physical abuse, if he wills it. But no father can stand by and watch his son similarly damaged."

"Zhulin, no!" Blaisdell exclaimed, drawing resources from deep within to voice the protest. His whole body seemed to shake from the effort as he continued, "I can't give you what you want — I don't know where Kogan is!"

"He's right, Zhulin — the Captain turned Kogan over and neither of us ever saw him again. We never knew where he was sent — we can't even find out —"

Despite his size, Zhulin could move quickly, and he covered the space between the door and Kermit in an instant, backhanding the computer specialist and sending his head hurtling back with a crack. Zhulin stood over Kermit, shaking with fury, his upper lip curling with anger as he breathed heavily. "I thought you could find anything held anywhere in any computer, Kermit. Are you telling me that this small, unimportant piece of information eludes you?"

Slowly righting his head, Kermit glared up at Zhulin. His glasses had been knocked awry, and blood dribbled down his chin from the corner of his mouth. He shook his head, jarring the glasses back into place, and licked at the blood. "It's not in a computer, Zhulin. You know how Washington works — it's so easy to lose a single piece of information in that mass of bureaucracy."

"Not unlike the disaster left us by democracy poisoning the Soviet Union. But I simply don't believe you, Kermit. One never trusts a wizard."

Zhulin shifted his attention to Peter. He stared at him for a long time, ignoring Blaisdell's protests, Kermit's mutterings. Peter simply held that look, not flinching. The smile Zhulin gave Peter was cold, lifeless. "A brave man, eh? Perhaps. It doesn't matter," Zhulin shrugged. He gestured for another of his goons to join him. "Take care of him." With that, he turned and left the room.

"Zhulin, stop!" Blaisdell yelled after him. "Don't!"

The thug who towered over Peter glanced over his shoulder to the corridor beyond and then back to Peter. He grinned, revealing a deplorable absence of dental work, discolored and broken teeth and an absurdly pink tongue. That tongue flicked over his lips, anticipation lighting his eyes under heavy brows.

"It only hurts if you let it," Peter whispered, then forced himself to relax as the first blow struck.

"**D**amn!" Strenlich swore at the monitor. On the screen before him, he watched impotently as a Neanderthal pummelled Peter Caine with piledriver fists. The resolution wasn't perfect, the range of the camera Kermit had placed strained by the distance, but he could make out enough to know that his detectives were definitely in trouble, and his captain needed him. He could see, just within the frame of the window, Blaisdell being held by another thug. Kermit was out of sight entirely, but he had no doubt that the 101st's resident whiz fared no better than Blaisdell and Caine.

With a string of curses, he catapulted out of the van, heading toward Steadman and Rykker. Rykker met him halfway, warning him to silence, but Strenlich puffed out his news, and the ex-mercenary's face went stony.



"They're not playing fair," was all he said, then led Strenlich back to Steadman.

"I'm just about ready," Steadman answered once he'd listened to Strenlich's explanation. "You two go on — I'll give you aerial backup from here."

Steadman was working over a row of toy planes, a dozen in all, and Strenlich shook his head in disbelief. "Planes? You're going to back us up with toy planes?"

Steadman grinned at the Chief. "Special toy planes, Chief. Carrying a payload guaranteed to ruffle a few feathers. Don't worry — I'll do my bit. You do yours."

"Y'don't need to tell me twice. Let's go," he ordered Rykker. With a wry glance at Steadman, Rykker shrugged and followed the portly Chief of Detectives.

"Not partaking of the spectacle, Mr. Chan?" Zhulin asked conversationally as he entered the surveillance room, which had once been the house's dining room.

Chan looked up from the monitors before him and shook his head. "Not my style. I'm a non-violent sort."

"A strange business for a non-violent man. You were once an enforcer for a Mr. Tan, were you not?"

"I worked for Tan. Running the business. I did a little enforcement, but I didn't enjoy it," Chan replied with a wave of his hand.

"Caine and Griffin claim they are not alone. Have you noticed anything?" Zhulin inquired, nodding toward the monitors.

The technician manning the surveillance room glanced up at Chan, then shook his head to his superior. "No, sir. Nothing."

"It is curious, is it not, that they managed to get into the compound at all. The only vehicle to enter the compound this evening was your van, Mr. Chan. Or perhaps your security precautions are flawed."

"From what I've seen, Caine and Griffin are determined. And Caine's father is a Shaolin priest — they're into all sorts of weird things, magic and stuff. I wouldn't be surprised if he helped them get in," Chan shrugged.

"Indeed. I have heard of this Kwai Chang Caine. You took him prisoner some months ago, along with the Dalai Lama. And yet they managed to slip through your fingers. He is Chinese, as you are — perhaps your loyalties are not so ephemeral after all."

"I'm an American," Chan snapped. "I only look Chinese. An accident of birth — you can't hold me accountable for my genes. As for my loyalties, you paid for them. I'm here to do a job, not fight for some lost cause."

"I see," Zhulin sighed, a vague disappointment passing over his craggy face. "Merely muscle for hire. Well, see that you provide value for the money I am paying you, Mr. Chan — I do not want to find any more ... old friends ... paying us a call. As much as I enjoy seeing Kermit Griffin again, I would not like to see any of his old team members. Not, at least, until I am ready for them." With that, Alexandre Zhulin turned on his heel and exited the surveillance room.

"Love you, too," muttered Chan after Zhulin had gone.

A few minutes later, Chan watched a familiar figure slip out of the woods and start across the empty ground toward the house. "Damn!" he muttered to himself. The technician looked up at him as he reached for the alarm. "No, I don't think so," Chan informed him.

"But, sir —"

"Sorry about this," Chan answered him, and punched the man out cold. Nursing his bruised knuckles, he added to himself, "You owe me, Caine."



Blood dripped from Peter's nose and mouth, and Peter was certain a couple of teeth had been knocked loose. His abdomen felt like it was on fire; with his arms secured behind him, he'd been unable to protect himself as Goonface had pounded him. A couple of times, he'd thought the chair in which he was tied was going to topple, but somehow, it had remained upright, leaving him in prime position for Goonface's ministrations. He'd concentrated on images of the temple, of the quiet, the serenity, and when that had started to fail, he'd focussed on the scent of Arabian jasmine, trying to call up images of his mother. All he'd really gotten was an old Rhonda Fleming movie he'd watched recently on the late show.

Zhulin's men had moved Kermit's chair away from Peter, to give his torturer room to maneuver. Kermit had complained loudly, but Peter had warned him to be quiet; there'd been no need for both of them to get beaten senseless. Paul had been stoic through it all, keeping silent after his initial protest. But Peter could see what it had cost his foster father, and the ache inside was far worse than any physical pain he now suffered. Zhulin had come back at last, demanded information from Blaisdell, and been refused again. Paul simply didn't know the answers to Zhulin's questions.

Zhulin had looked critically at Peter's injuries, then instructed his man to leave him alone, and to leave the injuries untended. It would, he announced, force Blaisdell to suffer further, seeing his son hurt but not cared for. Zhulin ordered Blaisdell propped up with pillows so that he could see his son better. To further facilitate that, he'd left the lights on as he'd exited the room. Peter had felt bile in the back of his throat, not so much from the pain as from his disgust that such a creature could call itself human.

Now the three of them remained, and Paul strained to get up and go to Peter.

"Paul, don't," Peter told him. "I'm okay. I hurt like hell, but I'm okay."

"Peter, you shouldn't have come here," Blaisdell answered, falling back against the pillows. "I never wanted you mixed up with these people. Annie's going to have my head for this."

Peter smiled, immediately regretting it as his face seemed to catch fire. "She knows we're here. And we're not alone."

"You'd better let me do the talking, Peter — you're starting to swell up already," Kermit put in.

"Sounds good to me," Peter replied, touching a split in his lip with his tongue. "I'm not gonna win any beauty contests any time soon."

"Like you could before," Paul chuckled softly. His voice was weaker than it had been before, and Peter felt his heart clench.

"I think the first order of business is to free ourselves," Kermit offered practically. "And then we need to plan our escape."

"You said you're not alone — Caine?" Blaisdell whispered, and Peter had to strain to hear him.

"And Steadman, Rykker, and Strenlich. We thought Chan was with us, but apparently he switched sides again," Kermit added with venom.

There was no reply from the figure on the bed. Peter and Kermit exchanged anxious glances, and Peter called out Paul's name, getting no response.

"I think we'd better hurry," was all Kermit said, and started working at the ropes binding his hands.

"I'm with you," Peter vowed, and started to flex his wrists, stretching the ropes. Once more, he was grateful for the training his father had given him so many years ago, training he had thought useless. Once more, he'd been proven wrong.

The four guards were all lying unconscious in the woods. He had been careful to make them comfortable before leaving them behind, but it had been necessary to remove them from the puzzle. Ahead lay the house, some of its rooms dark, others ablaze with harsh, artificial light. The spotlights arranged around the house created a checkerboard effect, leaving pools of darkness amidst the brightness.

The grass was springy beneath his feet, and its fragrance wafted up to him as he made his way across the lawn. At another time, this would be a pleasant place, far from the noise and congestion of the city,



surrounded by the scents and sounds of nature. Instead of the harmony such a place should hold, it held nothing but conflict. Now, it was the site of a battle, a battle for his son, and the man his son had called father for many years.

No one contested him as he covered the space between the wood and the house, and he came around the back of the house to stand at the door. It was a sturdy door, built in an earlier time with care and craftsmanship. A door a man could be proud to have fashioned. He opened the door and slipped into the corridor.

The first room on his left was the kitchen, smelling of coffee and bad cooking, but otherwise empty. He shook his head; this was a kitchen built for good smells, good food, and good conversation. The heart of the house. The windows looked out onto the fields behind the house and the woods along the side, and in the morning, would capture the sun and hold its light and warmth. Inwardly, he apologized to the house for its misuse, and backed out of the room.

The door to the next room on the hallway was closed. With men such as these, that could only mean a room of some importance. Silently, he opened the door, stepping softly into the room. Banks of television monitors lined one side, marring the simple elegance of the wall. A dark-haired young man sat slumped in a chair by one of the screens, and Caine moved over to him. He touched him at the neck and felt a strong pulse. Not dead, merely unconscious.

He heard a click from behind him, recognized it as a gun, and straightened slowly.

"I wondered how long it would take you to catch up," Chan remarked from behind the door. He pushed it closed as he walked into the center of the room, lowering the gun as he did so.

Caine looked from the unconscious technician to Chan, and the Shaolin's face hardened. "Where is my son?" he demanded.

Chan held up his hands, letting his gun dangle from one finger. "I figured one of us free was better than all of us captured. He's upstairs." He turned back toward the door and paused, pivoting to face Caine. "Coming?"

"If my son is harmed —"

"Nothing a little Shaolin magic won't cure. Zhulin hasn't had time to get really nasty. Are we staying or going?"

"We are going."

Rykkker quickly transferred his arsenal from Steadman's car to the power company truck while Strenlich locked the back of the van and jumped into the driver's seat. As Rykker took the shotgun position, he turned to the Chief and asked, "What's the plan, Chief?"

"Hit and run."

"You don't have one."

"I think fast on my feet," retorted Strenlich.

"That'll have to do. Let's go."

The truck bumped its way backward through the undergrowth to the potholed road, and Strenlich fought with the wheel to maintain control. This was not the easiest terrain in which to maneuver a heavy van. Finally, he eased the truck back over the shoulder and put the vehicle into forward. They were jostled and bruised as Strenlich gunned the motor, sending the van careening down the track.

"I think perhaps speed is less important than actually getting there, Chief. Perhaps you'd better slow down before we break an axle."

Strenlich cast a scowl in Rykker's direction, but complied, bringing the van back to a less precipitous pace. A few minutes later, they reached the intersection with one of the main roads, and Strenlich peeled out onto the roadway.



The sound of footsteps on the floorboards of the hall outside heralded the approach of their jailer. With barely a glance between them, Kermit and Peter both gathered their ropes in their hands and slumped down in their chairs, feigning defeat. The door opened, and Chan stepped into the room. He stood looking at them for a moment, then shook his head. Coming around to the back, he reached for the ropes, saying, "Time to get out of here, guys."

"Why should I trust you?" Peter demanded, his words slurring slightly through his swollen lips as he lifted his head. "You set us up."

"I bought us some time. Besides, I'm not alone," he protested, hooking a thumb toward the doorway.

Caine stepped into the room, warily looking around him. He glanced toward Peter, and their eyes met; Caine took a step toward his son, his face anxious. Peter smiled slightly and shook his head, his eyes shifting toward the bed. Nodding in reply, Caine turned to Blaisdell, stepping up to the bed. He ran his hands over the supine figure of the Captain.

"Never mind, Chan," Peter snapped, pulling his hands away, the ropes dropping to the floor. "How is he?" he directed to his father as he got up and stalked across the room to Caine's side. He clutched at his abdomen when the shock the movement caused registered, but he waved off his father's concerns.

"Weak. But alive." Caine reached into his bag and pulled out the vial of liquid he had prepared earlier. He unstopped it and lifted Blaisdell's head gently, nudging open his lips to dribble some of the fluid into his mouth. Peter held Blaisdell's hand in his, unconsciously caressing the rough skin, willing his own energy into the pale, bruised body of his foster father.

Kermit had also sloughed off his bonds, and now stood, facing an open-mouthed Chan. "Got anything for me?" he asked, putting out his hand and grinning at their would-be rescuer.

Chan handed Kermit his Glock, shaking his head as he muttered, "Why do I bother?"

"Why *do* you bother?" Peter asked, turning around to look at Chan, but not letting go of Blaisdell's hand.

"I owe your mother. Peter, I'm sick of always being in debt to your family," he complained, handing Peter his Beretta.

"Don't hang around so much," Peter replied testily, shoving the gun into its holster.

Blaisdell coughed then, screwing up his eyes as he grimaced at the taste of the medicine Caine had given him. "What the hell —?" he sputtered, his eyes opening. "Peter — Caine!" Peter felt Blaisdell's hand tighten on his, and gave back a reassuring — and reassured — squeeze.

"We're going to get you out of here, Paul. Just take it easy —"

"Yeah, Captain — don't push it, okay?" Kermit encouraged, hurrying to Blaisdell's bedside.

"Kermit. I thought I'd been dreaming," Blaisdell said weakly.

"More like a nightmare. Can he walk?" Peter asked Caine.

Caine brushed back Blaisdell's hair from his forehead, considering his response. "With assistance," he replied at last. "He is weak, and injured — too much strain could cause greater damage. We must move carefully, get him to a place he can heal."

"I sure as hell don't want Annie to see me like this —" Paul cut himself off, looking anxiously at Caine.

Caine nodded. "She is well. The Ancient is with her, as are Skalany and Jody. She is safe."

Blaisdell sagged back against the pillows with relief. "Good. That's good."

"C'mon," Peter ordered, maneuvering himself to take Paul's weight to help him up.

"No," Caine commanded. "I will assist the Captain. You are hurt."

"Nothing a little TLC won't take care of, Pop —"

Caine tilted his head and regarded his son sternly. "No."



"I'll take the other side," Kermit interjected.

"Hey, look, he's *my* f—" Peter cut himself off, casting an anxious glance toward Caine. Caine nodded, and smiled understandingly at the unfinished word "father."

Blaisdell reached up and clumsily patted Peter on the arm, wordless acknowledgement of Peter's worry. "I'd like to make it down the stairs in one piece, Peter. You look almost as bad as I feel."

"Yeah, Pete. You look like last week's hamburger. I'm unharmed."

"A temporary condition, I promise you, Kermit," Zhulin announced from the doorway. He filled the frame with his bulk, but the small handgun in his fist was what drew their attention.

Peter and Caine exchanged glances, and Caine lifted his shoulder in a shrug.

"I mean you no harm," Caine responded, taking a step toward Zhulin.

"I really don't care," Zhulin answered. "Blaisdell stays until he gives me what I want. And so do the others." Zhulin's eyes shifted, and he spied Chan. "Ah. I thought so. Perhaps your loyalties are not so easily bought, after all, Mr. Chan. It would appear that you do, after all, champion lost causes."

"Yeah, well, win some, lose some," Chan quipped philosophically.

The distraction was sufficient for Caine to close the space between him and Zhulin, and he stepped into a kick that connected with Zhulin's gun hand, sending the weapon flying backward, and spinning Zhulin around. Chan leapt up and caught the weapon before it hit the ground, turning it on the Russian.

"And I think you just lost." He brought the butt of the gun crashing down on Zhulin's head, knocking him unconscious.

The guard at the gatehouse heard a high-pitched buzzing sound. He looked at the surveillance monitors, the bank of high-tech equipment, and shuddered. If something was going wrong with the equipment, he had no idea what to do; that was Mr. Chan's job. And he'd pretty much pissed off the security specialist earlier when he'd questioned him about the contents of his van.

As the buzzing grew louder, he realized that it wasn't coming from the monitors, but from somewhere outside the little structure. He glanced out the window, peering upward at what he supposed was the source of the sound. A toy plane, a couple of feet long, its propeller whirring madly, seemed to be coming across the road, banking toward the gatehouse. Nervously, he watched it circle around, dropping lower with each pass, until it was dive-bombing toward the gate. His eyes widened fearfully, and he sat there frozen as the plane seemed to come at him in slow-motion. Then, he slammed his hand down on the alarm, wrenched open the door of the gatehouse, and ran toward the house.

The alarm klaxon wailed insistently as he pelted down the drive. He'd gotten halfway down the drive when the concussion hit, flattening him to the ground. He felt the gravel bite into his face, tasting blood, as the heatwave passed over him, billowing his jacket. His ears ringing from the blast, he heard distantly the creak and subsequent crash of the gates falling inward, torn from their moorings in the perimeter wall. Aching from bruises and gashes along the front of his body, he gingerly raised his head, looked back over his shoulder, and saw the twin headlights of a vehicle bearing down on him, outlined in the flickering flames leftover from the explosion. He rolled quickly to one side, sliding into the cool, dewey grass, and watched, horrified, as a van emblazoned with "County Electric" raced past him, spewing gravel in its wake.

"What the hell was that?" Chan demanded, running to the window to peer out into the night.

"Steadman, I imagine," Kermit answered offhandedly, fitting himself under Blaisdell's shoulder to take on half of the Captain's weight. Caine held up the other side, and between them, they eased Blaisdell off the bed.

The Captain's mouth was a grim line as he struggled to contain the grunt of pain the movement caused him. Peter hovered anxiously, and Kermit snapped, "Get out of the way, Peter — the Captain's not *that* light."

"Sorry," Peter muttered, stepping out of their path. He almost stumbled over Zhulin's unconscious body, and glanced back at Kermit. "What're we gonna do with him?"



"Leave 'im for the Chief. Why should he miss *all* the fun?"

At that moment, the Chief was having some fun of his own. Steadman had ensured their entry into the compound by launching one of his planes at the main gates, providing a satisfactory explosion and a clear path into the house. The gatehouse, caught in that first explosion, still burned brightly. A second plane had impacted an area in front of the house, more for show than for any specific target, followed by a third to the side of the house. A fourth buzzed the house, circling the building as though searching for something. The threat of an explosion in the house had been enough to force the men inside to surrender, and Strenlich had his hands full dealing with the men, babbling to him in several ex-Soviet dialects, begging to be arrested. The plane had come to rest safely right in front of the main door to the house, but the payload still strapped to its fuselage invited the men to give it a wide, respectful berth.

"Here, you handle 'em for a minute — I'm calling this in," Strenlich ordered Rykker, then scrambled back into the cab of the van.

Shrugging, Rykker hefted his automatic weapon and trained it on Zhulin's hirelings, causing an immediate halt to the chatter. "So," Rykker began with a sly smile, "can anyone direct me to Captain Blaisdell's room?"

As one, the men pointed to the upper front room.

Blaisdell grunted with the effort of putting one foot in front of the other as Caine and Kermit guided him down the stairs. Peter felt an answering pang at each suppressed complaint, willing his own ebbing strength into his foster father's weary and battered body. Behind him, Chan followed, strangely silent. Peter didn't have the time or the energy to concern himself with the shifting colors of Chan's coat right now, but later, he'd sort it all out.

Outside, the sounds of explosions had stopped, although he could hear many voices raised in cacophonous protest. The house itself was empty, and before long they were standing at the front door.

The sight that met them was something out of a movie. Flames still licked at the gatehouse and perimeter wall where the gate had been blown inward. A space ten feet across had been gouged out of the front lawn where another of Steadman's toys had hit, and near the door sat a plane, intact but apparently still dead. A group of burly men, hands raised, milled in a clump directly ahead, and Peter could just make out Rykker standing watch over them, weapon in hand. The Chief jumped out of the van and rushed over to join them.

"Captain, are you all right?" he asked anxiously.

"I've seen better days, Chief. But I've never been happier to see you," Blaisdell wheezed. Caine shifted his grip on Blaisdell, taking on more of his weight as the Captain appeared to droop. "What's the situation?"

"Black and whites on their way. Broderick's planning to put in some OT tonight to process these guys personally. Paramedics are en route, too." To Peter he directed, "You look like hell, Detective. Are we secure?"

"Thanks. Zhulin's up in the front bedroom. Don't know if anyone else is left in the house," Peter reported.

"Technician in the surveillance room," Chan added. "He's probably waking up about now."

Steadman's car glided through the remains of the gate at that point, and Kermit chipped in with, "And the gang's all here. Hope he's got some handcuffs — I lost mine."

By the time the paramedics arrived, just behind the police patrol cars, Blaisdell was feeling a little stronger. Caine had given him more of that foul-tasting brew, and had done something arcane with some of his worst wounds; he could still feel that strange heat where Caine's hands had touched him. It was as though somehow Caine had transferred some of his own potent life energy into Blaisdell's aching body, and he felt oddly energized by the experience. Finally, he'd waved Caine off, telling him that anything Caine didn't attend to, the paramedics would, and to look after Peter.

Peter had stuck close through the entire examination, if examination it could be called. He'd fluttered worriedly around him, generally getting in Caine's way, apologetic and fearful. Blaisdell had to admit that he'd liked being the center of Peter's attention, had missed that since Caine's return into their lives.



Blaisdell knew that Caine had ... well, weird powers. He was a healer, and Blaisdell's respect for that healing ability increased even more the longer the Shaolin worked on his injuries. The gentleness of Caine's ministrations had touched him, and he'd grabbed Caine's hand to whisper a fervent thank you. Caine had merely bowed and murmured something he hadn't quite caught.

Now he tended to his son ... no, *their* son, Caine had insisted. Zhulin's goon had done a good job messing up Peter's smooth young face. Caine applied some sort of salve to the worst of the cuts, dabbing something onto Peter's swollen lips. None of the marks would leave disfiguring scars, Caine had assured them both. That was something, he supposed. Although Annie could not see with her eyes, her fingers were incredibly sensitive, and any change to their son's face would be readily apparent to her questing fingers.

A blanket over his shoulders, Blaisdell leaned against the inside wall of the back of the power company van, watching his men ... no, his friends, he corrected himself ... clean up. Peter was already impatiently chomping at the bit to get back to work, while Strenlich ordered the uniforms to round up all of Zhulin's men and start reading them their rights before packing them off in the wagon.

Steadman came up to him then, reaching out his hand as he leaned on his cane with the other. "How are you feeling, old friend?"

"Better. Thank you, John," Blaisdell answered sleepily. Was it weariness, or something Caine had given him?

"Any time. Although, I imagine your lady wife might have something to say about it."

"Annie! Has anyone —"

"Just got off the phone with her. Told her Caine was looking after you, and she calmed down after that. Your people are still with her; so is the Ancient. It appears he's been giving them all t'ai chi lessons today. You'd better watch yourself — next time you get into trouble, it may be your wife who comes to the rescue."

Blaisdell chuckled at the thought. "What makes you think she doesn't do that every day?"

Steadman smiled warmly at his old friend, and nodded. "You're good together. I knew I did the right thing, introducing you all those years ago."

"They've been good years. The best," Blaisdell agreed, his eyes slowly drooping shut.

"You'd best let the EMTs take you in hand, old man. A little sleep'll do you wonders."

"Hmm-mmm," Blaisdell replied, feeling the gentle hands of the paramedics urging him to his feet and guiding him to a stretcher.

Just then, a civilian car drove up the driveway, parking in a spot that blocked the exit of the ambulance. Peter roused himself and stormed over, yelling at the driver. Caine paused and then followed a few steps behind. Sleepiness sloughed off as Blaisdell recognized the driver as Vince Crawford. He shrugged off the paramedics and took a faltering step toward the car.

"I think you'd better lean on me," Steadman offered, coming up alongside Blaisdell. Kermit, who had been working with the Chief, suddenly materialized on his other side, and with that escort, Blaisdell made his way to join Peter and Crawford. Caine stood by a few feet away, listening to the exchange and observing Crawford with watchful eye.

"I told you we didn't need you," Peter was saying, glaring at Crawford.

"I must admit I'm impressed — but then, I've been impressed with you for a while now, Detective. You're a natural," Vince replied suavely. He glanced over to where the trio picked their way toward him. "Paul. None the worse for wear, I see."

"No thanks to you, Vince," Blaisdell acknowledged grimly. "What're you doing here? I thought we discussed —"

"Oh, we did," Crawford waved him off airily. "I know how you feel, Paul. I just don't happen to agree with you."



Zhulin was being escorted by a uniform to the wagon when he spied Crawford, and he struggled to free himself from the officer. He called out Crawford's name, and a flicker of annoyance crossed Crawford's face. Blaisdell looked between the two men, and signalled for the officer to bring Zhulin over. Something about the exchange intrigued him. Beside him, Kermit stiffened, as though about to spring.

"You know each other," Blaisdell directed to Zhulin.

"Of course we know each other," Zhulin snapped. He glared at Crawford, who watched him with an expression of distaste. "I don't know what your game is, but it's a dangerous one you play with men like this."

"Kogan's dead, Zhulin. He died five years ago of cancer. Your revenge is impotent," Crawford replied impatiently.

"Dead? You told me it was Blaisdell who knew where he was, Crawford. You are the one who knew all along — you lied to me!"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Zhulin. I think you've had some bad vodka, Comrade."

"I know what he's talking about," Kermit supplied, nodding to the Captain as he left his side. "I made some phone calls after we ran into each other this afternoon." To Blaisdell, he added, "Seems our old friend here is on indefinite leave from the Agency. Pending an investigation. I did find someone who knew a little more — apparently Vince has been trying to get support for that crazy idea he's always had of an assassination squad. In fact, he started to put one together, funded from his own money. Money that came from supposedly questionable sources." He glanced meaningfully toward Zhulin.

"That's hearsay," Crawford dismissed. "You know as well as I do it's inadmissible in court."

"Since Vince wasn't on active duty when he sent you on assignment, I think we can probably put together a pretty good case. In fact," Kermit added with an intensely sour expression directed at Crawford, "I suspect friend Crawford here set you up, Captain."

Zhulin eyed him with calculated hatred. "Hearsay, you claim. But eyewitness testimony, dated records ... these are admissible, are they not?"

"Sure they are, but —" Peter answered.

"Then you have your evidence, gentlemen. Recordings, video ... it's all in the safe in the house." He turned toward Blaisdell and bowed slightly. "Reparation, if you will."

Blaisdell gritted his teeth, but nodded just the same. As an operative or as a police officer, deals were part of the reality. No matter how personally distasteful the deal might be, they had Zhulin, and they could have Crawford, too. He turned back toward Crawford. "Commerce with a known KGB operative, Vince ... treason carries a high penalty."

"A man who betrays his friends has no honor," Caine interjected softly. "Your evil has consumed you."

"Let's be satisfied with conspiracy to commit kidnapping for the moment," Kermit offered, and Zhulin inclined his head in acknowledgement. "That'll put Vince on ice until we can get things set up with the guys in D.C."

"You can't arrest me, Kermit —"

"No? I can," Peter suggested, his face set. He put his hand out to the uniformed police officer, who glanced at the hand, then put a pair of handcuffs into it. "Thanks." He stepped up to Crawford and started the Miranda warning. "You have the right to remain silent ..." Blaisdell could swear that Peter was about to cheer as he locked the cuffs on Crawford's wrists. Hell, he felt like doing it, too.

The last of the black and whites was pulling out, following behind the wagon and its load of Zhulin's men. Blaisdell had been taken to the hospital by the paramedics, but when they'd also suggested that Peter come along, he'd waved them off, promising to meet them there. Strenlich was boarding the power company truck, Kermit at the wheel, while Steadman and Rykker got into Steadman's car. The house was



quiet now, the flames died to embers, and the sounds of nightbirds and crickets filled the cool night air. The only people left were Peter, Caine, and Chan.

"I'm surprised you stuck around," Peter was saying to Chan.

"Wanted to see how it all turned out. You got your foster father back, you're okay, Zhulin's men are arrested ... came out pretty well, I guess."

"So tell me, Chan — when Zhulin took Kermit and me prisoner — you were just acting, right? I mean, you weren't really setting us up? Were you?" he asked, the last sentence a challenge.

It was Caine who answered. "When the choice mattered, Chan chose wisely."

"If you mean I chose the winning side, you're right. To tell you the truth, I'm not sure what I was doing. It didn't make any sense for all three of us to be captured — a hero, I'm not. At least, not a stupid hero."

Peter stared at him for a long moment, then thrust out his hand. "You did okay."

Chan looked at the hand, then grasped it. "You, too."

"All of us ... did as we were meant to do," Caine added.

"C'mon, Chan, you can give my father and me a ride to my car."

"I will walk," Caine announced.

"Pop, I'm gonna stop off at the hospital — Annie'll be there —"

"I will meet you there," his father replied, moving off down the road. "And do not call me 'Pop'," he called over his shoulder.

"What'd I tell you? A strange old dude."

"You don't know the half of it," Peter agreed, watching his father disappear into the night. "Let's go."

"Mrs. Blaisdell, the Captain's just been brought in. Shall I take you to him?" Skalany asked softly, tapping Annie on the shoulder.

Annie's hand reached up and caught Skalany's, squeezing it. "Yes, please."

Annie rose, and Skalany guided her to the emergency room, seeking out the gurney on which Blaisdell lay. She brought her up to Blaisdell, smiled down at the captain, and said, "Glad to see you're okay, sir," then stepped back to allow Annie and Blaisdell's reunion in private.

"Oh, Paul, you had me so worried," Annie told him, crushing his hand between hers. He lifted his other hand and touched her face.

"I was a little worried, too, Babe. But Peter and his friends were looking out for both of us," he replied with a smile that she felt with her fingers.

"Peter — where *is* Peter?" she asked, lifting her head to listen for the voice she knew so well.

John Steadman came up beside her. "He's on his way. He needs to get checked out, too. Perhaps you and your son can be roommates, Paul."

"Peter's hurt? You let Peter get hurt?" she demanded, slapping at Steadman's arm.

Steadman chuckled. "Since when can anyone stop that boy of yours? He's a little banged up, but he'll be fine. His father's been looking after him."

"Caine's not here," she said.

"How can you tell?" Blaisdell asked.

She smiled down at him. "I can see him — his aura, I suppose. I always know when Caine's nearby. Just as I always know when you are."



A nurse stepped up to them and cleared her throat. "Excuse me, but the doctor's ready to examine Mr. Blaisdell."

"I love you. Feel better, Paul," Annie told him, gripping his hand once more before letting go and stepping back to allow the nurse access to his gurney. "Because when you do, you and I are going to have a long talk about these trips of yours."

In the end, Peter wasn't surprised that Chan followed him to the hospital. He knew it had nothing to do with him — Chan, like every other man he'd ever known, had been enchanted by Annie, and was drawn to her like the proverbial moth. Only Annie wasn't a flame. Annie was more like a ... a waterfall. Musical, brilliant in the sunlight, refreshing, life-giving. Whatever magic she worked, she'd worked it on Chan, and he was only a few steps behind as Peter came into the waiting room.

The Chief wasn't there, nor was Kermit; they'd gone to the precinct to oversee the booking and processing of Zhulin, Crawford, and Zhulin's men. Steadman was there, sitting right next to Annie, and from the smile on her face, Peter knew that they were reminiscing about the good old days. It was strange to see Steadman with his mother, even now, even knowing that it was Steadman who'd introduced Paul and Annie so many years ago. Although he'd only met Steadman a few times, Steadman had always seemed part of Paul's world, and yet he was as much part of Annie's as any of her friends. It was curious that Steadman had never been part of his own world until just recently, but he suspected there were many friends of his foster parents he'd never met.

Rykker had somehow excused himself, since he was nowhere in evidence, and Skalany and Powell had also disappeared. The Ancient sat on Annie's other side, chuckling softly at the story Steadman told. There was an easy familiarity among them, and Peter stood for a moment watching his mother enjoy the company of two friends.

She looked up suddenly, her face tilted directly toward him, and he felt, as he often did, that little thrill of surprise that she could find him without sight. But she did see. Not with her physical eyes, but with her soul. And, as if she'd touched him from across the room, he felt the warmth of her love.

"Peter!" she greeted, holding out her hands to him. He crossed the room and knelt before her, taking her hands in his. Kissing her on the cheek, he murmured, "Love you, Mom."

"I love you, too, honey." She caressed his face, felt the bandages and lumps there, and frowned. "You'd better see the doctor, Peter. John told me you'd gotten hurt."

"My dad patched me up. I'm all right."

"Actually, you're barely standing at this point, bro," Chan squealed on him from the entranceway. "The way you've been walking, I'll bet you have a cracked rib or two."

"Tattletale," Peter accused over his shoulder.

"Hey, somebody's gotta look out for you — you don't do such a good job on your own."

"Chan's right, Peter. I'm fine — John and Lo See will look after me, Paul's under sedation — take care of yourself. For me?"

He kissed her again and said, "Okay. Don't leave without me."

"Never. Now go!"

Peter got up and went, but not before giving Chan a mock punch to the gut as he passed.

"Some people are never grateful," Chan muttered to himself after Peter had gone, then sauntered over to join Annie and her entourage. As he sat down on the coffee table, he nodded toward the Ancient, who watched him warily.

"You have found a new path, Mr. Chan, have you not?" the old man asked enigmatically.

"If you mean I've turned over a new leaf, maybe," Chan shrugged.



"Perhaps." Then the Ancient smiled at him, a beatific smile which warmed Chan in a strange way. "Perhaps there is hope yet."

"There's always hope," Annie asserted, reaching for Chan's hand. "Thank you for your help. For my husband and my son — thank you."

As Chan leaned forward to kiss Annie on the cheek, he heard Steadman say speculatively, "Perhaps, indeed."

A week later, Blaisdell returned to work, still pale, still moving slowly, but looking much better than any of the uniforms who'd assisted at Zhulin's compound remembered. He stepped out of Peter's car and breathed in the air, savoring it, feeling a keen sense of pleasure to be returning to the precinct.

During his stay at the hospital, Strenlich had stopped by daily, bringing him news of the ongoing legal tangle resulting from the arrest of Zhulin and his men. The State Department had finally stepped in, further complicating matters, and it looked like it would take weeks before the jurisdictional muddle was resolved. Paul had promised Frank he'd look into it when he got back, and made a few calls to contacts in Washington from his hospital room. By the time Paul had gone home, Frank had announced suspiciously that the red tape had cleared, and the District Attorney's office was processing the men for trial for a list of felonies a mile long.

Kermit had come by often, and the day after the raid on Zhulin's compound, briefed him on Crawford's disposition, assuring him that no one at the Agency had any interest in exonerating their old contact. Crawford had been dismissed from the Agency, and now awaited trial for a surprisingly large roster of charges.

Paul had been able to discuss with Kermit things he couldn't broach with most of the others, details that would remain between them, as so many other details had over the years. Not for the first time, he realized how much he relied on that history between them, how important it was to him to have someone close at hand who understood. Kermit had taken in stride Paul's account of Annie's dressing down, and reminded him of a similar encounter he'd had with one of his wives. Paul had laughed at that; the thrice-married Kermit had consistently managed to find and lose good women, and they'd all remained friends. For him, there was only one, and he'd do what it took to keep her.

Annie had stayed close, using the recliner provided by the hospital in his room so she could sleep there. She'd had the good sense to stay out of the way of the hospital staff, and had kept quiet about her opinions on Paul's care. By the time he'd been discharged, Annie was a popular favorite among the nursing staff, and had started stopping by the children's ward to read stories from braille storybooks.

Skalany and Powell had both dropped in on him while he'd been in the hospital, and Skalany had been particularly quiet when they'd come in. He learned later from Frank that she'd been informed just how much Annie had hated being dubbed "Mrs. B." At Annie's insistence, she started calling her by her first name, and when Annie had concluded with an invitation to dinner, Skalany's penance was complete. Both of his detectives had looked to him for guidance, and he'd simply seconded Annie's invitation. Considering the number of people unofficially involved in his rescue, he might just have to start planning a barbecue at the house to express his thanks.

Caine had visited once, to ensure that Blaisdell was receiving adequate care. He'd brought more potions, and this time he'd taken precautions to flavor them so that Paul could actually stomach them. While Annie had been with the children, Caine had talked to him for a while, in that strange, halting manner of his, about his health. He'd finished by inviting Blaisdell to come by his apartment in Chinatown for tai chi lessons. Failing that, Caine had offered to design a diet for Blaisdell that would help him cut down his cholesterol. Considering what Peter had told him of Caine's eating habits, he hoped Annie didn't catch wind of the suggestion, or he'd be eating rice for the rest of his life.

Even Chan had wandered in one day, carrying flowers that were more likely for Annie than for him. At first, he'd thought Chan was simply smitten with her, until he'd noticed that same hungry, needy look that Peter sometimes wore when he looked at Annie. He'd asked Peter about Chan later, and learned that he'd lost his mother several years earlier. Annie had picked up yet another stray, it would appear. If it helped Chan straighten out his life and keep on the right track, he supposed it was a small price to pay.



Peter, of course, had been nearby almost constantly, finally earning himself a reprimand from Strenlich. Not that Frank didn't understand, but he, like Paul, knew that Peter needed discipline. He hadn't officially requested compassionate leave, and once he'd been cleared for duty, he should have reported to the precinct and stayed there. Nothing would show up on his record, but Peter had learned a lesson. For now, at least.

As Blaisdell leaned on the cane given to him by John Steadman, he took one more look at the facade of the precinct, then followed Peter up the steps.

"Need a hand?" Peter asked as they made their way through the main doors.

"Do I look like a cripple to you?" Blaisdell teased.

"Well, now that you ask ..."

"Careful. I'm still your commanding officer. Annie bullies me enough without help from you — let me get around on my own for once."

"Yes, sir," Peter replied with an affectionate grin.

Paul returned the grin and reached for Peter, cuffing him on the back of the neck and squeezing. "No hugs on official property. But I'll collect later."

"I'll be ready. Sir."

As uniformed and plainclothes officers passed by, they greeted Blaisdell warmly, some even saluting. A group waited by the elevator, but when the car arrived, they stepped back to allow Peter and Paul privacy. As the elevator doors closed, Paul saw the grins of pleasure on his people's faces, and if ever he doubted his decision to go into police work, he knew that moment would come back to remind him.

The elevator opened onto the booking room, and Broderick glanced up and saw them, snapping to attention. "Welcome back, sir!" he called out, saluting.

"At ease, Sergeant," Blaisdell chuckled. "Glad to be back," he added with a smile.

When he entered the squad room, he was faced with a phalanx of his detectives, who broke into a cheer at the sight of him. He was beginning to get choked up, and it was only Peter's hand on his elbow, steering him through the crowd, that helped him get to his office without betraying his emotion.

He fell into his chair heavily as Peter closed the door behind him. "Welcome back, Captain," Peter said, grinning.

"Feels good to be back," he sighed. He rubbed his hand across his face and nodded. "Thanks. For everything."

"Any time."

"Now get back to work, Detective," he added, unable to contain his smile.

"Yes, sir. Oh — don't forget, we're having lunch at Steadman's this afternoon. Frank's meeting us there."

"I'll even let you drive," Blaisdell retorted. "Now get out of my office and let me get some work done!"

Paul was silent on the drive out to Steadman's, and Peter allowed him that silence. He looked tired, and Peter thought that maybe he'd returned to work too soon. But he also knew that when Paul Blaisdell decided to do something, no one could stand in his way, with the possible exception of Annie.

She'd taken the opportunity to fuss over them both over the past week, insisting that he move back home for a few days after his release from the hospital. He hadn't minded; with tape on his torso securing two cracked ribs, he wasn't able to do housework too easily, and having Mom ready, willing and able to make his bed for him had been a blessing. Since the death of his occasional cleaning lady, Rosa Lopez, at the hands of the Shadow Assassin, Peter had depended on his own somewhat hazy housekeeping skills at home. Annie had made certain to make all his favorite foods, not a grain of rice anywhere in evidence, except the night his father came over for dinner. And living at his parents' house had eliminated any



discussion with Kelly Blaine about staying over. Truth be told, he still ached a little too much in too many places to think seriously about amorous encounters. For the moment, anyway.

Paul's return home had been joyous, but the discussions behind closed doors, the hushed voices and raised protests ... he'd found reason enough to go out when Annie and Paul had closeted themselves to have that "little discussion" Annie had promised. Paul was running on a short leash right now, not just as a result of his injuries, but because Annie would brook no argument. And with Vince Crawford, Paul's contact at the Agency, under arrest, Paul might just have gotten himself a long-term vacation from Agency business. Then again, Peter himself had taken a call from another man calling from Washington, and Paul had been grumpy and ill-tempered for the rest of the day.

Right now, his foster father rested his forehead against the window of the car, looking out at the passing landscape with a serene expression on his face. Peter could appreciate the sentiment; he too, had moments when he was simply, completely, happy to be alive. And in those moments, he found the world such a wonder, it brought tears to his eyes. At moments like those, he couldn't help but think about his father, and the quiet awe with which he held the world. Perhaps there was a little of Kwai Chang Caine in his son, after all.

Steadman's pub was just up ahead, and Peter announced the fact in case Paul had started to doze off. Paul shifted in his seat, straightening, and murmured a hazy reply.

Chan was waiting in the bar when they came in. Peter looked quizzically at his erstwhile "partner," and Chan shrugged.

"Steadman said I had potential — thought I might be able to contribute something. I'm also learning the restaurant business," he answered cryptically.

"Well, it beats prison," Peter replied.

"Anything beats prison," Blaisdell observed. "Well, almost anything."

Peter felt his stomach lurch at the reminder; Paul had been in prison, despite the lack of bars. Zhulin had been a brutal jailer, and it would take time for them both to heal. Peter had only been in his hands a little more than an hour or two, and it would be weeks before he healed completely. Paul had been Zhulin's captive for more than a week ... how long would it take for him to lay to rest the ghosts that must surely haunt him?

"I'm glad to see you looking so fit, sir," Chan greeted, coming up to Blaisdell with his hand held out.

Blaisdell grasped the hand and shook it warmly. "I find it a little strange to be thanking you, but I thank you just the same. Without your help ... well," he sighed, "let's just say you increased the odds in my favor."

"Your wife is a persuasive woman, Captain," Chan answered.

Blaisdell laughed out loud. "That she is, Mr. Chan. That she is."

Steadman poked his head out from the private dining room, beaming at Paul. "Paul! You're looking much better — must be Annie's nursing. And young Peter — you're looking well, too. Come on, come join us!"

Chan stepped back and bowed, waving them toward the dining room.

"Aren't you joining us?" Peter asked.

"Of course he is," Steadman asserted. "Katya will look after the bar, Mr. Chan."

"Katya?" Peter repeated.

"Yes, Katya," replied a female voice. She strode into the room and planted herself in front of Peter, her fists on her hips as she glared up at him. He stared down at her, his eyes wide.

"I'm surprised you can show your face around here, Peter Caine," she challenged.

"Hey, I was invited," he protested, his hands raised placatingly.



"Not by me, you weren't," she pointed out vehemently. The tensing of her shoulder muscles warned him of the swing before her fist sliced through the air, and he ducked, feeling his hair ruffle in the wake of that swing.

"Not as fast as usual, but you're recovering," she observed with satisfaction, and moved off to the bar.

Peter was so surprised at her reaction that he lost his balance, falling out of his crouch onto his backside.

"All is forgiven, I see," Steadman said brightly. "Shall we?"

"If that's her idea of forgiveness ... man, I miss the days when women just slapped me!" Peter complained, his breath hissing between his teeth as pain from the injured ribs reminded him that dodging punches was not a good idea.

"Ever the ladies' man, eh, Peter?" Blaisdell chuckled, leaning heavily on his cane.

"C'mon, I just cleaned that floor," Chan admonished, extending a hand to Peter to help him up.

"What, manual labor — you?"

"Exposure to your father has opened me to new experiences," Chan replied with a wave of his other hand.

Peter grasped the hand Chan extended, and held tight as Chan hauled him to his feet. Peter stumbled, gasping as his ribs made their presence more acutely known, and he found himself clinging to Chan for support.

"Don't read anything into this Caine, but you're right — definitely Princess Leia," Chan said loud enough for only Peter to hear.

Peter righted himself and grinned. "Watch yourself, or you'll find yourself encased in carbonite."

"I'll count on you to rescue me, then."

"Putting yourself in debt again?"

"Maintaining the balance."

Peter clapped Chan on the shoulder and nodded. "Trust the Force." Then they turned, Peter moving gingerly, toward the dining room.

Blaisdell followed them, shaking his head and chuckling softly to himself.

As they entered the dining room, Steadman rose from his seat, holding up a fluted glass of bubbling, pale gold liquid. Chan turned and picked up glasses for Peter and Blaisdell, then retrieved one for himself. Around the table sat Rykker, Strenlich, Kermit and Caine, each holding a glass like Steadman's.

"To friends, old and new," John Steadman toasted, his sunny face tinged with seriousness as his eyes met Blaisdell's.

"That's something I can drink to," Peter agreed, lifting his glass in unison with the others.

"Hear, hear," Blaisdell murmured, his voice unsteady with emotion.

Chan smiled a lopsided smile, clearly feeling out of place. Peter nudged him with his elbow, and raised his glass encouragingly. Chan's smile grew, and he winked at Peter.

"True friendship is a rare harmony," Caine offered, his glass held delicately in his hand. "Like the blending of perfectly tuned instruments ... or the natural flow of a fine dragonswing," he added, nodding toward Peter.

"Oh, yeah," Kermit agreed emphatically, and beside him, Rykker inclined his head in appreciation. Strenlich did a doubletake, then brought his hands together to applaud Caine's words.

Peter smiled, warmed by the approval in his father's eyes. Then he realized that his father held a glass of champagne, and he frowned, saying, "Pop, you don't drink."

"Ah. I do not, no. But, today, I do — to the health and well-being of my friends," Caine answered with a shrug.



"And don't call him 'Pop'," Blaisdell completed, straight-faced, then started to chuckle at Peter's shocked expression. The others burst into laughter, and after a blushing moment, Peter joined in.

"Like I said, bro — damned confusing," Chan told Peter, clinking his glass against Peter's.

For a moment, Peter let himself enjoy the pleasure of having both of his fathers close at hand. Having so many friends, old and new, he reminded himself, was an added bonus. "I wouldn't have it any other way," Peter answered, grinning foolishly.