

ICE OUT

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For:

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Geraldo Lunas Campos

Víctor Manuel Díaz

Parady La

Renee Nicole Good

Luis Beltrán Yáñez–Cruz

Heber Sánchez Domínguez

Alex Pretti

murdered by ICE

The time is always right to do what is right.
-Martin Luther King, Jr.

ICE OUT

Once upon a time. That's how Joe's Jilly likes to start a story. She says it relaxes the listener with its air of familiarity and how it seems to promise a happy ending no matter how tragic a turn the story might take.

So...

Once upon a time this part of the world was green and the old growth forests ran from hilltop to mountain in undulating waves. There were only the animals and my people, the cousins, who sometimes wore their animal shapes but were the first on this land walking upright on two legs. We hunted and fished, told our stories, fucked in the sunshine and under the moon's light, laughed and cried and danced. Our only coin was our word and we took measure of each other by how we cared for the beauty surrounding us.

I wasn't there when the first real five-fingered beings appeared, locked in their one shape. Some of the cousins think we should have culled them as soon as they came, the way you'd pull a carcass out of a creek so that it doesn't spoil the water. Some of us still think we should. Some of us retreated into otherworlds, untouched by this particular blight, even if those worlds had challenges of their own.

Because nothing's perfect.

Storms and mud slides, earthquakes and forest fires. Natural

disasters have always caused untold damage. But these kinds of things are amoral. They don't choose to bring pain and suffering, they just are.

In all the worlds, only the five-fingered beings make that choice. They literally created the concept of evil through their thoughts and deeds. This old wolf knows they're not all like that. They would have killed themselves and this world a long time ago if that was the case. But the ones that embrace their baser tendencies grow like a cancer in an otherwise healthy body, ultimately consuming the host.

Their dominion over others waxes and wanes, like one season turning into another. But when they rise they feed on goodwill and hope, gnaw on the world around them until it feels like nothing could ever survive.



A LITTLE PAST midnight Commander Leith Miller woke suddenly in his hotel bed. He sat up, gaze darting around the room until it settled on me standing at the foot of his bed.

"Who the fuck are you?" he demanded.

His hand inched towards his pillow as he spoke.

"Hands where we can see them," Joe said.

Miller's head whipped in the direction of the voice to see Joe standing in the shadows beside the window drapes. He drew his hand back from the gun under his pillow. Both Joe and I could smell it there.

"Do you have any idea who you're fucking with?" he said.

He was in better shape than I'd expected. Broad shoulders with a weight lifter's arms and abs. He had a military buzzcut, and while his jaw was weak, his eyes were hard, cold and grey. I could see him working through the situation, analyzing it like the kind of guy who'd really resent being put in this position, but was smart enough to bide his time till he could see where things stood.

"Of course we do," I said. "Why else do you think we'd be here?"

"Why *are* you here?"

"Maybe we're looking to sign up to your little shit parade. I mean, \$100k salary, \$45k signing bonus. Sounds like a sweet deal."

Miller's eyes narrowed. "Yeah, I doubt that. More 'n likely you're just another radical trying to prove some leftwing antifa bullshit point.

But it's not going to work. All you've done is brought a world of trouble down on yourselves."

I glanced at Joe. "You hear that? We're in a world of trouble."

"Stop playing with the toy soldier," Joe said. "We've got a long night ahead of us."

I gave him a nod before returning my attention to Miller.

"We're here to make you an offer," I said.

"You don't get to make offers, asshole."

I ignored that.

"Stand down," I told him. "Get out of the city and don't look back."

He laughed. "Oh yeah? Or what?"

"You get to find out firsthand what it feels like to be disappeared."

He responded by rolling off the bed, hand going for the gun under the pillow. I was on him before he could pull it out. He struggled to break free of my grip, eyes widening when all those hours spent in the gym did nothing. He swung a leg at me, trying to throw me off balance, so I broke his arm. Snapped it like a twig and just like that the tough guy was gone.

He cried out and went limp.

"My arm." The words came out like a moan. "You broke my fucking arm."

"It'll heal."

I kept him pinned down and looked to Joe.

"You want me to take him?" I asked.

"Take me? Take me where? You broke my arm. You better be taking me to a fucking hospital."

"Nah," Joe replied to me as he ambled over.

He put a hand on Miller's shoulders and stepped him away into the otherworld, returning a moment later by himself.

"I told you it'd be a waste of time," he said.

I nodded as I got up from the floor. "I felt I had to try. Otherwise I'd be just as bad as them."

"Nothing's as bad as people like them," Joe said.

After that we went room by room through the hotel where Miller's men had been barracked and removed each of them to the pocket world our friend Christiana had carved for us in the otherworld. When we'd cleared all the rooms we went down to the bar where another dozen or so of them were holding court, laughing and

drinking. They were the only ones still up except for the hotel bartender.

Our dark skin got their attention when we entered. They were out of their “uniforms”—dressed in just their camouflage cargo pants and army green T-shirts for the most part—but I guess they figured they didn’t need body armour and batons to take out just the two of us.

They were wrong.

In quick order they were disappeared to join the ones from the rooms upstairs. We took them away four at a time, each of us manhandling a pair. When we came back from our final trip the bartender was staring at us with wide worried eyes.

I put a finger to my lips and he gave me a slow scared nod.

“Now comes the hard part,” Joe said.



I’D BEEN off world for a while, clearing my head. Running like a wolf through untouched wilderness that had never felt the blight of the five-fingered beings. But this world was my home and I always came back.

I’m pure canid clan, but for the past few decades I’d been running with Joe, who was a canid/corbae mix. I was the muscle, along with a coyote named Jack, for Joe’s vigilante missions, keeping order in the otherworlds, keeping this city safe. Joe had a soft spot for Newford, particularly for Crowsea, which Raven—yeah, *the* Raven—had made his home.

But Joe didn’t have anything on at the moment and I’d found myself walking in Lower Foxville, planning to drop in on my old friend Jaime who I hadn’t seen for a while. I’d known Jaime since he was a little kid, fresh off the immigrant trail from Colombia. Been something of a father figure to him back then. Now, some twenty years later, we were just friends.

These days he ran a little soup kitchen/food bank on Walker Street, a couple of blocks east of Lee. I had some money in my pocket, courtesy of a poker game where I’d come out way ahead, and since I have no use for money I planned to donate it to the cause.

I was maybe a block or so away from Jaime’s place when I heard a commotion up ahead of me. People shouting, car horns sounding, whistles piercing the air. I quickened my pace until I turned a corner

and was stopped by the chaos in front of me. I rolled myself a cigarette and lit it as I took in the scene, a good bad habit that kept me from rushing in before getting the measure of a situation.

There were three or four black SUVs blocked in by cars, and a crowd of people who were yelling and blowing their whistles at a bunch of men decked out in green military-style gear. The people in the crowd were bundled in parkas against the cold, and the military guys were shoving and pushing at anyone close enough for them to hassle. As I watched, a black teen was roughly pulled from the crowd and thrown to the ground, his hands quickly zip-tied. Two of the military guys dragged him to his feet and hustled him into one of the SUVs.

Another older teen stopped beside me while I was watching. I gave him a quick glance. Pale skin, bed hair, raggedy clothes, skateboard under his arm. His jacket was thin but the cold didn't seem to be bothering him.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Another fucking ICE raid."

"ICE?"

He turned to look at me, taking in my dark cousin skin.

"ICE—Immigration and Customs Enforcement," he added at my blank look. "The government's private gestapo. Where you from, you don't know what's going on?"

"Away."

"Well, I'd haul my ass right back there unless you can prove you're a citizen. And even that don't make a difference to them most of the time now."

He spat on the ground.

"How long's this been going on?" I asked.

He shrugged. "They rolled into town a week or so ago, news says fifteen hundred of 'em. If you're brown or black they'll just snatch you, throw you in detention, doesn't matter what your ID says. Mostly they don't even bother to check IDs."

"And the government just lets this happen?"

"Fuck, are you stupid? They *are* the government."

As we'd been talking I'd seen a couple more guys—these looked Latino—thrown to the ground with way more force than was necessary and shoved into the waiting SUVs. The crowd continued to shout at the agents, phones held high filming, blowing their

whistles. The whole mess was a powder keg and way too close to Jaime's place.

"Thanks for the info, kid," I said.

I pinched the coal from my cigarette and stuck the unsmoked portion in the pocket of my jacket. Then I backtracked so that I could go up Venice Avenue, away from the chaos. There was an alley running off it that I could use to come in through the back of the food bank.

I eased open the door when I got there and slipped into the kitchen. It was empty where usually it was a bustle of activity as volunteers and Jaime's staff prepared meals for the steady influx of folks coming in, looking for something to eat. And in this weather, just to get out of the cold.

The kitchen was empty but I could hear men shouting conflicting orders in the main room.

"Don't move!"

"Get up against the wall!"

"Show us your ID!"

"Keep your hands where we can see them!"

I slipped into the between to see what was going on.

The between takes up the space between this world and whatever world is right next to it. It's a place where you can see into either world, but not be seen yourself. Not everybody who can move between worlds knows about it. Most of them just pass through from one world to the other too quickly to notice.

I used it now to make my way alongside the empty kitchen, pausing in the doorway.

There were four men in what looked like more makeshift green military gear, faces masked, "ICE" in block letters on their armoured vests. They had a crowd of about twenty people pushed up against a wall. No, not just people. These were folks nearing rock bottom already. Some older, some homeless. Many were both, most likely. Women with children. A couple of teens way too lightly dressed for the weather. People who'd already lost everything—some of them probably more than once.

I saw Jaime in the middle of them, standing in front, blood dripping from a cut above his eye. On the floor were two brown-skinned kids—twelve, maybe thirteen?—face down, hands zip-tied behind their backs. The point at which I lost it was when my gaze tracked to a middle-aged pregnant Mexican woman, her wrists also

zip-tied, who was being pushed to the ground by one of the ICE agents.

I crossed the room, stepped out of the between right behind the guy. I've got big hands. I put one on either side of his head and snapped his neck. His buddies stared in shock, but I didn't hesitate. In the time it took for the first man to sprawl to the floor I was on the rest of them.

Cousins are faster and stronger than five-fingered beings. Only a couple of moments passed from when I stepped out of the between and it being over.

And then I had four bodies on the floor to deal with. And a couple dozen more of the bastards in the street outside. But that was a problem for future me. Right now I knelt beside the pregnant woman, snapping the zip-ties with my fingers like they were made of paper. I helped her sit up.

"You're okay now, Tía," I said. I gently brushed her hair away from her face. "I won't let anyone else hurt you."

Then I remembered I had an audience.

Who'd just seen me kill four men in as many seconds.

I looked up to see a lot of wide-eyed gazes. A couple of women had hands to their mouths. They all looked scared, except for one old black woman who had a satisfied grin on her wrinkled face.

"Bo?" Jaime asked, stepping forward.

The pregnant woman was gripping my arm like she'd never let it go. I pulled a jack knife out of the back pocket of my jeans, flicked it open and held it out to Jaime, hilt first.

"Free the kids would you?"

"Right, right," he said.

He took the knife and went over to the two kids lying on the floor and cut the ties from their wrists. They were a boy and girl with a strong family resemblance. After he helped them up they scurried over to the crowd of people and hugged a Mexican woman who was holding a baby. The girl spat on one of the corpses as she passed it.

Jaime closed up the knife and came over to help me get the pregnant woman to her feet. We sat her in a chair. Jaime handed me back my knife and knelt in front of her, speaking to her quietly in Spanish.

I put the knife back in my pocket and considered the four dead men. Time to get them out of here. I grabbed two of them by their

arms and stepped them into the otherworld. I heard gasps behind me, which wasn't surprising. Those people had already been through a lot and now they were seeing me vanish into thin air, dragging a pair of corpses with me.

The place I stepped to was the edge of a forest in somewhere, maybe even somewhen. It looked rough and wild with big chunks of granite pushing out of the ground. I dumped the bodies and returned for the other two.

There were more gasps when I suddenly appeared back in the main room of Jaime's place, but I stayed on task and got rid of the other men before returning again.

The people were talking amongst themselves, staring at me. I saw more than a few of them make the sign of the cross. Walking over to the front door, I peered outside. It was still chaos out there but nobody seemed to be looking our way. I locked the door and closed the blinds at each window. This made the interior feel gloomy and shadowy, but I had a wolf's eyes and could see just fine in the dark.

"Bo, I appreciate your help," Jamie said. "But, um..."

"You feel I've just made things worse."

"Honestly, no. If I could have, I would have done the same—especially when they threw Hortensia to the floor. But no one is safe here. When the agents out there come looking for their buddies..."

"I can fix that," I told him.

Then I pulled out my phone and called Joe.

"I could use a hand here," I said when the call connected.

"Hang on."

More gasps when he stepped out of nowhere. I'd been dubious when Joe'd got Jack and me phones from his otherworld provider in Mabon, but the GPS in them sure came in handy since Joe could track anything, even a GPS signal, in any world.

It took a few moments for me to fill him in.

"You're thinking the ranch?" Joe asked when I was done.

Joe's got a pocket world that's basically a rambling ranch house—or more like a dozen of them attached to each other—surrounded by fields and woods for as far as you can see. It's mostly an animal refuge. He takes in the old critters no one wants, or who are just in their last days, and brings them to the ranch, where the air of the otherworld—and a lot of love—rejuvenates them so that they can live much longer lives than they would have in this world.

He also takes in broken people—some five-fingered beings, but mostly cousins—and the place does the same for them. Some move on, some stay to take care of the place, the animals, each other.

It took a bit to explain it all to Jaime who then had to sell it to the folks who'd gotten trapped in his food bank. They'd stay there only as long as it took to get things straightened out here. Only one older guy—I figured he was Haitian from his accent—refused to go. He had family that he needed to bring food back to. We loaded him with an overflowing knapsack and sent him out the back door, then ferried everybody else to the ranch.

It took a bit more time to get them all settled, but once we did Joe, Jaime, and I went out on the porch where we were surrounded by elderly dogs of every size and breed. We looked out at the big grass-covered hill that rose away from the ranch house. Old horses who felt like they were colts again played in the grass along with a donkey and some goats.

“You okay?” Joe asked me.

“Getting there. Lost it for a moment, but I caught myself in time.”

The problem with wolf canids is we have a little of the berserker in us. Great in a fight, I guess, but it's easy to lose yourself to the red rage.

Some wolves never make it back.

“They had a pregnant woman zip-tied and thrown to the floor,” I added. “Couple of kids too. Just kids.”

Joe nodded. “I get it.”

I glanced at Jaime who was unusually quiet. He looked shell-shocked. I bumped my shoulder against his and he started, caught himself.

“How are you doing?” I asked. “I know this has been a lot to throw at you.”

A bit of his usual humour showed in his eyes.

“You think?” he said.

“You have a play here?” Joe asked me.

“I want them out of the city. Kid on the street told me that something like fifteen hundred of those asswipes have been deployed here.”

He nodded. “You plan to kill them all?”

“If I have to. You have a better idea?”

“Well,” Joe drawled. “They like disappearing people. Maybe it's

time they see what it feels like when they're the ones being disappeared."



JILLY SAYS in the best stories heroes don't prevail because they're the toughest, the strongest, the meanest. They prevail because they operate from a base of protection and kindness and love. The seventh son will strike back if he's attacked, but he never provokes the fight. The swan maiden, the donkey girl. They prevail because they don't lose hope and they outsmart their opponents. And there's always help from unforeseen quarters. The spoon. The rabbit freed from a snare, the sparrow from a bag. The old woman to whom you gave the last of your bread and cheese.

It's kindness that gains you allies. It's loyalty that inspires the weakest to do their best.

It sounds good but I don't know from fairy tales. We cousins have different stories and they don't always have pretty endings.

* * *

JOE and I weren't the only team hitting hotels. Joe had called in reinforcements. His phone was buzzing with incoming texts by the time we exited our hotel, the other teams checking in. He sent a group text back. *R @ the airport.*

We stepped through the otherworld, stepped out again beside a large black van that was serving as our command centre. Juniper had "borrowed" it from the Spook Squad, the NPD task force she works for, and it was parked behind a hangar with about a dozen school buses lined up in a row beside it. From here I couldn't see the hangar that ICE had commandeered as a holding area, but I could hear the protesters outside it, held back by the newly enforced airport fence. Chanting and blowing their whistles. Rattling the chain link. Inside that hangar were almost certainly folks abducted by ICE, locked in makeshift cells before being flown out to detention facilities in Texas, Florida, and who the hell knows where else.

“They’re going to be a problem,” Joe muttered, nodding towards the noise. “Too many phones live streaming every damn second.”

The other teams arrived. Christiana and Jeren, one of Raven’s corbae crew. Jack and another corbae whose name I didn’t know. Juniper and her mage beau Davey had hit the fourth hotel, after which they were supposed to head over to Kingsmore College to set up lodgings for the detainees in the hangar. There were too many of them to take to Joe’s ranch. Since the two of them hadn’t joined us I assumed that was where they were now.

Newford was called the City of Crows, so maybe it was no surprise that there were crows everywhere tonight, lining the roof of the hangar, on the van, on the school buses, wheeling in the sky above us and above the next hangar over. Crows aren’t nocturnal, but these crows were corbae, a veritable army of them, all of them on call.

I watched them for a moment before joining the others inside the van. Saskia and Wendy were there, doing whatever it is they do with their computers. Wendy’s fingers were a blur on her keyboard while Saskia sat beside her, eyes closed. There seemed to be flickering lights behind her eyelids like you’d see on a laptop or a phone.

A wall of monitors showing various parts of this area of the airport took up one side of the van. On them we could see the protesters now, a few hundred strong. ICE agents were in full force all along their side of the fence—thirty, maybe forty of them. And outside the fence but keeping their distance were a half-dozen NPD cruisers, their occupants looking uncertain. Another screen showed the area between the hangar and the runways, out of the line of sight of the protesters. There was a big army cargo plane parked there, and still more agents herding a long line of abductees on board. The inside of the ICE hangar wasn’t on any of the screens.

“They’re almost finished loading that plane,” Jilly said.

I hadn’t noticed her because the crowd of us in the van had been blocking my line of sight. Joe frowned at the monitor showing the plane.

“We have to stop it from taking off,” he said.

“I’ll bet you regret not asking Jay to help out,” Jack said.

I nodded in agreement. A dragon would stop that plane dead in its tracks. There was no way we could hide that, but it would sure do the trick.

“I know a dragon,” Wendy said

We all turned to her.

“What?” she said. “I can know powerful people too.”

“Where did you meet a dragon?” Jilly wanted to know.

“Game night at The Harp.”

“Game night?” Joe asked.

“You know all those board games on the book shelves across from the bar? That’s what they’re for. They come out every Tuesday night.”

“Never noticed them,” Joe said.

“It’s fun. Anyway, that’s where I met Jed. Some people go in a group but I always like to go by myself and meet new people.”

“How’s there a dragon in the city and we didn’t know?” Joe said.

“I knew,” Wendy told him.

“No, of course. But he just told you he was a dragon?”

“Not straightaway. But he had a little bodach named Mimie sitting on his shoulder, glamoured to look like a parrot, and I’ve been around all of you for so long glamours don’t really work on me. That first night he was sitting by himself with a backgammon board on the table in front of him and you know how much I love backgammon. So I asked if he wanted to play, and we got to talking. We’ve been meeting up there for weeks now.”

“Do you like him?” Jilly asked.

Wendy nodded.

“But do you like like him?”

“What are you, ten? But no, it’s not like that. And besides he’s a dragon. I’m sure his life is full of important dragon stuff.”

We were all just looking at her.

“Do you want me to call him?” she asked.

As Joe was still considering an intercom crackled. A male voice I didn’t recognize spoke.

“That plane’s about ready to go,” he said.

“Can you stop it?” Joe asked.

“I can’t, but Maggie says we can send Maida and Zia to deal with it.”

“*They’re* here?” Joe said.

I understood his surprise. That would be like using a nuclear missile to take out a hornet’s nest.

The crow girls Maida and Zia, were old old spirits. Story goes they were already here to watch Raven pull the world out of that old pot of

his—they're that old. And old spirits tend to let themselves forget a lot, to take on lighter personalities. Because when they remember, it can be overwhelming. So the crow girls presented as cheerful teenaged girls with a penchant for sweets. Most of the time. Dark skin, darker hair, gangly bodies. They wore tattered sweaters and black jeans and clunky combat boots and were about as silly as any giddy teenagers could be.

Unless they were woken up.

"You want them to stand down?" the voice on the intercom asked.

Joe sighed. "No, they're what we've got right now."

"Copy that."

We crowded closer to the monitor showing the plane.

"You should call your friend," Joe said to Wendy. "If this whole thing goes sideways we're gonna need the backup."

On the screen the last of the abductees had been loaded into the plane and the cargo hold door at the rear was slowly going up. A cloud of crows was circling the plane. Two of them flew free from the others and dropped down to land lightly on the sloped roof of the cockpit.

People always say they can't tell them apart but I knew it was Maida who slid down the dull metal until she was looking into the cockpit at what I imagined was a very surprised pilot. She drew back her hand and punched a fist through the glass. A moment later she'd hauled the pilot out and tossed him to the tarmac.

He didn't land well. One of his legs was bent underneath his body at an ugly angle.

A couple of the ICE agents outside the hangar noticed what was going on and started to run towards the plane, guns drawn. That was the moment the mass of crows swarmed, driving them back, even knocking some off their feet. Gunshots rang out that we could hear even from a hangar away.

"Crap," Joe said. "That's going to rile up the protesters. And the other ICE assholes."

One of the monitors showed the crowd banging harder on the chain link fence, yelling at the agents on the other side. "I'm in their phones," Saskia said, "and I've shut them all down. Nobody's going to be streaming this."

Just as she finished speaking, people in the crowd lowered the phones they were using to film, poking at their screens in obvious confusion.

Joe nodded. He pushed the speak button on the intercom and said into it: "Head's up. It's game time."

The monitor showed a lean, dark haired crow man stepping out of the between behind each of the ICE agents on the tarmac, overpowering them. The corbae had surprise on their side, but didn't really need it with their superior strength. A moment later they were each stepping away, dragging an agent with them to dump in the pocket world. In less than a minute the space between the protestors and the hangar was clear of ICE agents. I briefly wondered how the crowd would explain that to themselves but at this point I didn't really care.

"Jed's on his way," Wendy said. "And I heard from the team with the supplies for the agents we've disappeared. The helicopters have arrived and they're going to start refueling and loading them as soon as they land."

"Thanks," Joe said, "Good. Now we need to get into that hangar. Fast."

In the monitor showing the plane I saw that Maida had pulled the other pilot out and tossed him onto the tarmac as well. He landed really badly and was still after impact.

"Let's move!" Joe said.

He was out the door as he called the order, and we followed at a run, leaving Saskia, Wendy and Jilly in the van. Like the rest of them, I stuck an earbud in my ear to be a makeshift earpiece. It connected my phone to the group call that linked our communication. We got around the other side of the hangar in time to see Zia running across the top of the plane. She jumped down and hit the closing door with such force that it twisted and stopped, halting its ascent.

But then both she and Maida turned their attention to the melee of ICE agents and crows, some of them still birds, some in their five-fingered shapes.

This was going to get real ugly real fast. I've seen what the crow girls can do when they're in their power. I've seen them literally rip men to pieces. Never good men, but we were trying to keep casualties to a minimum. We weren't interested in killing the agents, necessarily, just in removing them from the situation.

And yeah I know. I had the blood of four of them on my own hands already so who was I to talk?

But disappearing just left the authorities with a mystery. Trying to whitewash a crime scene was impossible with the kind of forensics the five-fingered beings could bring in, so Joe had decided that disappearing the enemy was the right call.

Joe yelled as we ran forward. "Move them out of here now!"

The corbae stopped trying to fight the ICE agents and simply stepped them away to the Icedales, the name we'd given the pocket world where we were dumping them. One of the corbae had wanted to call it Iceland until it was pointed out to him that there was already a place called that in this world.

By the time we got between the hangar and the plane all the agents were gone. It was just us and the crow girls.

"NPD's moving in," I heard Saskia say in my earbud.

"I'm on it," Juniper said sprinting towards the side of the hangar where I expected to see police cars appearing at any moment. Her voice went on in my earbud, "I just have to flash my badge and regular cops fall over themselves to avoid getting involved in Spook Squad business."

We could still hear the crowd on the other side of the fence, but the tone of their shouting and chanting had changed as they tried to figure out what was going on. So far as I could tell all we had left to deal with was whatever agents were still in the hangar and on the plane.

And the crow girls.

The hangar doors were closed and I hoped Saskia or Wendy had shut down communications inside as well. Ditto for whatever agents were on the plane.

"Hey," Joe said to the crow girls, his voice quiet and friendly. "That was a great job you did stopping the plane."

Usually you could count on a barrage of words from the pair, talking half nonsense and almost at the same time. Not tonight.

"Don't patronize us," Maida said.

"Come on, girls," Joe said. "Why would I do that?"

"We are hardly children," Zia said.

Crap. We didn't have time for this. Who knew what the agents in the hangar and in the plane might do in their panic? We'd already seen how undisciplined and angry they were. If they started taking it out on the abductees it could turn into a bloodbath.

“You think I don’t know that?” Joe said. He held his arms wide, then brought them together, palms against each other as he gave them a small bow of respect. “You’re the first grandmothers, the oldest of spirits. We thank you for your help. But we’ve got this now.”

Maida cocked her head. “Why do you rebuff our aid?”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw a man I didn’t recognize approaching the plane. In my ear Wendy said, “Jed’s on the scene. I’ve asked him to deal with the plane while you guys handle the crow girls.”

“Don’t hurt them,” Jilly piped up.

I managed to not laugh. “Darling,” I said, “there’s not a chance in hell of that happening, ‘specially when they’re like this.”

“But we didn’t,” Joe was saying to the crow girls. “We asked you to stop the plane and you did that. But when you wear your power like this we—I—worry about overkill.”

“We would never hurt the prisoners in there,” Zia said.

“Of course not. But we shouldn’t kill any more of the agents either.”

“Whyevernot?” Maida asked.

I relaxed a little. The tone of her voice was becoming more crow girl and less ancient spirit.

“Because it’ll just bring more problems,” Joe said.

“We’re good with problems,” Zia said.

Maida nodded. “Veryvery good.”

Zia nodded with her. “Ask anybody.”

“Even Raven would tell you that.”

“Maybe especially Raven.”

“Or our Juniper.”

“Where is our Juniper anyway?”

I was able to relax completely now. I could see it was the same for everybody else.

“She’s gone to talk to the police,” Joe said.

Maida frowned. “We don’t like police.”

“They’re like the icy men,” Zia explained.

“Maybe,” Joe said. “Some of them. But not all of them.”

“Are you sure?” Maida asked.

“Sure enough.”

Zia smiled. “Okay. Maybe we’ll just go see how Juniper’s doing.”

“But you won’t interfere?”

“We won’t inter fear,” Zia assured him.

“Or even outer fear,” Maida added.

“There will be no fears.”

Then they skipped off toward the other side of the building.

Joe glanced toward the plane that Wendy’s friend had almost reached before turning to the rest of us. Our numbers were increasing as corbae began to step back from the Icedales.

“We’re going in blind,” Joe said. “Our number one priority is the safety of the abductees. Winged cousins in first. Grab as many of the agents as you can and dump them in the Icedales. The rest of the cousins keep watch around the building. No one escapes.”

The corbae immediately dispersed, half of them winging away to surround the building, the rest flying in slow circles above us.

“The hangar door,” Jack began. “Want us to try and force it?”

“Give me a moment,” Joe said.

He crossed the asphalt toward the plane. Jed had already leaped up to the cockpit. A moment later he was gone from sight.

“Bo, Jack,” Joe called.

We trotted over to the rear of the plane to stand on either side of the disabled cargo hold door. We exchanged glances. None of us was as strong as a crow girl. But the three of us together grabbed hold of the metal door, me and Jack on one side, Joe on the other.

It wasn’t budging. Christiana joined us, then Jeren and a half dozen of his corbae.

“On three,” Joe said.

We put everything into it but still it didn’t budge.

“I heard something like metal grinding inside the door,” one of the corbae said.

Joe nodded. “Let’s try it again. On three.”

Something was definitely breaking in the door’s mechanism.

“Again,” Joe said.

It took us three more tries before the giant cargo hold door crashed to the asphalt, banging like thunder. Agents had been huddled against the door and half of them fell out of the hold in a tumble of limbs. Jack and I confronted the ones that remained, but they laid down their weapons and held their hands up, looking pleasantly panicked. Joe pushed by them, going inside.

I glanced into the hold and saw Jed come walking down from the front. He had a dragon’s head on his shoulders, eyes gold, tiny flames

flickering out of his nose as he breathed. He had the agents terrified. Unfortunately the abductees were as well. After the shock of everything that had happened to them so far, this seemed to break a lot of them.

"It's okay, it's okay," Joe said to the abductees, repeating the words in Spanish. "*Está bien. Está bien.* You're safe now."

Jack and I marched the agents still inside down the ramp where corbae took them to the Icedales.

Jed let the dragon's head fade away, adding his voice to Joe's promises of safety. He knelt down so that he wasn't standing over anyone, his eyes warm, his smile without artifice.

"We've got a bus waiting to take you away," Joe told the abductees. "You'll have food and beds there while we work on reconnecting you with your loved ones." Into his earbud he added, "Wendy, could you send one of the buses here to the plane?"

"Copy."

"Let's get you out of this nightmare," Jed said. "Tía," he said to an older woman, holding out his hand. "Will you allow me the privilege of helping you out?"

She gave him a slow, dubious nod. When Jed saw she had zip-ties on her wrists he took out a pocket knife. She flinched at the blade.

"I'm just going to cut it off, Tía," he said. "No one will do this to you again."

The rest of us moved through the cargo hold, cutting off zip-ties, murmuring encouraging words as we slowly moved them to the back of the hold and outside. We had them all standing on the asphalt as the school bus pulled up. They were quiet, shell-shocked, looking around as though they had never seen a night sky before.

"Where will you take us?" a man asked.

"To a college that's being set up for your comfort," Joe said. "But let me just add, this is your decision. None of you have to go anywhere. If you prefer to stay here in the city, we'll make sure you get to your homes."

"Why are you doing this?" a grandfatherly man asked.

"Because we can," Joe told him.

A corbae came and deferentially motioned the old man to the bus.

Jed was the last down the ramp.

"I appreciate your help on such short notice, Jed," Joe said, He held out his hand and introduced himself.

Jed smiled. "The infamous Joe CrazyDog. The pleasure's all mine. And please, just called me Carter."

"Okay, Carter. I've got one more favour to ask of you. Can you open those hangar doors for us?"

Carter glanced at the doors, then looked around. "Um, my elders don't appreciate it when I take on my dragon form in public like this."

"It'll only be for a moment and we have this area shut down tight. Zero surveillance. And if anyone gives you flack, let me know and I'll have a word with them."

"Because you're Joe CrazyDog."

Joe shook his head. "I just have a lot of friends, and some of them are dragons."

We had cousins circling above us again as we approached the doors. Carter noticed the blood stains on the asphalt as we walked by where the fighting had been.

"I can get rid of those later if you'd like," he said.

"Preciate it."

I looked over to the front of the plane and saw that the injured pilot and the body of the other man were already gone.

"So what did you have in mind?" Carter asked when we were all standing in front of the hangar doors.

"I'll give them a chance to surrender and come out peacefully," Joe said.

"Yeah like that'll work with these thugs," Jack said.

Joe shrugged and approached the door, banging on it.

"Anybody in there with some authority?" he asked.

There was a long silence before a muffled voice responded. "Who the fuck are you?"

"The guy that's giving you a chance to end this peacefully."

The man laughed. "No, we're good. We'll just stay here and wait for reinforcements."

"You've got a long wait then because there are none coming."

"Bullshit."

"Okay. I gave you an option."

"Listen, buddy. You try to bust in here and we'll start shooting."

"Let me make something clear," Joe said. "If you so much as touch anybody in there we'll be going scorched earth on you."

"What the fuck's that supposed to mean?"

"It means," Joe said, his voice like ice, "first we'll kill you. Then

we'll kill your families—spouses, kids, parents, grandparents. Then we'll start in on anyone who ever knew you.”

“Fuck you. You wouldn't.”

I saw the concern on Carter's face. “He's right, we wouldn't,” I said quietly. “But it was worth a try, speaking in the kind of language they understand.”

Joe shrugged. “Can't say I didn't give it a shot. Go ahead and rip it open. Jeren, get your crow boys ready.”

Five-fingered beings have all these stories about dragons but I'm guessing very few of them have actually been in the presence of one. Watching Carter change from a five-fingered shape to a twenty foot tall dragon just made my heart swell with pride over his magnificence. I mean, I had nothing to do with who he was, but we were still related. Still cousins.

The dragon stepped forward, moving in an easy glide. He put the talons of each paw in the seams between the doors and then he just pulled them apart with an awful screech and stepped smoothly aside.

I had the chance to see the looks of terror and shock on the faces of the agents crowded near the door before they were lost to me, obscured by the black wave of crows that flowed in around me. Some battered the agents with their wings, disorienting them. Others shifted immediately to that of five-fingered beings and started yanking them away to the Icedales.

The whole operation took less than thirty seconds and then we were all just standing inside the giant holding facility. The place was filled with cages of abductees of every shape, gender and age. The only unifying factor was they were all brown-skinned. Some were nursing wounds. Some looked sick. Expressions ranged from despondent to defiant. Somewhere in the maze of cages a baby was crying. Everyone looked terrified.

I could feel the fury radiating from Joe.

“Wendy,” he said into his earbud. “Cancel the supply helicopters to the Icedales.”

“But without food and gear...” Jilly began

“I don't give a fuck. Let them go *Lord of the Flies* on each other.”

“It's bad in here, Jilly,” I added. “Really bad.”

I could hear Jilly swallow through my earbud.

“Helicopters are cancelled,” Wendy said.

“Thank you. Let's get the buses here.”

He gave the abductees the same speech he'd given to the ones in the plane as we methodically went through the facility, snapping the locks on the chain link doors and freeing everybody.

Nobody took him up on his offer to return them to their homes here in the city.

"Nice and easy," Joe told them as they began to crowd towards the doors. "Take your time and look out for each other. We're not leaving anybody behind."



THERE WERE a lot of logistics to deal with before we were done there. Carter scorched the asphalt where the melee had taken place and also, under Christiana's direction, the area where the crow girls had thrown the pilots.

"Now there's no DNA," Joe said, "so they can't prove anything. But that plane's a problem."

Jack was leaning against one of the hangar doors. "Also all the missing agents."

"It'll just be a big mystery, I guess," Christiana said.

"Which was the point," Joe said. "Except the fed's paranormal department is still going to know something was up."

"We'll just have to get a message to them," I put in. "That this was a one-time... anomaly?"

Joe nodded. "It will be a one-time anomaly if they stay the fuck out of this city."

The buses were all gone, taking the abductees to Kingsmore. Most of the crows were gone too except for Jeren and Maggie and a handful of dark-haired men with black crow eyes. Wendy, Saskia and Jilly had joined us in front of the hangar. We could still hear the protesters at the fence, going strong even though there was nothing left for them to protest here. Not that they were aware, since they couldn't see inside or past the hangar. They didn't know everyone was gone.

Juniper came around the corner of the building.

"Cops?" I called.

"Want nothing to do with this."

"And the crow girls?" Joe asked her, as she joined the rest of us.

"They got bored and wandered off."

Joe nodded. "So I guess we're done here. Thanks for your help, everybody."

"But what about what's going on in other cities?" Jilly asked.

Joe gave her a puzzled look.

"This same thing is happening in other cities all over the country," she said. "This malignant idea is spreading everywhere, infecting communities across the continent."

"That's not our concern."

"How can you say that?"

Joe sighed. He looked at Jack and me for understanding, but he was on his own here for explanations.

He looked back to Jilly. "Other cities have their own guardian spirits."

"But they don't seem to be doing anything."

Joe sighed again. "Here's the hard truth, Jilly. Most cousins don't like five-fingered beings. They don't care what happens to you and would just as soon see you finish each other off because they believe the world would be a better place without you in it."

"But—"

He held up a finger to stop her. "And from a certain perspective they're not entirely wrong. Cousins won't bring the five-fingered world down—they wouldn't bother. But they think it's likely you'll do it to yourselves eventually. They're patient."

"But *you* help people."

"I do. Sometimes others do. Cousins have one law: don't kill each other. When it does happen, when it's fed by cruelty and the strong preying on the weak, there are some who step in. Some who patrol this world and the otherworlds because..." He shrugged. "Because that's a thing they can do."

"Like you."

"Like me. And Bo and Jack."

"But you do the same for people, for humans, not just cousins. I've seen you step up time and again. You work with the task force to protect people from otherworld danger."

"Not people," Joe said. "We protect you and your friends and the sanctuary Raven and the rest of you have made of the city. You've created a community."

"The people in other cities are in just as much need as the ones you rescued here."

Joe nodded. “We can’t save everybody. We can’t move into another cousin’s territory. Maybe there’s a cousin there with a mind to step in, maybe not. Mostly those people have to help themselves. Do what the people at the fence here are doing. Protest, document, vote out the parasites that have put all of this in motion when the time comes. They might have to put themselves on the line. Some people, too many of them, are happy with the status quo. It’s just too big for a few cousins to make a difference. And frankly, this is a five-fingered beings mess.”

“And I guess,” Jilly said “the rest of the cousins don’t care enough to step up and help like you did. Maybe it’s not fair to ask them to?”

“I can’t speak for them.”

“Why did you help out today?”

Joe nodded at me. “Because they went after Bo’s friend. He’s my brother and I’ll stand by him no matter what course he takes. Though I have to admit, we might have made things worse. There are going to be a lot of questions about what we did here tonight. Odds are more of these ICE agents are going to be showing up to find out what happened to their people.”

“I’ve got that covered,” I said.

Joe looked at me and raised an eyebrow.

“I’ve got it covered,” I repeated.

“What about the faerie courts?” Jilly asked. “There are courts in most other cities too, right?”

“Probably,” Joe said.

“Why don’t we ask them for help?”

“You don’t want to go asking faerie for favours,” Wendy’s friend Carter said. “That never turns out well.”

“Word,” Jack nodded.

Maggie, Jeren and Christiana were all nodding in agreement.

Jilly sighed. “I guess I can see why everybody hates humans. We do so many terrible things. The messes we make aren’t theirs to clean up.”

“Nobody hates all of you,” Maggie said. “But there are so many of you that only show the world their worst sides. It’s hard sometimes to remember all the things we love about five-fingered beings. Your art and your music. How you can stand together in the worst of times, even alongside those you disagree with if the situation calls for it. How you can rise up against the darkness with kindness and generosity of

spirit like all those protesters at the fence standing up for their neighbours.”

“Yeah,” Christiana said. “There’s a lot we love about the human world. It’s why we work so hard to protect this little sanctuary that Raven made, where we can coexist. This community.”

“So the general consensus is we let five-fingered beings sort out their own crises,” Joe said. “If we did what we we did here today on a larger scale we’d be no better than the oppressors—deciding what’s best for you instead of you standing up for yourselves.”

“Otherwise,” Jack added, “you’d have to give up your free will.”

“Which I’m sure you wouldn’t want,” Joe said.

“And,” Jack said, “we sure as fuck don’t want the responsibility of policing you lot twenty-four/seven.”

“It’s a matter of taking action,” Juniper added. “Change only happens if enough of you raise your voices. It’s like Sociology 101.”

Jilly nodded.

“Speaking of getting involved,” Joe turned to Juniper. “How much trouble are you going to be in when your boss finds you’ve commandeered one of the task force’s vans and were flashing your badge around?”

Juniper shrugged. “I’m more of the ‘apologize after’ school of thought. Cray’ll survive. He’s never been much of a by-the-book cop, and besides, he needs us in the day-to-day grind of keeping the city safe.”

“I don’t think standing up to your own government’s forces is part of his mandate,” I said.

“Probably not. But it was still the right thing to do.”

We broke up then, everybody going their separate ways. Joe caught up to me before I left.

“You’re going to be okay with whatever you’ve got planned?” he asked.

“Hell, yeah. I’m just going to have a polite conversation with the mayor.”

His eyebrows went up.

“I’ve got this,” I told him.

Joe nodded. “I know. But you need anything, I’m just a phone call away.”

“Preciate it, partner.”



THE NEXT MORNING I stepped myself into the mayor's office, bypassing security, support staff and anyone else that might have tried to stop me from seeing Her Honour. She was sitting behind her desk when I arrived, looking tired, and she wasn't alone. A guy in fatigues, shaved head, square jaw, was in her visitor's chair, legs spread wide, putting out the vibe that we were all in *his* office. He had a couple of goons with him, standing with their backs against a far wall.

"The fuck?" he said when I appeared.

The mayor didn't even blink. I wasn't surprised. The first thing she'd have gotten read into when she took office was why the NPD had a Paranormal Task Force.

"Who's this clown?" I asked the mayor.

Said clown's face went red.

"Director Madison," the mayor said. "From DHS."

"Huh. Good. That will save needing you as a go-between."

I turned to face him. His goons were on high alert. I took one to be a career officer. He was in a relaxed but ready stance, grey gaze fixed on me, but it was obvious he was aware of every part of the room. His fellow agent looked green, hand hovering near his holstered gun, gaze darting around. He was ready, too, but in his case it was a readiness to do something stupid.

"What does that mean?" Madison demanded. "Are you responsible for what happened last night?"

"I don't know. Are you responsible for a pregnant woman being zip-tied and thrown to the ground, or a child separated from her parents, imprisoned in your hangar lockup, starved and sick?"

"Don't get smart with me, asshole."

"Truth stings, huh?"

"Fuck you. If what you say is true my agents had justification to act the way they did. We have our orders."

"Remind me, is your boss the one that shoots dogs or the one that's always drunk? Or the one who rapes kids? Maybe you get your orders straight from the top."

The goons were tensing up, the green one practically vibrating in anticipation.

Madison got his anger under control, his earlier smug expression returning.

“Two things you need to know,” he said. “We don’t negotiate with terrorists and the only way you’re leaving this room is in cuffs.”

I cocked my head. “Really? You weren’t paying attention to how I got in here in the first place?”

He looked confused for a second but quickly recovered. Five-fingered beings are truly amazing in their ability to ignore what they’ve seen with their own two eyes.

“Don’t jerk me around,” he said. “Tell me what you’ve done with my men or things are going to get even worse for you.”

I let a flicker of wolf appear in my eyes and he blanched.

“What makes you think I’m here to negotiate?” I asked.

“Well, why else...” His voice trailed off and his eyes narrowed. “Why are you here?”

“To give you a message: tell your boss this city is off-limits. Send any more of your pathetic little wanna-be soldiers here and we won’t be disappearing them anymore.”

I’ll give him this. He held my gaze. Then a slow smile spread over his face.

“Corporal,” he said. “Arrest this man. You don’t have to be gentle about it.”

His goons stepped forward, the green one already drawing his weapon.

The mayor stood up behind her desk and said, “Don’t do this.”

The goons hesitated.

Madison laughed. “You can’t save this man. You can’t save anybody who’s unlawfully here in this city or who tries to prevent us from doing our job.”

“I was saying it for your sake,” the mayor said.

“Don’t worry, Your Honour. We’re not in any danger. And rest assured we’ll be dealing with you next.” To his men he added, “Corporal. I gave you an order.”

I sighed.

Then I stepped into the between and came out behind the goons where I clapped hands on either of their shoulders and stepped them away to the Icedales. A moment later I was back where I’d originally been standing.

Madison’s eyes were bulging. This time he wasn’t able to just brush away what he’d witnessed. He turned automatically to his men, but of course they were gone.

“What the actual fuck—”

I didn't give him time to finish and a moment later he joined his men in the Icedales.

I returned to find the mayor seated again. For a long moment she laid her head on her desk. When she straightened up she looked like a lot of the abductees had, a little broken.

“You know you've just made things ten times worse,” she said. “We were handling this. Through the proper channels. Now they're going to come down hard and turn the city into a bloodbath. The one thing this administration hates almost more than anything is to lose face.”

“I think they hate immigrants and women and people of colour and anyone with an education even more,” I said. “But I hear you. And I suppose it could come to that.” I shook my head. “Joe might have done things differently, but we're not finished here yet.”

The mayor fixed me with a surprised look. “You're *not* Joe?”

“What? You thought there was only one of us?”

Though Joe does stand out. He's just a little smarter, faster, stronger than the rest of us. I'd say his heart's bigger, too. He's always ready to step up to make the hard decisions and then carry the weight of them without complaint.

“How...how many of you are there?”

“What, canids? In all the worlds or just this city?”

The mayor swallowed. “This city?”

“Three or four of us—that's when Cody's in town. But you know, having him around can be a bit of a liability seeing how he's the original Coyote. You just never know when he'll get some crazy notion and—”

“Please,” the mayor said, holding up a hand. “Just stop. I need to think. There has to be a way to fix this.”

“There is,” I said. “Call up that guy's boss and pass along my message. Tell her if she wants to escalate she won't have time to strike back. She sends bombers, we'll drop them from the sky. She sends troops, they'll be slaughtered. We will utterly destroy her and her people. Dragons will reduce their headquarters to rubble and then we'll scorch the earth where it stood.”

“I can't tell her that.”

My gaze narrowed.

“She won't believe a word of it.”

“Then what you need to do is call the fed's paranormal task force

and tell them. They'll understand the threat is real. If everybody just leaves this city alone, everything goes back to normal." I thought of the crows who already patrolled the city, day and night. "We have eyes everywhere. We'll know if someone's trying to play us. And if they do, I'll personally declare war on the whole of your government and bring it down."

"You...you can do that?"

"What do you think?"

"I'll make the call," she said.

"Oh," I said. "Also tell them I want the immediate return of each and every person they already kidnapped and deported from the city."

"Is that it?" she asked, in a tone that sounded like she might be just humouring me.

"Yup. Just remember to tell them everything I told you. Don't leave anything out."

She reached for the phone, then paused. "Aren't you afraid that this will put you in their sights? That they'll actively come after you now?"

I laughed. "You don't think they've tried? They leave us alone because any one of us can build an army from a thousand worlds. We can walk into your most secure locations, render your security and weapons useless. We can pluck your bombers from the sky, decimate your tech networks, bring the whole country to its knees. You might think you rule this world but you're only here on our sufferance. The fed's task force knows this. If they want to maintain the peace, it's simple. Leave us alone."

"You'd do all that for illegal immigrants?"

"You're all immigrants in our eyes. Who says one has more rights than the other? But if you want to bear down on your rule of law... that pregnant woman I mentioned earlier? She was a citizen. So were a good third of the abductees we rescued—they were citizens or people here 'legally.'" I was sure she understood how ridiculous that last word was from my tone.

I smiled and gave her a wolfish grin full of teeth, before I added, "And besides. I don't stand for bullies."

Then I stepped out of her office into an otherworld of big forests and bigger skies where I finally felt like I could breathe. I shifted to my wolf shape and started running.



ONCE UPON A TIME there were people who needed a hero. Instead they got me. I thought this was a story about cousins, but it turns out it's a faerie tale. Because once upon a time a boy made friends with a wolf and when the time came that he needed help, just like in a faerie tale, that wolf was ready to answer his call.

Because that's what friends do.

AFTERWORD

If you liked this free story—heck even if you didn't—you might consider making a donation to organizations like these, or similar ones in your own neighbourhood:

ACLU of Minnesota

<https://www.aclu-mn.org/>

ACLU of Southern California

<https://www.aclusocal.org/>

Immigrant Rapid Response Fund

<https://www.wfmn.org/funds/immigrant-rapid-response/>

Or you could donate to your local food bank.

In the real world we don't have folks like Bo and his friends to step up to help us but we do have each other. Stay strong, be kind, and know your rights!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charles de Lint is a Canadian author with more than eighty published adult, young adult and children's books. Widely recognized in his field, he has won the World Fantasy, Aurora, Sunburst, and White Pine awards, among others. He has been inducted into the Canadian SF & Fantasy Association Hall of Fame and received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the World Fantasy Organization. De Lint is also a poet, musician, songwriter, performer and folklorist, and has written a monthly book review column for *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* for decades. He makes his home in Ottawa, Ontario, with his pup Joey Strummer ("The Only Dog That Matters"). For more information, visit his website at www.charlesdelint.com, join him on www.patreon.com/charlesdelint or hang out with him and like-minded souls at the Mythic Café (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/114379772019551>)

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Under My Skin (young adult novel, Penguin Canada, 2012; Triskell Press, 2012)

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Triskell Press, 2014)

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Muse and Reverie (collection, Tor, 2009)

The Mystery of Grace (novel, Tor, March 2009)

Woods & Waters Wild (collection, Subterranean Press, 2008)

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Dreams Underfoot (collection, Tor, 1993)
I'll Be Watching You (novel, as Samuel M. Key; Berkley, 1994)
Spiritwalk (collection, Tor, 1992)
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