"Who did?" I said, although it was pretty clear who 'he' was.

"Some big guy, he came up here and barged in on us. Zak told me to hide, and tried to fight him off, but it didn't do any good the guy was too strong for him. He knocked Zak cold and carried him off."

"Oh, damn," I said, sinking to the floor.

I sat there on the floor, not thinking or anything for I don't know how long. 'Diva was just as bad off as I was, I remember noticing that she was a sick shade of greyish-black, but I couldn't think of anything to do about it.

I was still like that when Diane came in.

"I'm back!" she sang out, "My folks said to say 'hi' to you, so Hi!"

I didn't say anything, I just blinked at her.

"What happened this weekend?" she said, noticing the room. "It looks like you had a fight in here."

Tears rolled down my face. Diane realized that she must have said the wrong thing and dropped to her knees beside me

"Kandace? What's wrong?" she asked. "Did somebody hurt you? Do you want me to call the police or the hall director or something?"

"No," I said, the sound of my voice startling both of us. "They couldn't help me."

"No police!" 'Diva said. some of her color beginning to return.

"What the hell is that?" Diane said, recoiling back at the sound of 'Diva's voice.

"Diva, this is Diane. she's my roommate." I said. "Diane, I'd like you to meet 'Diva, she's a will-o-the-wisp."

"A what?" Diane said. 'Kandace, have you completely flipped?"

"No," I said. "I'm perfectly sane."

"For some reason I doubt that," Diane said. "What happened here? Why's the room a wreck?"

I started out very calmly explaining to Diane what had happened over the weekend. She sat next to me on the floor, not daring to interrupt, because my voice became more and more shrill as I went on. By the time I finished I was almost completely hysterical, I was on my feet and ranting
like a mad woman. 'Diva joined in, flying around me like a tiny red moon around a giant storm covered planet. Diane sat there, eyes wide, mouth open.

"You can't be serious," she said.

"Look at me and tell me I'm not!" I screamed. "I'm as serious as death right now!"

"Are you sure it's Colin?" Diane said.

"Yes, there's nobody else it could be," I said.

"Then do you have any idea where he might have taken him?"

"No," I said, reaching up to pull at my hair.

The phone rang and all three of us jumped. I reached for it but Diane was too fast for me.

"Hello?" she said. "Oh, it's you, Colin."

"Give me that damn phone!" I yelled, lunging for it. Diane turned away from me.

"No, Colin, I'm afraid I can't let you talk to her right now. You can give me a message though if you'd like. Uh-huh. at the reservoir this afternoon at six. All right, I'll tell her," she hung up the phone.

"How could you?" I yelled, "You should have let me talk to him."

"You're in no condition to talk to him," Diane said. "You'd have ended up ranting and raving at him and you wouldn't have found out where he wants to meet you and then how would you get Zak back?"

"You mean you believe me?" I said, incredulously.

"Well, I really don't have much of a choice do I?" she said. "I haven't known you that long, but I do know that you aren't crazy. And if you had just gone schizzo, Colin wouldn't be playing along with it. If anything, he'd probably have you committed by now."

I stood there staring at Diane with my mouth open. It's kind of hard to describe how I felt. I guess guilty and surprised come close to it. You know that sick feeling you get in your stomach when you realize that you've misjudged someone? Well, I had it. Oh, boy did I ever have it.

"So what should we do now?" Diane asked.

"I suppose we should get ready," I said. "It's going to take a while to drive out to the reservoir and I have to finish getting ready to go."

"Go where?" Diane asked.

"I'm going with Zak," I said.
“Figures,” Diane said, nodding. “I guess I don’t really blame you, but what are you going to tell your dad?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’ve kind of been avoiding thinking about that.”

“Well, you’re going to have to tell him something,” she said. “It wouldn’t be fair for you to just pull up stakes and go without telling him at all.”

“I know,” I said. “I’ll think about that after we get Zak back.”

We spent the rest of the afternoon getting me ready to go. This was when I told the hall director everything [Well, not everything, just that I was transferring schools and that I needed to get as much of the paperwork out of the way as possible now,] and sold my books back and stuff. Diane has promised to take care of a lot of the extra paperwork for me that I couldn’t finish myself.

We packed up Diane’s car around four thirty and Diane drove us out to the reservoir. I fidgeted and fussed the entire drive out there. I have no idea how Diane put up with me, because I would have popped myself one after the first ten minutes.

The sun was already half set by the time we got there. Colin’s car was parked close to the water, as far away from the other cars as he could get. I was out of the car and running before Diane could stop the engine.

“Colin, you bastard where are you?!” I yelled. “Get out here and show yourself!”

“Take it easy, Kandy,” Colin’s voice said from the other side of his car. “You’re going to give yourself a heart attack if you don’t learn to relax.”

Diane ran up behind me and grabbed me to keep me from lunging at him over the car.

“Where’s Zak?” I yelled

“He’s fine,” Colin said. “The two of us have been having a nice little chat, haven’t we Zak?”

A moan came from the back seat of Colin’s car. I screamed.

“You bastard, what do you want?” I yelled.

The smirk disappeared from Colin’s face and was replaced by an agonized look.

“I want you to stay, Kandy,” he said, forcefully.

“What?” I said, incredulously.

“Zak told me what you were planning on doing,” Colin said. “I don’t want you to go. I
want you to stay with me!"

"Colin, I don’t even like you,” I said, trying to inject a little reality into the situation.

"So?” Colin yelled in a tortured voice. “You could come to like me! You’ve never really
given me a chance!”

"Colin, I don’t want to stay,” I snapped. “I’m not about to give up my dream for you.”

"But why?” he took a step forward, coming around the car toward me. “Why can’t you
just stay here? Why can’t you be normal?”

"Because I’m not!” I said. “For God’s sake Colin, you’ve known that ever since I met
you! Why can’t you accept that?”

"I was hoping that you would grow out of it,” Colin said sulkily. “I mean, you’re twenty
one years old. You can’t live in a fantasy world forever.”

"That’s where you’re wrong.” I said, with a small bark of laughter. “I’m going to spend
the rest of my life in a fantasy world and nobody, least of all you, is going to stop me.”

Colin’s face darkened. “Oh, really?” he said. "How far do you think you’re going to get
without Loverboy here?”

"What do you mean?” I said, my mouth going dry again. "What are you going to do?”

Colin smiled.. "What do you think, Kandy?"

"Oh, God, Colin, you can’t kill him,” I said. "You can’t want me that much, do you?"

"Yes,” Colin said.

"Please, Colin,” I said, moving toward him, shaking my head. "Please, Don’t kill him.
You don’t really want to do that.”

I kept walking and talking, trying to distract him, hoping that I could take him out before he
could do anything stupid or crazy. I was hoping that he wouldn’t see me as a threat, despite the
fact that I’ve knocked him on his ass before. I was actually praying for him to be a sexist asshole,
hoping that I could use that to my advantage.

I got within three feet of him before he grabbed my wrist. That was when instinct took
over. I grabbed his wrist and spun around, trying for a shoulder flip, but he was expecting it. He
grabbed me around the neck, pulling me partially off my feet. I hung there, helpless for a moment,
clawing at his wrist, trying to break his grip, when all of a sudden he went limp and collapsed to
his knees. I shoved him backwards so he wouldn’t land on top of me. My extra weight on his
chest knocked the wind out of him. I wriggled free and stood up.

Diane was standing behind him, grinning at me and holding a big stick. She'd come up behind him and knocked him cold.

"Thanks," I said, rubbing my throat. I was going to have a nasty bruise the next day.
"Don't mention it," she said.

We got Zak out of the back of the car and carried him over to Diane's. As far as I could tell he wasn't seriously hurt, mainly just a few bruises.

"C'mon," Diane said. "Let's go!"

"Just a second," I said, walking back over to Colin's unconscious body. Flipping him over with my foot, I reached down and pulled out his wallet. I took all the cash and his credit card. I also took his car keys out of the ignition and threw them into the water. The splash they made was the sweetest sound I've ever heard.

I walked back over to Diane's car and got in.

"Okay, now let's get out of here," I said.

Diane drove us to a motel located on the interstate about thirty miles from the reservoir. It was one of those places that a lot of truckers stay at. There were two or three big Peterbilts sitting in the parking lot. I used Colin's credit card to get us a nice big double room. I wasn't worried about being busted for the theft since by the time Colin would be able to report it, I'd be long gone from here.

We carried Zak into the room and laid him out on the bed. He rolled over and fell asleep. While he was out, Diva and I patched him up.

"Are you going to need me to drive you anywhere?" Diane asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I'll have to ask Zak when he wakes up. Do you mind staying overnight?"

"No," she said. "Do you think we'll be safe here?"

"Yeah," I said. "Colin's going to be out for a while and even if he's come to by now, it's going to take him a while to get to a phone or someplace to tell anybody."
"Okay," she said. "I'll stay tonight."

Diane and I took one bed and we let Zak sleep in the other. He woke up once in the night, and tried to leave the room. He didn't know where he was and panicked. It took both me and 'Diva to get him back to bed.

The next day Zak was feeling better. His face and my neck were both sore. I sounded like hell, but I felt good despite it.

"Diane was wondering if we needed her to drive us someplace else," I told Zak over a breakfast of Pop-Tarts and coffee. "I told her that I had to ask you. So, do we?"

"Yeah, if she can take us someplace out in the country away from everybody, that'll be fine," he said.

"That shouldn't be too hard," Diane said. "I mean, this is Indiana, if we can't find some out of the way place around here, there isn't one to be found."

Zak smiled at her.

"So," I said. "Will you be able to do the recharging spell?"

"Yeah," Zak said. "It won't be too tough now. I've got the spell down cold, it's just a matter of doing it now."

Diane drove us out to a cornfield in the middle of nowhere. When we got here, Zak and I took our stuff out of her trunk and carried it over to a spot about two hundred feet from the car, just in case something goes wrong. Zak has almost finished the spell; I can't tell you exactly what he did, because I didn't understand it all. That and I'm too busy rushing to get this letter done. I can tell you, from what I did see, that it's kind of an anticlimax after everything else that's happened.

I've said my good-bye's to Diane and I told her to be careful around Colin because he isn't going to be happy with her when he finally makes it back to campus. She says not to worry about her and to be careful myself. She also says that she'll help you run interference with the University if you want. She's the one who'll be bringing you this letter.

I'm sorry I had to say good-bye like this, Dad, I love you.

Kandace
Introduction to 'Sloth':

I've saved the longest and the most involved story for the end. I thought that that would only be fair.

I've heard authors say time and again that a story has developed a mind of its own and run off with them, getting bigger and bigger. Stephen King's Christine started out as a short story. When I first started 'Sloth' I thought that it would be no more than about thirty or so pages, just long enough to even out the rest of this anthology, since only two stories seemed a little small to me. At last count it was fifty-two pages long and I've begun referring to it as my demon child. People in the computer labs when I was printing it up were asking me if it were for a class so they could make sure they didn't sign up for it.

'Sloth,' as you'll soon discover, is a little different from the other two stories in this anthology. For one thing, it's about as long as the other two put together. But more importantly than that, it is almost a blending of the themes of the other two. You're going to meet strange and unusual aliens living in a fantasy environment, but the world they live on is an alternate earth, one where the elves didn't go away and the magic didn't die.

This is by far the most complex story I've ever written and it's the one that took the least amount of time. I wrote this monster of a story in about two months as opposed to the year it took me for both 'Styx' and 'A Letter Home.'
Sloth

The phone rang. Langley Scath sat up as if Death had just called her name and grabbed the receiver before it got the chance to ring again.

"Hello?" she snapped.

"Where's Sloth?" her grandmother asked.

"What?" Grandma had this annoying habit of starting phone conversations with you right before you picked up the receiver and expecting you to catch up.

"Where's Sloth? She hasn't been home yet and I thought she might be with you."

"If she is here I'd better not find her," Langley growled. "Last time she came over she nearly cleaned out our refrigerator."

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "You're sure you haven't seen her?" Grandma asked, her voice rising in pitch.

Langley woke up completely at the tone of her grandmother's voice. Grandma sounded worried. Correction, she sounded scared, like there was something more to this that she wasn't letting herself think about.

"No, Grandma, I haven't," Langley said gently. "When did you last see her?"

"Two days ago, she went with some of the cousins to the Hammers of God rally at the park downtown."

"What? Why?" Langley asked. Elves went to H.O.G. functions about as often as blacks went to Klan meetings. Or Jews to meetings of the American Nazi Party. The Hammers were a radical fundamentalist religious/political organization that thought all non-clerical magic came from Satan and that all non-human races in general and dark elves like Grandma in particular were the kissing cousins of the demons of Hell. Half elves like Langley were the lowest order of degenerate filth in their book.

"To harass the preachers that's why," Grandma sounded proud of them. "A lot of the neighborhood kids went. If your aunts hadn't had to work the late shift and needed a baby-sitter, I'd've gone too."

Langley rolled her eyes. That sounded like her grandmother, her cousins too for that matter. Self destructiveness seemed to run in the family. The old lady had only recently stopped riding her motorcycle. Langley had made her quit because her reflexes
were beginning to go. Nearly ending up as a hood ornament for a Mack truck had been the final convincer.

“So did the others come home?” she asked, before Grandma could start in about how terrible it was when you couldn’t even enjoy the simple pleasures of life any more.

“Yes,” Grandma said. “But Sloth didn’t come back with them.”

It figures, Langley thought. Knowing Sloth, she was probably curled up under a bridge or in an alley somewhere ‘camping out.’

“Who all went?” Langley asked.

“Sloth, Danielle, Menk, Joseph and Lechery,” Grandma said.

“And everybody but Sloth got home? Wasn’t anybody watching her?” Langley said. “They know she needs to be watched.”

“I told Menk to, but you know how he is,” Grandma said.

Langley did. Oh boy, did she ever! Out of all of her cousins. Menk was the only one that Langley thought really ought to have been drowned at birth. He was a vain, self-centered overgrown brat who, for some reason believed that he was really a human under some kind of evil enchantment. All of the evidence to the contrary, like the fact that both of his parents were full-blooded dark elves, did nothing to persuade him that he wasn’t. If anything, it made his convictions even stronger.

Langley thought for a moment.

“Is there any chance that Sloth went home with somebody else after the rally?” she asked.

“No, they said the cops showed up about halfway through and they all took off,” Grandma said.

“You checked all her regular haunts?” Langley said, hopefully. “Cemetery, movie theater, library? Did you call the Goldfarthings? You know that she likes to hang out with Nemo and watch those old Godzilla movies.”

Langley felt her grandmother’s glare burn into her over the phone. “No,” she said frostily, “Why didn’t I think of that? Of course we did, what kind of idiot do you think I am? I talked to Archie and he said she wasn’t there— that he hadn’t seen her and that he thought I should keep her away from his son. And I told him to take his light elf attitude
and..."

"Okay, so she’s not at any of her regular spots," Langley interrupted. "Are you sure she didn’t get picked up by the cops?"

"Positive. Menk went back and checked and they hadn’t seen her."

"Damn. Look, it’s too hard to try and figure this out over the phone. Give me an hour and I’ll be over. That’ll give you a chance to find Menk and the others."

Her grandmother hung up.

While she was in the shower, Langley mulled over the possibilities. Sloth was a narcoleptic. She could have fallen asleep somewhere, woken up and just decided to stay there. In fact, it wasn’t unusual for her to disappear from the house for two or three days at a time. She was worse than a cat that way.

Sloth was Langley’s favorite cousin. They were exactly fourteen years apart in age, but they still had a lot of things in common. Both of them had been raised by Grandma, both were only children and both had mothers who left something to be desired.

Actually, when Langley thought about it, she would rather have had Sloth’s mother. Despite the fact that she was currently serving thirty years for attempted murder, Danielle really wasn’t that bad. The way Langley looked at it at least Sloth knew where her mother was. Langley’s mother had left her with her father after their divorce because she’d wanted to go find herself and didn’t want the trouble of lugging around a half-dark elf daughter.

Bitter? Langley asked herself. Oh, a tad.

Langley climbed out of the shower and wrapped herself in a bath sheet. Despite her grandmother’s assurances that they had checked all of Sloth’s regular haunts, she decided to call the Goldfarthings herself. She’d ask Wendy Archie’s wife, if she’d seen Sloth. Wendy was a whole lot nicer. Wendy was who the ancients had had in mind when they’d come up with the idea of a Mother Goddess.

And if she’s not there, then what? Langley thought.

That left the one possibility that she didn’t even want to think about. That the
Hammers, or someone connected with them had gotten Sloth. Langley pushed that thought, as well as some nasty memories about getting beaten up by Hammers in high school out of her mind.

Langley put on jeans, her Silk Toxic T-shirt and tennis shoes. After eating a breakfast consisting of Pop-Tarts and chocolate milk, she felt ready to face calling the Goldfarthings. Picking up the phone in the kitchen she dialed the number.

It rang three times before Wendy answered.

“Hello?” she said. As usual, her voice was pleasant. Langley couldn’t understand how she could always be so cheerful. Especially since she’d been married to Archie Goldfarthing, the world’s scruffiestest man, human or elf, for nearly thirty-five years.

“Hi, Wendy, this is Langley Scath,” Langley said.

“Hi, Langley,” Wendy said happily. “How’ve you been? It seems like forever since I’ve talked to you.”

“I’m doing okay. Uh, I was wondering, have you seen Sloth?”

Wendy thought for a moment. “No, not since last weekend, why?”

Langley quickly explained. “Grandma called me this morning, she’s kind of worried about her.”

“Well, I don’t blame her,” Wendy said. “I tell you what, I’ll ask Nemo when he wakes up and if he’s seen her, I’ll have him give you a call.”

Mentally, Langley moved Wendy to the top of her choice of mother’s list.

“Wendy, if you could do that for me, I’d really appreciate it. Oh, if I’m not home, just call my grandmothers house or call the office and leave a message on the machine. I’ll get it somehow.”


“Take care. Wendy,” Langley hung up.

Langley sat on the kitchen stool and rubbed distractedly at her knee, the one that had been broken by a couple of Hammer Youth when she was in high school.

“Damn,” she muttered to herself before going upstairs to tell Alyssa that she was going over to her grandmother’s.
Alyssa was Langley's best friend and partner. They had met during their freshman year of college. At first, they'd simply been next-door neighbors, but over the course of their first semester, they had both ended up hating the roommate they had been assigned. Fortunately for them, their roommates also became good friends and asked them if they'd mind if Langley moved in with Alyssa.

"I can be packed and ready to move in an hour," Langley had said.

Alyssa had been majoring in Comparative Thaumatology, while Langley was a Criminology major with dreams of starting her own detective agency. Alyssa was human and Langley was half dark elf and half human. In spite of what some people would have considered to be irreconcilable differences, the two of them became good friends. Even more surprising to some, the friendship had lasted past college and even through the first few rocky years of the opening of their detective agency.

Langley went quietly upstairs to Alyssa's half of the house. She took a quick glance into Alyssa's office and shook her head. As usual, the place was a mess. Langley had never been able to understand how Alyssa was able to work under such conditions. She'd always thought that magic users were supposed to be orderly.

Alyssa was still asleep. For once, she'd been the one who'd gotten in late. She, along with a couple of people in her one of her graduate classes, had gone to an out of town lecture on nature magic and urban dwellers. She'd asked Langley if she'd wanted to come along. Langley had considered it. At the very least, it would have been a chance to get out of the house for the evening and get taken out to dinner. But then, the theoretical workings of magic didn't really interest her, so she'd begged off as tactfully as possible.

Langley looked down at her friend's sleeping form. Alyssa looked so peaceful that it almost seemed a shame to wake her. Then Langley thought about the last time she'd gotten in late and Alyssa had made her get up early to go into the office to work on the books. She smiled. It was payback time.
“Alyssa, wake up,” Langley said, giving Alyssa a shake and reflecting on just how good it felt to be the one saying those two little words instead of the one hearing them.

Alyssa groaned and rolled over. “What?”

“I have to go over to Grandma’s. Sloth’s missing,” she said.

“Again? She’s probably sleeping in the park again. Have one of your cousins check.”

“They’ve already looked. She’s not in any of her regular haunts.” Langley paused, getting up the nerve to say it. “I think Grandma’s going to want me to look for her.” There, it was out; she’d said it.

“Is she going to pay you?” Alyssa asked, her eyes drilling into Langley.

“I don’t know. Probably.” Langley studied the poster on the wall over Alyssa’s bed. It was a copy of the Escher painting of hands drawing each other. Alyssa had had it ever since college, and Langley always found it fascinating at times like this.

Alyssa sighed and sat up. “Langley, I know your family means a lot to you but we can’t afford to work for free.”

“I know, I know. But it’s not like she can afford to pay us either. Especially not our regular rates,” Langley said. “Besides, she’s helped us out more than once. Remember when we couldn’t pay the rent?”

Alyssa nodded. “I know, but we have other clients to worry about. Sloth’ll probably come home on her own. She always has before.”

“Yeah, probably. But things are a little different this time.” Langley said. Alyssa tilted her head. “How so?”

Langley told her story again. “I hate to even think about it, but I’m afraid she might have been picked up by some of the Hammers and,” Langley swallowed, “well, you know how Hammers are about dark elves.”

Alyssa nodded. Langley wasn’t one to jump to conclusions too often, and she had to admit that she did have a point as far as the Hammers were concerned. Finally, she sighed and looked up at her.

“Give me a minute to get dressed and I’ll come with you.”

Langley awarded her with one of her winning smiles. “Thanks.”
They pulled up in front of Langley's grandmother's house by midmorning. Like all of the other houses in the neighborhood, it needed fixing up, but it was clean. The front yard was littered with bikes, motorcycles, toys, bricks and other assorted junk. In a few places, blades of grass clung to each other for moral support.

A dark elf child, around four or five, stood on the porch clutching a blanket. When he saw the car pull up, he turned and ran inside.

Langley got out of the car, locked her door and checked to make sure the back doors were locked and that Alyssa had locked hers as well. The fact that it was her car wouldn't stop her cousins from trying to steal it. In fact, knowing them it would act as a kind of incentive for them to see if they could get it away from her and get it back without her noticing.

They walked up the cracked sidewalk to the porch. Langley knocked.

"Hey, Grandma, we're here!" she yelled.

Her grandmother came to answer the door. She was a small woman, about five inches shorter than Langley's five feet. Even without the pointed ears it was obvious that she was a full-blooded dark elf. Her grey hair was worn in a traditional dark elf style, long pony tail in back, short on the sides, with two braids on either side of her head just in front of her ears. She looked old and tired. Langley cringed inwardly, feeling somewhat guilty for not spending enough time with her family.

"Good. You're here." Grandma said, holding the door open.

Langley and Alyssa stepped into the house and followed Grandma into the kitchen. The living room was dark, except for the blue light from the TV. Five or six kids between the ages of four and nine were sitting around it raptly watching cartoons.

In the kitchen there were four older dark elf kids, all in their teens. They nodded at Langley and Alyssa when they came in.

"Have a seat," Grandma said. The two kids who were sitting at the kitchen table got up and made a place. It didn't take an empath to see that Grandma was on edge.
Which explained why there were none of the almost traditional welcoming insults between Langley and her cousins.

“Okay,” Langley said. “I know you explained things over the phone, Grandma, but I want to hear them tell the story. What exactly happened?”

The cousins looked at each other, each of them unwilling to be the first to speak. Grandma straightened, swelling up like a cat ready to attack.

“All right, then,” Langley said. “Let’s start with something easy: who’s idea was it to go?”

“Mine,” Menk said. “I thought it’d be fun to hear the Hogs talk and maybe bug them a little bit.”

“Smart,” Langley said. “You were only outnumbered what? A couple hundred to one?”

Menk scowled. “Don’t gimme that Langley a couple years ago you’d a been down there with us.”

“You’ve gotta point, Menk, but I sure as hell would’ve made sure we’d all gotten back!” Langley said sweetly.

Menk came forward a step and Langley stood up, ready to meet him. Two of the cousins grabbed Menk’s arms and Alyssa grabbed Langley’s arm. Grandma put herself between the two of them.

“Break it up,” she said, quietly but with enough force that both of them looked at her. “None of this is getting Sloth found. Menk, you tell Langley what happened. Langley, you shut up and listen.”

“Yes’m,” they both said.

“Like I was saying,” Menk said. “We were down at the park listening to the rally and not doing anything more than yelling a few cat-calls and such at the Hogs. Even Sloth was getting into it, she was actually acting like something other than a zombi for once.

“Everything was great. Then, all of a sudden this Hog starts bothering me. He shoved me, I shoved back. Next thing I know the cops show up to chase us off. Well, we all took off and regrouped a few blocks later and that was when we noticed that Sloth wasn’t with us.”
“Then what did you do?” Langley asked.

“Well, I sent the younger kids home and went back after her.” Menk said, wisely leaving the ‘of course’ unspoken. “I even went over to the station house to see if she’d been picked up. But, no such luck. Not only hadn’t they picked her up, but they hadn’t even seen her.”

“Damn,” Langley muttered. “Not at all?”

“Noope,” said one of the other cousins. “They did say that she might have been picked up by the HOGs security and handed over to some cops from another precinct, but we called all the precincts that could have one and none of them have seen her either.”

“Damn!” Langley said. “And you checked all of her haunts?”

“Yeah, and we made sure she wasn’t in the neighborhood and she’s not upstairs, or under the porch or behind the garage.” Menk said, in a voice that wasn’t quite mocking.

Langley sighed and looked over at Alyssa. “You’re the witch. Any ideas?”

“We could try divining for her,” Alyssa said. “It’s a fairly simple spell.”

“Would it work?” Grandma asked.

“Couldn’t hurt and it might help,” Alyssa said.

“Then do it,” said Grandma. “What do you need?”

“Something of Sloth’s, preferably an article of clothing.” Alyssa said. “Those tend to hold energy longer.”

“Right, I’ll get one of her T-shirts,” Grandma left the room.

“Okay.” Alyssa said. “I need to clear off this table here so I can spread out.”

Langley and one of the cousins began removing things from the table. When the table was cleared, Alyssa reached into her purse and pulled out a city map and a large sewing needle hung on a piece of cord like a necklace. She set the needle down on the table while she spread out the map.

Grandma came back with the T-shirt and handed it to Alyssa. She held the shirt with both hands for a minute, her eyes shut and concentrated before picking up the cord holding the needle with one hand and starting it spinning over the map. All eyes followed the swinging needle and nobody dared breath deeply.
Slowly, the needle’s swinging became more and more definite, as it began to focus on one area of the map. It finally stopped over a side street three blocks from the park. Alyssa waited a moment to be sure that the needle had stopped before pulling out a pencil and marking the spot. Then she started the needle spinning again. It stopped over the same spot. She spun it again. And again it stopped in the same place.

“There she is,” Alyssa said.
“Sure?” Langley asked.
“Yes. Provided she doesn’t leave before we get there, that’s where we’ll find her.”
“Let’s go then,” Grandma said.
“Grandma, I really don’t think you should come. It could be bad. We don’t know what kind of shape she’s in.” Langley paused. “She could be dead.”
“Langley,” Grandma said. “Need I remind you who it was that went to identify your father at the morgue after the shooting?”

Langley swallowed. Her father had been shot in the head by a couple kids with a sawed off shotgun. Needless to say, it had been a closed casket funeral.

“All right, you can come,” Langley said. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Grandma rode in the back seat while Langley drove and Alyssa navigated. They pulled up in front of a run-down hotel and parked the car. Climbing out they stared at the alley for a moment. The alley was littered with trash that hadn’t been picked up for weeks. Dumpsters lined one side of the alley, their trash overflowing and adding to the collection of garbage on the ground. The three women wrinkled their noses at the smell and pressed on.

Langley was doing her best to look in all directions at once, up down, left, right, front and back. So far nothing.

“If she’s left the alley, she could be anywhere by now. Just our luck she’s back at the house, enjoying a good laugh on us. Of course, if she is, she’ll be dead when Grandma gets home. favorite or not.” Langley thought as her eyes swept the ground.
looking for a clue of any kind.

The clue arrived in the form of a Gummi Bear sitting face up in a small puddle of dried blood. Langley stared down at it, eyes wide. Sloth loved Gummi Bears, she always had some with her no matter where she went.

"Grandma! Alyssa!" she yelled. "I got something!"

They came over. When Grandma saw the blood, her eyes narrowed and she appeared to age about fifty years before Langley’s eyes

"Sloth!" she yelled. "Where are you?"

No answer.

"Sloth!"

No answer.

"Sloth answer me, dammit!" Grandma belloved the echo bouncing back and making the dumpsters vibrate. "Where are you?"

From the next dumpster down there was a soft whimper. Sloth had climbed in and buried herself under the trash to hide. She’d always been good at hiding. She had to be since she really couldn’t fight back as well as the rest of the kids could. Becoming overexcited triggered cataleptic attacks, that for all intents and purposes turned her into a rag doll and an easy target.

They all looked at each other, then Grandma and Langley took off running for it, with Alyssa not far behind. Langley beat Grandma there, reached up and swung herself up into it. She knelt down in the trash and started digging. The trash flew out of the dumpster, making the mess in the alley even worse.

She found Sloth just a little ways down. What she found made her want to cry. She looked like somebody, or more likely a group of somebodies, had decided to play Grand Championship Wrestling with her. Her face was a mess, with one eye almost swollen shut and her nose broken. Part of her scalp was hanging forward on one side. The knuckles and sides of both hands were scratched and bruised. The rest of her was covered with assorted cuts and bruises that were all too easy to see through the rips in her clothes. And to top it all off, she looked like she was suffering from shock as well as exposure.
Langley swallowed and called out to Grandma and Alyssa.

"Grandma, go get the blanket and the first aid kit out of the car. Alyssa, go call an ambulance. I saw a pay phone at the end of the street."

"Right," Alyssa said, heading back down the alley.

"How bad is she?" Grandma asked.

"Real bad," Langley said. "Whoever did this to her must’ve really enjoyed himself."

"I want to come up and see her," Grandma said.

"Not now," Langley said. "Just go out to the damn car and get the damn first aid kit!"

Grandma opened her mouth, closed it and followed Alyssa down the alley.

While they waited for the ambulance Langley gave Sloth first aid and with Grandma’s help, got her out of the dumpster. That was how they found out she had no shoes or socks in addition to having lost her jacket. They put the blanket around Sloth and laid her down with her head in Grandma’s lap. Sloth lay there, eyes shut tight, not looking at anyone.

"Will she be all right?" Grandma asked, nervously.

"I think so," Langley said. "I think the worst of it is the blood on her face. Once she’s cleaned up she’ll look a lot better."

Grandma nodded and looked down at Sloth. Gently, she brushed Sloth’s bangs out of her eyes. She was quiet a moment, then looked up at Langley.

"I want you to find out who did this," she said.

"Grandma..." Langley began.

"I’ll pay you, if that’s what you’re worried about," Grandma snapped.

Langley backed off a little, guilt stabbing at her because that had been exactly what she’d been thinking about. "Grandma, it’s not that. It’s just that I don’t think we could. The Hammers protect their own, and there’s no way Alyssa and I could sneak around their headquarters and find out."
"I understand," Grandma said, wearily.

Langley looked down at her grandmother, unable to think of what to say. Luckily for both of them, the ambulance picked this time to arrive and the businesslike activity of the paramedics kept them from having to say anything to each other.

The paramedics loaded the stretcher bearing Sloth into the back of the ambulance. One of the paramedics helped Grandma climb in with her, then followed her in and shut the doors behind her. The ambulance drove off sirens wailing.

"You want me to drive?" Alyssa asked.

"Yeah," Langley said, climbing into the passenger side of the car.

Alyssa got in and started the car. She pulled away from the curb and started off in the same direction as the ambulance. She waited until they were in traffic before she even tried to talk to Langley.

"Your grandmother wants us to find the people who did this to Sloth, doesn't she?" she asked.

Langley stared out the car window. "Yeah."

"What did you tell her?"

"That I didn't think that we could, because we'd have a hell of a time trying to find anything out," Langley said, her voice hard and bitter.

"But you still want to try, don't you?"

"Yeah, but like you said, we can't afford to work for free."

Talk about your words coming back to haunt you, Alyssa thought. It was another few minutes before she spoke again.

"Langley," she said, "I've been thinking. We're going to take this case."

Langley looked over at Alyssa eagerly.

"But you said we couldn't afford it," she said.

"I know, but right now I think finding whoever did this is more important than money. Besides, your grandmother's good for the cash. After all, she did help us make the rent that one time."

"Oh, God, Alyssa, you don't know how happy this'll make her," Langley said, her face lit up for the first time that day. "I'll tell her once we get to the hospital."
At the hospital, Langley found her grandmother pacing the waiting room and cursing in dark elvish almost under her breath.

"What'd they say?" Langley asked.

"Nothing!" Grandma said. "They just wheeled her into the emergency room the second we got here and they haven't told me a thing since then."

"Great," Langley said. "Wait here. I'll see what I can find out."

"No," Alyssa said. "You stay here with Grandma. I'll go."

"She's my cousin," Langley said.

"So who isn't a coak, they'll try and bog you down in bureaucratic red tape, you'll slug somebody and I'll have to bail you out... again."

"I wouldn't!" Langley protested.

"Need I remind you of the nasty incident at the Drop/Add line our sophomore year?" Alyssa said.

"I'll wait here." Langley said, reaching into her pocket for her cigarettes.

Alyssa walked back to the emergency room and looked around. The room was quiet except for a section that had been curtained off. Alyssa could hear someone, the doctor and a nurse or two mumbling amongst themselves as they worked. They didn't sound happy. A nurse came out from behind the curtain and headed for a storage cabinet.

Alyssa walked up to her

"Excuse me, but how's the patient?"

"Are you a member of the family?"

"No, but I'm a friend. The family asked me to come back and see what I could find out. Can you tell me anything about her?"

"She's a mess, but she's going to be all right," the nurse said. "The hardest part of working on her is that we're having to clean her up as we go along. That dunk in the trash dumpster didn't do her any good."
"Is she conscious?"

"No, she was out when she got here and we anesthetized her once we started working," the nurse said, looking back over to the curtained off area. "Excuse me, but I have to get back."

"All right, and thank you," Alyssa said.

Back in the waiting room, Grandma was sitting on the couch waiting while Langley paced, alternately drinking a soda and smoking a cigarette. Both of them looked ready to eat through concrete.

When they saw Alyssa their eyes lit up like sharks at feeding time.

"Well?" they asked. "Did you see her?"

"No, they were still working on her, but I talked to a nurse. She said that Sloth's going to be all right once she's all stitched up."

Grandma gave Alyssa a hug. "Thank God. I'm going to go call her father and let him know what happened.

"Hey yeah, how is Uncle Sidney?" Langley asked. "Is he still working up at Ironwood?"

Grandma's face hardened. "Yes."

Langley paused. "Has he been down here to visit her lately?"

"Not since August, right before school started. She saw him for all of a weekend," Grandma said. "I'll be right back."

"August?" Langley fumed, "That was two months ago, damnit. Sidney, you rotten son of a bitch, how could you?"

"Sidney is Sloth's father?" Alyssa asked.

"Yeah, I thought you knew that?"

"No, I just thought he was her favorite uncle or something." Alyssa said.

"No, he's her father, but he might as well be a stranger for as much attention that he gives her," Langley said. "You see Sidney met Sloth's mom when she was first incarcerated at the prison he used to work at. After Sloth was born, he went to court to get custody of her so she wouldn't end up in a foster home. One of the conditions for him to get custody was that he provide her with a stable home life. Which he did by getting Grandma and me
to agree to take care of her while he worked. Which was great while he still worked here in
town and wasn’t so great when he transferred to the Ironwood facility up-State about four
years ago. He left Sloth with us and promised us and her that he’d come visit her at least
once a month, as well as sending Grandma money to help support her. And at first he did
come down regularly. It got so that Sloth perked up considerably for about a week or so
before he was due to come down. It even took her mind off all the problems she was
having at school.

“Then, after about a year or so, his visits started getting more and more infrequent.
He’d miss a month or two at a time. Oh, sure, he’d send a nice letter explaining that things
were busy and he was needed up at the prison, but that didn’t make Sloth feel any better.
Now, every time he skips a visit she gets depressed and just stays in her room all day and
tries to sleep.”

“Sounds like a wonderful guy,” Alyssa said, dryly.

“Oh, yeah, he and my mom would make a wonderful couple,” Langley said.

“Personally, I think Grandma should sue him for custody of her, but she won’t hear a
word of it.”

“Do you think he’ll come down when he hears about this?”

Langley frowned. “I don’t know. Maybe, but I doubt it.”

“But she’s his daughter!” Alyssa said.

“Yes and she’s also a pretty painful reminder that her mother has another decade or
so to go on her sentence.” Langley said. “I’ll say this much for the son of a bitch, he does
love her mother.”

Grandma came back into the room so mad that her eyes were practically glowing.

“What’d he say?” Langley asked.

“He’s busy,” Grandma said, the words coming out bullet quick. “Ironwood just
went on lock down this morning and he’s one of the few guards that they’re going to keep
on duty until it’s over. He says there’s no way he can get off work, not even for this.”

“Uh-huh,” Langley said. “Funny, I didn’t see anything in the paper today about a
possible lock down at Ironwood. Or on the news.”

“You think he’s lying?” Alyssa said.
“No, I know he’s lying,” Langley said. “Grandma, did you talk to that lawyer at all about getting custody of Sloth?”

“No,” Grandma said.

“Are you going to?”

“No.”

Langley reared up to face her grandmother. “Why not? Jesus, Grandma it’s obvious that he doesn’t want to have anything to do with her. What does it take for you to see that?”

“He does to care about her,” Grandma insisted stubbornly. “She’s his daughter.”

“Grandma, she’s lying in the emergency room half dead and he can’t drag himself away from his lousy job to come see her. He doesn’t care!” Langley was yelling and waving her arms by now. Grandma was staring down at the floor, her face looking like it was made of stone.

“Maybe you’re right.” she said.

Langley softened. “Grandma you know I’m right,” she said. “I know it’s hard to believe but Sidney doesn’t want to have to think about Sloth. You know that’s why he took that job at Ironwood. You should have gotten custody of her then, when he decided to leave, but you didn’t. Now you’re going to have to. You don’t have to think about it now, but will you please call that lawyer?”

“I’ll see,” Grandma said.

Langley knew that was as close to a yes as she was going to get her grandmother for now. Ever since Devon, Langley’s dad, had died. Grandma had had a blind spot as far as Sidney was concerned. She and Langley had had this argument many, many times before, but for once it looked like Langley was actually going to convince her of something.

“Okay, fine.” Langley said. “I’ve got some good news.”

“What?” Grandma asked.

“Alyssa and I are going to find out whoever did this,” Langley said.

“I thought you couldn’t do that sort of thing.” Grandma said, her voice like ice.

Langley and Alyssa both winced at that one
"Well," Langley said. "We talked it over and we think we just might be able to find out who it was. Of course it won't be easy, but we'll give it our best shot."

Grandma nodded graciously. "Thank you."

"You're more than welcome," Langley said. "Have you called home yet?"

"No, not yet. I was too mad after talking to Sidney," Grandma said.

"Why don't you sit down and I'll call," Langley said.

"I'd appreciate that," Grandma said. The ice in her voice was beginning to break up.

Langley smiled. "Anything you want from the house?"

"Yes, tell one of them to pack me some clothes, I'll be staying here tonight."

Langley nodded and headed out toward the payphones. Depositing a quarter, she dialed her grandmother's house. For once it only took them two rings to pick up.

"Hello?" said a guarded voice.

"Hi, Menk." Langley said. "It's Langley. Grandma and I are at the hospital with Sloth, somebody beat the hell out of her and either dumped her in an alley or that's where she ended up hiding herself. Looks like she should be okay, but Grandma wants you to bring her some clothes so she can stay here tonight."

"Do I have to?" Menk asked.

"Seeing as you're the only one there with a driver's license, yes." Langley said.

"Look just toss a few things in a bag and drive them over here, that's all you have to do. What's so hard about that?"

Menk sighed. "I've got stuff to do, you come get it."

Langley gritted her teeth. "Listen, Menk. I have had one real pisser of a day. I got woken up early, dragged back over to the house, had to drag Sloth out of a stinking dumpster and got into another fight with Grandma over Sidney. What I do not need right now is anymore of your shit, so go upstairs, toss a few of Grandma's things into a bag and drive them over here or I will personally call the cops and tell them about that little stash of yours that you keep under the bed, capish?"

"Okay, but I ain't staying long, I gotta meet somebody about a job I did," Menk said.

"Menk, for all I care, after you leave this hospital you can go see the flippin' Queen"
of Faerie,” Langley said. “Be here in twenty minutes or else.”

She hung up and walked back into the waiting room, taking her time so that she could regain her composure.

Back in the waiting room:

“Menk’ll be here in about twenty minutes,” Langley said. “If it’s okay with you, I think we’ll go so we can get started on this investigation.”

“All right.” Grandma said. “Good luck. Call me in a day or so and let me know what you’ve found out.”

“Sure,” Langley leaned over and gave her a hug and a kiss on the cheek. “And don’t worry, we’ll find the bastards.”

Alyssa drove home from the hospital while Langley stared out the window and muttered to herself.

“What do you think our chances of finding out who did this are?” she asked suddenly.

“I don’t know. I’d give us fifty-fifty odds, though,” Alyssa said.

“I dunno, for some reason I’m not that optimistic,” Langley said. “Something about all this bothers me.”

“What?” Alyssa asked.

Langley started to answer and stopped, mouth half open. She closed it and thought. “Well, for one thing, why Menk and the others took Sloth along with them. It’s not something that they would ordinarily do. Most of the time, they act like she’s not even there. It’s like she’s a piece of furniture. The only one who really pays any attention to her is Menk and then only when he’s bored and wants an easy target to harass. He thinks it’s fun to hide her medicine and then harass her until she has a cataplectic fit.”

“That’s sick!” Alyssa said.

“That’s Menk,” Langley said. “He’s always been a little bent like that. Only lately he’s gotten worse. Grandma said that one night he came home drunk and started spouting off about how he wasn’t really a dark elf. That an evil spell had been put on him when he
was little and he’d been turned into a dark elf and sold to his folks. Grandma almost called the cops on him.”

“Jeez, Langley, how did you stand it?” Alyssa asked.

“Stand what?”

“Growing up around all these crazy people.” Alyssa said.

“It wasn’t really that bad,” Langley said. “For the most part, my family’s pretty normal. My other cousins are fine, albeit a little rebellious, but no more so than any other family in the neighborhood. In fact, I could point out half a dozen families that are worse than ours is by a long shot.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Alyssa said.

“I’m hungry.” Langley said.

“You want to get some take out or do you want to cook?”

“Take out.” Langley said. “When we get home all I want to do is eat and watch TV.”

Alyssa pulled into a McDonald’s.

“Drive through or go in?”

Langley shrugged. “Drive through. I guess.”

“Okay, what do you want?”

“Usual.”

Alyssa pulled the car around to the drive-up speaker.

“May I help you?” a tinny voice said.

“Yes, I’ll have one chunky chicken salad, two large fries, a Diet Coke, two regular hamburgers, a chocolate shake and an apple pie.”

Alyssa leaned out the window and yelled.

The tinny voice repeated the order. “Is that all?”

“Yes.”

“That’ll be $8.70. Please pull around.”

Alyssa paid for the food and drove home. Instead of going back to muttering, Langley started playing with the radio, much to Alyssa’s chagrin.
When they got home, Alyssa's familiar, Desdemona was waiting for them. She was a Jellicle cat, one of the oldest breeds of familiars named after the famous cats in the T. S. Eliot poems. Desdemona, or Desi, was a big grey and black cat with tabby markings and a mischievous disposition.

"It's about time you got home," she said. "I've been waiting all day. Why didn't you leave me a note?"

"Sorry, Desi," Langley said. "We left the house in kind of a hurry."

"What's so important you couldn't leave a note?"

Langley forced herself not to get mad. Desi wasn't being selfish, she didn't know better yet.

"You remember my cousin Sloth?" she asked.

"The narcoleptic? Yeah, I slept on her the last time she came over."

"Yeah, well, she disappeared a couple days ago and Grandma wanted Alyssa and I to find her. We did, in an alley over by the park. Somebody'd done a number on her and she'd hid herself in a dumpster to get away. We've been at the hospital with her."

Desi's eyes grew wide. "Oh," she said. "I understand about the note now. Sorry."

"S'okay," Langley said. "We got McDonald's you want a burger?"

"Sure!" Desi said, racing into the kitchen.

They piled the feast from McDonald's onto regular plates and carried everything into the living room. Langley used the remote control to turn the TV on. A news report about the Hammers of God rally was on. She tried another network, but it was no use, they were there too. Same for the other two national networks. She finally settled on the classic movie station which was showing Disney's Peter Pan. Lately there had been a movement among certain circles of the nonhuman community to wipe out all references to the Fey as cute and/or evil creatures. While Langley admitted that the Disney adaptation of Peter Pan, in fact most adaptations of Peter Pan for that matter, were nothing compared to the original book, she did believe that it was a great way to spend an evening. Especially if the Hammers were on.
After they had finished eating Alyssa decided that it was time to get them back on track.

"Okay, so what's our next move?" she asked.

"Dunno," Langley said. "Until we can talk to Sloth we really have no idea who or what we're looking for."

"Yeah, but we don't know when she'll decide to wake up," Alyssa said, "So it might no hurt to do a little brainstorming before then."

"What d'you mean?"

"Well, for one thing: why would the Hammers want to beat up Sloth?"

Langley looked at Alyssa as though she'd grown a stalk out of her forehead with a third eye on it. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe because she's a dark elf and makes one hell of an easy target?"

"Yes, but why her in particular? She wasn't the only one there harassing them. Just about every minority group in town had at least one representative there. They could have just as easily gotten somebody else."

"Yeah, but when Menk and the others took off, Sloth ran too slow to get away," Langley said. "Remember what Menk said..."

"That's just it, Langley, remember what Menk said. I'm surprised you didn't give him a harder time of it. You're the one who's always going on about what a dishonest jackass he is. What in the hell made you think he'd tell you the truth this time?"

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that I don't think you got the whole story out of him and that it might be a good idea to ask one of the others what happened. Especially Sloth."

"You've got a point," Langley said.

"You're damn right I've got a point." Alyssa said. "Besides, there's something a little suspicious about some of Sloth's injuries."

"Like what?"

"Did you get a good look at Sloth's wrists?"

"Other than seeing that they were cut up, no, not really. Why?"
“Well,” said Alyssa, “I’m not exactly sure but it looked to me like she had bruises on the sides of her hands. like they’d been squeezed or something. Now that could have come from being rough handled, but I don’t think so. You remember that time you put on those old handcuffs Nemo has? The ones without the keys?”

Langley blushed. “Yeah. It was a good thing I hadn’t tightened them too much because I had to squeeze my hands out... oh hell! Lyssa if you weren’t a woman and if it weren’t against my nature. I’d marry you.”

“A simple thank you will do,” Alyssa said, dryly.

The next morning, Langley woke up with a nice dirty sweat sock taste in her mouth. She hadn’t slept well the night before, thanks to a series of wonderful dreams about a group of Hammers chasing her through back alleys. She’d finally woken up about the time they’d caught her. She wondered if there was something Freudian about the fact that her mother had been at the head of the mob.

She swung herself out of bed and padded into the bathroom. Looking at herself in the mirror almost drove her back to bed, but she steeled herself to the sight and started brushing her teeth.

Alyssa was already there eating breakfast with Desdemona.

“Morning,” Langley said.

“Morning. How’re you feeling?”

“Okay, had a bunch of nightmares, but other than that I’m fine.”

“I know about the nightmares,” Desdemona said. “You were practically radiating fear and terror last night. It gave me a headache.”

“Sorry, Desi” Langley said.

“It’s okay, if one of my cousins had been beaten up by Hammers I’d have nightmares too.”

she said. “So, are we going to drink their blood or what?”

Langley looked at Alyssa. “She’s your familiar,” she said.
“Yes, but you’re the one who taught her to say things like that,” Alyssa said. “In fact, if I remember right, you’re the one who taught her how to swear.”

“Who, me?” Langley said, feigning innocence. “Desi, did I teach you how to swear?”

“Hell, no!” Desi said.

That afternoon, Langley, Alyssa and Desdemona walked into the hospital and up to the receptionist.

“We’re here to see Sloth Scath,” Langley said. “She was admitted yesterday.”

“Relation to the patient?” the receptionist asked.

“I’m family and we’re investigating what happened to her,” Langley handed the receptionist one of their business cards.

“Can I see your licenses, please?” the receptionist asked.

They handed over their wallets. Alyssa also showed the receptionist her magus license and the permit that allowed Desdemona to be admitted just about anywhere since familiars had the same rights as seeing eye dogs.

“All right,” the receptionist said. “She’s in room 455. You have an hour.”

“Thank you.”

They rode the elevator up to the fourth floor. Sloth’s room was down the hall and to the right. When they got there, Sloth was awake and watching TV.


“Grandma had to go home because Menk called and said he was leaving and if she wasn’t there in half an hour he was going to let the kids burn the house down. She’s pissed.” Sloth smiled and her eyes lit up. “This place is great! They’re actually making me stay in bed. I can sleep as much as I want and nobody bothers me. They feed me in here, in bed and I can watch as much TV as I want, when I want because the lady next to me is in a coma. And I’m not stuck watching the little kids and Menk’s not here.”

Langley smiled. “Sloth, don’t ever change.”

Sloth looked confused. “I wasn’t planning to.”

Langley changed the subject. “We brought you something.”
Sloth perked up again. “Cigs, beer, what?”

“Dream on, Speedy,” Langley said. “You’re underage and you’re in the hospital.”

“Then what is it?” Sloth asked.

Langley handed Sloth a paper bag. “See for yourself.”

Sloth gave her a pained look. “Hurts to move my fingers.”

Langley looked at her hands. Both arms were bandaged from the tips of her last two fingers to midwrist. She reached over and opened the bag for her, pulling out two Wolverine comics, a six pack of Jolt Cola (“All the sugar and twice the caffeine.”) Sloth loved the stuff, and according to her doctor, if it didn’t do any good, at least it made her feel better, and a handful of Charms blowpops.

“Blowpops?” Sloth asked.

“Trust me, when you can’t smoke, they’re great,” Langley said.

Sloth shrugged, then winced. She looked up at the two of them.

“I suppose you want me to tell you what happened, huh?” she said, her voice returning to its usual sleepy drawl.

“Yeah, Sloth,” Langley said. “D’you mind?”

Sloth rubbed at her face with her left hand. “Guess not.” she said, sounding all of fourteen and scared now.

“Just take your time, Sloth, no need to rush,” Alyssa said.

Langley leaned over and whispered in Alyssa’s ear. “Are you kidding? This is Sloth we’re talking about. We’ve only got an hour.”

“Don’t worry,” Alyssa whispered back. “Desdemona’s going to monitor her; she should be able to pick up things that we probably won’t be able to get Sloth to talk about.”

“Okay, if you think so,” Langley asked. “Sloth, Menk told us his side. And you know Menk, so I want yours.”

Sloth blinked twice. “Well, I was sittin’ on the porch watching the little kids when Menk came over to see if I wanted to go with them. I dunno why he asked me, most times he acts like I’m a piece of furniture or something.”

“Anyway, we got to the Park after the thing had already started, so most of the good spots were taken by other folks. We had to settle for a spot under a tree on the far left
of the platform near a buncha the HOGlets.”

“HOGlets?” Alyssa leaned over and asked Langley.

“Slang for the Hammer Youth groups,” Langley explained. “Give the enemy a stupid name and he loses some of his power to frighten you.”

Sloth continued. “So we ended up near these guys and started yelling stuff at the guy on stage. Menk went a little bit nuts, started yellin’ and screamin’ all kinds a crazy stuff at the guy. Even went so far as to yell stuff at the HOGlets near us.”

“What’d they look like?” Langley asked.

“Typical jocks,” Sloth said. “Kinda like those guys at school who always used to beat you up, Langley. You remember them?”

“Every time it rains,” Langley said. Then to change the subject. “So, Menk started harassing these guys, then what?”

“Well, he went over kinda close to them and started saying stuff about their mothers and they took off after us. So we scattered and started running. I don’t know where the others went, but Menk and I kinda ran together for a minute or two before he shoved me off toward a bush. I guess he was trying to help me get away or something, but it didn’t work because I ended up running right into two of them.”

“Wait a minute,” Langley said. “Menk tried to help you? Our cousin Menk? The one who believes in a Menkocentric universe?”

Sloth thought about that for a moment. “Uh, yeah.”

“And it was the HOGlets who came after you, not the cops?” Alyssa asked.

“Yeah, cops weren’t really there and they weren’t really trying to stop us,” Sloth said.

Langley and Alyssa looked at each other.

“Alyssa can I talk to you out in the hallway for a moment?”

“Sure,” Alyssa said, “Desi, would you stay here and talk to Sloth, please?”

“Sure,” Desi said, leaping onto Sloth’s bed and walking up to sit in her lap. In the hallway, Langley walked down about twenty feet from Sloth’s room.

“What’s all this about?” Alyssa asked.

“Something’s bothering me about this. Why didn’t Menk say anything about trying
to help Sloth get away?"

"Probably because he doesn’t want to destroy his tough guy image," Alyssa said.

"No, it doesn’t wash. Menk isn’t like that. He’s a self-centered egotistical bastard who’d sell his own mother if he thought that there was something in it for him."

"Then he was probably trying to get some brownie points with your Grandma for having lost her in the first place," Alyssa said.

"Yeah, maybe," Langley wasn’t convinced.

"Look, we’ll work this out later. For now, let’s finish talking to Sloth before our time’s up."

Langley let Alyssa drag her back to the room.

When they came back in, Desdemona was sitting in Sloth’s lap, allowing herself to be petted. Sloth’s eyelids were beginning to droop.

"Ready to get back to work?" Alyssa asked cheerfully.

"Guess so," Sloth said, already her eyelids were starting to droop. "What more d’you want to know?"

"What’d they do with you once they caught you?" Alyssa asked.

Sloth closed her eyes and didn’t answer for a few minutes.

"Maybe we’d better go," Langley said. "I think she’s asleep."

"No ‘M not," Sloth said. "Just thinkin’."

"So what happened?" Langley asked.

"Well, for one thing, I tried fightin’ back for all the good it did me," Sloth said, her voice bitter. "I didn’t get the chance to take my pills before we left the house because Menk said we had to get going. You can guess what happened."

"Yeah, you had an attack didn’t you?"

"Yeah," Sloth said, her voice returning to the dull monotone she used most of the time. "If they hadn’t been holding onto me, I’d’ve dropped to the ground. As it was, I twisted one of my ankles."

Sloth closed her eyes again. "They laughed at me. They thought I was scared of them, but I wasn’t. I’ve been beaten up too many times by worse people to be scared of assholes like them."
“How many of them were there?” Langley asked.

“Just three: one of them held me up while the other two tied me up. I watched them as well as I could so’s I could get out of it later,” Sloth laughed scornfully. “They used one long piece of rope and wrapped it around my legs and wrists and they thought it would hold me. That’s the easiest possible rope tie to get out of.”

“Where’d the bruises on the sides of your hands come from?” Alyssa asked.

“Oh, well, those’re from the handcuffs, they were the real bitch,” Sloth said, a touch of adolescent bravado in her voice. It was painfully obvious that it was a cover for her fear. “They almost got them too tight.”

“Let me get this straight, Sloth,” Langley said. “You’re complaining because they didn’t tie you tight enough?”

“Well, no, but they could have made it a little harder to get away,” she said, defensively. “I mean, what kinda idiot mages make it that easy for you to get loose?”

“Did you say ‘mages’?” Alyssa asked.

“Yeah, they kept talking about how they were gonna use me for some kinda spell; one that was going to make life better for them and all pure humans everywhere.”


“Hush, Langley,” Alyssa said. She scooted her chair closer to the bed and leaned over to look into Sloth’s half open grey eyes. “Sloth, this is very, very important: what else did they say about the spell. Anything you can tell me, no matter how trivial it seems could be important, so don’t leave anything out.”

Sloth paused for a moment and tried to think. “I dunno, they just said that I was perfect for what they had in mind and that I’d make the perfect vehicle for their war against the impure and a buncha other stuff like that. One of ‘em did ask me if I was a virgin.”

“What’d you say?” Alyssa asked.

“Nothing, I bit him,” Sloth said. “That’s when they beat me up.”

Langley put a hand over her mouth to stifle a laugh.

“Where’d they take you?” she asked.

“To some abandoned building somewhere near that dumpster,” Sloth said.

“Do you think you could find it?” Langley asked.
Sloth’s eyes looked panic-stricken. “You wouldn’t make me go back there would you, Langley?” she asked.

“How about we do this, honey, if we’re going to find whoever did this to you, you’re going to have to show us where they took you.”

“But what if they’re there?” Sloth asked.

“Then we’ll get them,” Langley said. “And they won’t be able to hurt you anymore.”

“I dunno, Langley,” she said. “I don’t wanna mess with them anymore. I mean, I got away, can’t we just let it slide?”

“No, Sloth,” Alyssa said. “If they’re untrained and they’re messing around with higher level magics, they could end up destroying the city. We have to find them, now more than ever.”

Langley picked up on Alyssa’s train of thought. “That’s right, Sloth, since you got away it just means that they’ll be looking for somebody else. You don’t want this to happen to them, do you?”

Sloth sat there, staring at them. “All right, all right, you can lay off the guilt trip,” she said bitterly. “I’ll help you, but I won’t go there. Nothing you can say is going to make me go anywhere near that place again.”

“Fine,” Langley said. “Alyssa, do you still have that map with you?”

“Yes,” Alyssa pulled the map out of her bag and spread it out on Sloth’s bed. She pointed to her earlier circle marks. “This is where we found you, about where is the place that you were?”

Sloth studied the map carefully. Using the tips of her unbandaged fingers, she turned the map left and right until she had herself oriented.

“Right there,” she said, pointing at an area three blocks north and west of the alley they’d found her in. “It’s around there.”

“Great,” Langley said. “Did the building have any distinguishing features?”

“Uhmmm, yeah, it used to be apartments,” Sloth said.

“Half the buildings around there used to be apartments, Sloth,” Langley said.

“Yeah, but these were different, the place had these really ugly statues on the front
of it, they looked kinda like a cross between a gorilla and a hippopotamus.”

“Great, that’ll make it a lot easier to find,” said Alyssa. “Thanks, Sloth.”

“Don’t mention it,” Sloth said, sinking back against the pillows. “‘M gonna take a nap now, see y’later.”

She was asleep and snoring before they left the room.

They didn’t discuss the matter in the car. Langley was concentrating on her driving and Alyssa was too busy thinking. Even Desdemona was deep in thought.

When they were back home, Langley went down to the old refrigerator in the basement and pulled out two bottles of the emergency special thinking beer. This was the imported stuff that cost three dollars a bottle. She turned to go, then looked back at the fridge.

“Better take three,” she muttered to herself, opening the door again.

Upstairs in Alyssa’s office, Desdemona was sprawled across Alyssa’s desk, while Alyssa had taken the desk chair. Langley handed one of the bottles to Alyssa, kept one for herself and dropped down cross-legged on the floor.

“What did you find out?” she asked.

Desdemona looked over at Alyssa. “You’re not going to like it.”

“I never do,” Langley said, opening one of her beers. “Spill it.”

“Well, for starters, I found out a little more about the spell,” she said.

“What?” Alyssa said.

“It’s one of the Grimoire spells,” Desi said.

Alyssa went pale. “Are you sure?” she asked.

“Yes,” Desi said. “Sloth didn’t tell you because she didn’t understand that it was important. Besides, she’s already starting to repress a lot of her memories about this whole incident.”

“What’s a Grimoire spell?” Langley asked.

“It’s a spell from one of a collection of spell books written about five or six hundred years ago. They are very powerful and very dangerous in the wrong hands. There’s one
story about a student who simply read aloud from one of the books and summoned a group of demons, the leader of which killed him simply for having summoned him without cause. The demons were dispelled, but you can imagine the kind of entities you could control with one of these books, and the kind of damage you could do if you weren’t sure of what you were doing.”

“Yeah,” Langley said.

“There is some good news,” Desi offered hopefully.

“What?” Langley and Alyssa asked.

“Well, it’s a comparatively minor spell that gives the user the power to control a demon. The kidnappers apparently discussed their plans in front of Sloth, but they got a little too technical for her to really understand what they were saying. Also, the kidnappers are college students, undergrads in the Pre-Clerics program.”

“Wonderful,” Alyssa said, sarcastically. “I’ve probably seen them around the Thaumatology building a dozen or so times.”

“Hey,” Langley said, her beer all but forgotten. “We could take Sloth a yearbook and see if she could identify them. That’d give us a name and a face to go on.”

“Great,” Alyssa said. “Let’s go over to campus. I want to talk to Dr. Sommers anyway, he’s the university’s expert on the Grimoires and you can get a yearbook.”

From downstairs there came a knock at the door.

“I’ll get it,” Langley said.

“While you’re doing that, I’ll call Dr. Sommers for an appointment.”

“Are you sure he’ll see you today?” Langley asked.

“Pretty sure, I was one of his favorite students,” Alyssa said, smiling.

“Brownnoser,” Langley teased, as she went downstairs.

Menk was at the door, dressed in his usual dirty jeans and t-shirt, but with a brand new Harley Davidson black leather jacket on.
“What the hell do you want?” Langley asked.

“Grandma sent me over to find out how far you’ve gotten on the case,” he said.

“And I wanted to show you my new jacket. You like?”

“Yeah, but where’d you get the money for it? No way Grandma gave it to you and your folks couldn’t afford it. You shoplifting again?”

“I bought it!” Menk yelled, instantly taking the defensive.

“Yeah, right, where did you get the cash?” Langley said.

Menk paused, then grinned. “I sold something that was just lying around.”

“What?” Langley asked.

“Look, you gonna tell me how far you’ve gotten or do I gotta tell Grandma that you just don’t care?” Menk said.

Langley grimaced. “Look, just tell her that we think we’ve found out why the Hammers grabbed Sloth and that I should have the guys who did it in a couple days. Also, tell her that she might want to pass the word on to tell the neighbors to keep an eye on their daughters, especially if they’re virgins.”

“Why?” Menk asked.

“Because the guys who got Sloth wanted to use her as a sacrifice and since she got away, they’ll probably be looking for somebody to take her place.”

Menk licked his lips, “Oh. Okay, Langley, I’ll be sure to tell her.”

“Great, now get outta here before you bring down the property values,” Langley slammed the door in his face.

Alyssa came downstairs, with Desi close on her heels.

“Who was that?” Alyssa asked.

“Menk.”

Alyssa rolled her eyes. “What did he want?”

“Grandma sent him over,” Langley said. “I told him to tell her what Desi found out and to warn everybody with daughters to watch over them, because those guys are
probably going to try again.”

Alyssa nodded. “Dr. Sommers said to cove over any time. Today was one of his less busy days. So, do you want to drive?”

Langley shrugged. “Yeah, let me get my coat.”

The campus was crawling with pedestrians crossing the main drag anywhere they pleased. By the time they had come within inches of hitting the third pedestrian, Langley was beginning to threaten to step on the gas and sacrifice a few pedestrians to Loki, God of Chaos. Alyssa sent off a small prayer to the Goddess, asking Her to grant patience to Langley and grant it fast.

They parked in the huge commuter lot at the far end of campus and walked back towards the main part of campus. Alyssa walked in silence, listening to Langley fume.

“I tell you, ‘Lyssa, next time, I’m not gonna be nice about it. I’m stepping on the gas, putting both hands on the horn, closing my eyes and I’m gonna let the gods sort ‘em out!” Langley said. She was so mad she was leaning forward so she could walk faster, her hands stuffed hard into her pockets. “I mean, we were never that bad when we went here! We had sense not to walk in front of cars, didn’t we?”

“If I remember correctly,” Alyssa said. “You used to play tag with the shuttle buses.”

Langley blinked twice and looked hurt. “I did not!”

Alyssa smiled. “Yes you did, you’d step off the curb just as they passed and tried to slap the side of them. You almost gave that one poor driver a heart attack because he thought he’d hit you.”

Langley was very quiet for the rest of the walk.

They split up at the library. Langley went in and stopped. She hadn’t been back in
the library in almost five years. When Alyssa’d come over to do research, she’d usually drop her off then meet her later on at the student union. Alyssa accused her of having a library phobia. Langley denied that, she just didn’t like the quiet of the place. It made her nervous; she kept expecting someone to leap out and grab her.

Gathering her courage, she walked over to the circulation desk. A fresh-faced young man was checking in books. He looked up when she coughed politely into her fist.

“Can I help you?” he said.

“Umm, yes,” she said. “I’m looking for a yearbook.”

“You can buy them over at the Journalism building,” he said.

“No, I’m not a student,” Langley said. “At least, not any more, I just want to borrow one. Do you know where I could find one?”

“Well,” he said. “You might try up at Special Collections, I think they might have some. It’s upstairs and to the right.”

“Thanks,” Langley said, walking away.

Special Collections was a small room that was even quieter than the rest of the library because nobody was there except for one librarian and her assistant. They looked up sharply when Langley came in and smiled.

“I’m probably the first person they’ve seen all year,” Langley thought.

“Can we help you?” the librarian asked.

“Uh, yeah, I was wondering if you have any yearbooks?” Langley said.

“Preferably this years, but if you have one for last year, that’d do.”

“Let me check,” the librarian said, typing a command into the computer on her desk. A moment later she looked up. “Yes, we do have this year’s yearbook. It’s just up from Processing.”

“Could I see it, please?” Langley asked.

“Of course,” the librarian said. “Judy, would you get it for me, please?”

The assistant nodded and retreated back into a side room.

“Is there a way I can check that yearbook out?” Langley asked, hopefully.

The librarian looked unhappy. “No, I’m afraid not. But you can photocopy what you need if you’d like.”
"I don't know, how well does your machine copy photos?" Langley asked.

"Pretty well, we use it all the time for that type of thing, especially when a student wants to use some pictures for a presentation or a report," the librarian explained.

"Okay," Langley said.

Judy brought the yearbook back. The librarian led Langley over to the photocopy machine.

"Now, just what do you need copied?" she asked.

"All the student pictures," Langley said.

"Oh," the librarian said.

Alyssa found Dr. Sommers waiting for her in his office.

"Hello Alyssa!" he said. "What brings you by?"

"Well, I wish that I could say that it was just to talk shop with you," she said, "but I'm afraid I can't."

Dr. Sommers leaned forward. "What's wrong?" he asked.

Alyssa explained everything to him. As she talked, Dr. Sommers' usually pleasant face became darker and darker. In addition to being the University's expert on the Grimoires, Dr. Sommers also taught the Magical Ethics course. An abuse of power like this was more than he could bear.

"And you were hoping that I could help you?" he asked.

"Yes, if you could give us an idea of what we might expect. Maybe tell me some more about the spell so that I could prepare a counter to it?" Alyssa said hopefully.

Dr. Sommers sat back and sighed heavily. For a while he sat in thought, his chin resting on his steepled fingers.

"Describe Langley's cousin to me again, please," he asked.

"Why?" Alyssa asked.

"It could be important, please?" he said.

Alyssa described Sloth again.
"And the girl is pure dark elf? No human blood?" Sommers asked.

"No, no human blood, at least not enough that you could tell," Alyssa asked.

"Why?"

Sommers leaned back again. "I think I know what you might be up against."

"What?" Alyssa asked.

"I'd rather wait until your partner was here, so that I can explain it to you both."

"She's over at the library," Alyssa said. "I'll go get her."

"No, no, that's all right," Dr. Sommers said. "I'll send someone over."

He reached over for the phone and dialed his secretary.

"Alice? Could you send one of the student workers over to the library to find a Langley Scath for me please? It's rather urgent. She's a half dark elf and she'll be looking at yearbooks. Please send someone right away. If you have to take them away from some other professor's work, don't worry, I'll take care of any problems. Thank you, Alice, you don't get paid enough for this."

Langley was beginning to develop a real hate for yearbook photos by the time the student aide found her in Special Collections. Her eyes were red and watering from the photocopier's lights, her fingers hurt from several paper cuts and her back was giving her fits from having to hold up the huge books. A stack of photocopies three inches tall sat next to her; in order to be on the safe side, she'd gotten photos from all the yearbooks for the past three years.

"Are you Langley Scath?" a voice behind her asked.

Langley turned. "Yeah. Why?"

"I'm from Dr. Sommer's office, he sent me to find you."

"Why?"

"He didn't say, but I think it's important."

"Lovely," Langley said, closing the yearbook she'd been looking at. "Let me get my stuff together and I'll be coming with you."

"All right," the student aide said.
Langley closed up her book and set it on the table behind her. Gathering her photocopies, she thanked the librarian and her aide.

"Okay, I'm ready," she said. "Lead on, MacDuff."

The student aide ushered Langley into Sommers' office. He and Alyssa were looking over a book just about as big as one of the yearbooks Langley had been looking at. She repressed a shudder at the sight.

"You wanted to see me?" she asked.

They looked up.

"Ah, you must be Langley," Sommers said. "Welcome, have a seat."

"Thank you," Langley said. "Why'd you want to see me?"

"Dr. Sommers thinks that he may know what we're up against," Alyssa said. "He wanted to tell the two of us at the same time that's why he sent for you."

"Oh, okay," Langley said. "Well, I'm here, so tell us what you think this is."

"Langley..." Alyssa said in a warning tone. Sommers waved her off.

"Don't bother, Alyssa. It's obvious that Langley's almost worn through. This can't be easy on her," he said. "It's understandable that she'd be short tempered."

"Thank you," Langley said. "And sorry for being such a bitch."

"Think nothing of it," Sommers said. "Well, for starters, Desdemona was correct when she said that the boys who kidnapped your cousin were attempting to use one of the Grimoire spells. Unfortunately, I believe that they didn't realize the power of the spell they wanted to use."

"What do you mean?" Langley asked.

"Well, to explain that, I'll have to backtrack a little, so please bear with me," Sommers explained. "It all goes back to the Persecutions of the early 1600s, when the Catholic Church was still trying to destroy as much of the earlier pagan influences as possible. The only possible safe havens for non-humans and non-Christians were the Seely and Unseely courts. The Seely Court, being the furthest removed from mankind, was strictly isolationist in its policies toward the refugees. A few light elves of high standing were allowed back in the borders, but all others were turned away."
"The Unseely Court, on the other hand, being considerably closer to human territory than the Seely Court, was forced into a defensive posture almost from the beginning. Queen Wyndbane allowed thousands of refugees across her borders, many of whom joined her armies in preparation for invasion by Christian forces. Many nobles of the Seely Court renounced their allegiance to their king and went to join Wyndbane's army."

"The Church, having received reports of this, decided to play the natural rivalry between the Seely and Unseely courts against each other. They hoped that if they caused a kind of civil war among the non-human races, it would be easier for them to destroy them later.

"Toward this end their clerics set about devising a spell in which a dark elf maiden was the main component. They planned to give the girl the strength and mindlessness of a demon making her a very powerful and easily controlled slave."

"But?" Langley said.

"Excuse me?" Sommers said.

"'They planned to give the girl the strength and mindlessness of a demon making her a very powerful and easily controlled slave,' but. . ." Langley said. "The way you say it, there must be a catch."

"True," Sommers said, "There is indeed a catch. The spell was much more powerful than the clerics realized. Instead of giving the girl the aspect of a demon, they wiped out her personality and put a demon into her body. As you can well imagine, the demon was none too happy about this. It went on a rampage, destroying everything in its path for hundreds of miles, before it was finally hunted down and dispelled by witches and magi from the court of none other than Queen Wyndbane. The upshot of which was that the Church lost a great deal of credit among the both the common people and the nobility. This also effectively ended the Persecutions, it's very hard to hate the people who save your life, you know."

"So, you seriously think that these boys have gotten hold of this spell and that that is what they were trying to do?" Langley asked.

"Yes," said Sommers, "but with one provision: I believe that they are operating under the same misconception as the original clerics who performed the spell. They aren't
aware of its true power, which means that if they are successful..." He broke off and let the sentence hang there. Neither Langley or Alyssa needed to be told what would happen. Stories about demons breaking through to the barriers to this world were common enough that they could easily guess. A fully empowered demon, in a full rage was a hundred times worse than the worst storm. They were Chaos personified.

Langley looked over at Alyssa. She was shaking. Demons were a special fear of Alyssa's ever since college. Their junior year a girl on their floor had 'accidentally' summoned one. If Alyssa hadn't gotten there in time, it would have gotten loose. As small as it had been, it couldn't have done any major damage, at least nothing on the same scale as the one these boys were messing around with, but it had given her a bad time of it.

"So what do you think our chances of stopping them are?" Langley asked.

Sommers sighed. "Well, if you can find them in time and can stop them before they complete the spell, your chances are pretty good. If you find them after the spell has been completed, you're best bet would be to simply get away as fast as possible. Of course, the fact that they don't have a vehicle for the demon will slow them down, but not for long. I would suggest that you find these boys as soon as you can, before they get the chance to strike again."

Langley nodded and stood up. "That's what I thought," she said. She put a hand on Alyssa's shoulder. "C'mon, I'll drop you off at the house and then I'll go see Sloth."

Alyssa nodded and stood up. "Thank you, Dr. Sommers," she said quietly.

Alyssa was silent the entire drive back to the house. Langley didn't even try to bring her out of it. She knew this mood too well. After her fight with the demon back in school, Alyssa had been shaky for months afterward. Even now, she still woke up screaming from dreams about what could have gone wrong.

As they were walking up to the house, the phone started to ring. Langley took off for the door, unlocked it and rushed inside. She snatched up the phone.

"Hello?" she said, breathing hard.
"Langley?" Grandma said, her voice hard.
"Yes," Langley said, instantly wary.
"Where've you been?" Grandma asked.
"Alyssa and I had to go over to the college to check on something," Langley said, cautiously.

"Why haven't you called me? I've been sitting by the phone all day waiting to hear from you about something," Grandma said. "You were supposed to keep me informed."

"But I told Menk to tell you everything was going fine and to warn the neighbors to keep an eye on their daughters in case these assholes try again, didn't he tell you?" Langley asked.

"Menk hasn't told me anything. In fact, he hasn't been around all day," Grandma said. "Why'd you talk to him instead of me?"

"I thought you sent him over here?" Langley said.
"No, I didn't," Grandma said.
"Then why'd he come over?" Langley asked.
"How the hell should I know?" Grandma snapped.

Langley decided to stop this argument before it really got started. "Well, then I suppose I'd better tell you what I've found out then," she said.

"If you please," Grandma said, her sarcasm thick enough to spread on toast.

Langley quickly filled her in on everything that had happened that day. Grandma listened intently, interrupting only to ask questions. By the time she'd gotten through the entire story, Grandma's anger was gone, replaced more by fear.

"I'll pass the word along to the neighbors," she said.

"Okay, Grandma, I'm going to get ready to go see Sloth," Langley said.

"All right," Grandma paused for a moment. "Langley, promise me you'll be careful."

she said.

"I will, Grandma," Langley said. "Anything you want me to tell Sloth?"

"Her TV Guide came," Grandma said. "Tell her I'll bring it to her when I come see her tomorrow."
"Okay, Grandma," Langley said. "Bye."

"Bye," Grandma said.

Alphelia Snaildarter was sitting on one of the playground swings, watching a bunch of the neighborhood guys play touch football. It wasn't the most exciting or entertaining thing in the world, but it beat hanging around the house and listening to Mom bitch at her about just about everything under the sun. Nothing pleased her mother. it seemed, not her friends, not her clothes, not her grades, not Alphelia period.

She sighed heavily, the way only a world weary fifteen year old can. Life at home was beginning to be a real drag. She needed to get out of the house, but nobody was going to rent her an apartment and nearly all her friends were in the same boat she was. It was at times like this that life seemed really hopeless.

She stood up and walked across the park, figuring that maybe she could spend the night at the bandstand. Maybe not coming home for a couple days would show her folks that they'd better be nicer to her.

She never made it to the bandstand. As she was walking between the decorative bushes that lined the path leading up to the bandstand somebody reached out from them and grabbed her. The only thing she saw before he knocked her cold was a glimpse of a black leather sleeve.

Sloth was asleep when Langley got to the hospital. The head nurse on duty allowed her into the room only on the condition that she not wake her up. Langley was tempted to explain to the woman that a large scale nuclear attack would have a hard time waking Sloth up, but thought the better of it.

Sloth lay curled up on her side, a Wolverine comic book clutched in one hand as though it were the Holy Grail. Langley smiled at her, remembering all the times Sloth had
followed her around when she was little. She'd been a wonderful baby, easily the best behaved of all her cousins at that age.

And the best part was that she hadn't changed much as she'd gotten older. Unlike the others who'd developed attitudes and tough-guy poses.

Langley supposed that the narcolepsy had something to do with it. Unlike her cousins, Sloth couldn't really afford to get upset so while she had a temper like the rest of the family, she had had to learn to control it. It was too easy for her to end up unconscious if she did. Instead, Sloth had gotten smart. She'd learned how to avoid trouble and to hide from it if it came looking for her. Being able to squeeze herself into her school locker at St. Jude's Parochial had saved her from a beating more times than anyone could count.

The bedside phone rang. Langley jumped then reached over to answer it. Sloth muttered something then rolled over, still asleep.

"Hello?" Langley said.

"Langley come home now!" Alyssa said, her voice raw with panic.

"Why, what's wrong?" Langley asked.

"Your grandmother just called; another girl has disappeared. Come home now, we have to go over to the hotel. They're going to be trying that spell as soon as they can and it's up to us to stop them," Alyssa said.

"Okay, I'm leaving now," Langley said. She hung up. Sloth still didn't wake up. Langley gave her a kiss on the cheek and walked quickly out of the room.

Back at the house, Alyssa was rushing around throwing equipment into a bag when Langley came in.

"Get your gun and let's go," Alyssa ordered.
Langley walked into her room and pulled a case out of her closet. Opening it, she took out a Beretta 9mm revolver and its shoulder holster. She slipped on the shoulder holster and slid the gun and two extra clips into their compartments. A Colt .380 went into a separate holster that she tucked into the back of her jeans.

"Ready," she said, coming out of her room.

"Good," Alyssa said, "Let's go."

At the hotel the boys had begun their spell. This time they had begun their preparations immediately after their connection had delivered the girl. They weren't going to allow this one to escape as easily as the first had. Their connection had whined and ingratiated himself, trying to appease them for not warning them about the first girl's penchant for escapes. Thomas, their leader, had been tempted to use their connection, it wasn't holding exactly with the traditions of the spell, but in a case such as this he would have been adequate for their needs. But the boy had sworn that he wasn't a virgin and that he could get them another girl if they would only give him the chance. It was disgusting what the lesser races would do for a few dollars.

Alphelia was spread out in the pentagram. It was drawn in red chalk within a black circle. In keeping with tradition, it was reversed, that being the symbol for evil magic. The girl's head rested on the intersection between the top legs of the pentagram, her feet were in the bottom point and her arms were stretched out, giving her a cross-like appearance. She'd been stripped to the waist and an inverted cross was drawn on her chest. The entire circle practically crackled with evil.

They began their chanting.

Langley and Alyssa pulled up in front of the hotel. Alyssa was the first out of the car; the force of the evil emanating from the hotel knocked her backwards against the car.

"You okay?" Langley asked.
"Yeah, just give me a minute to regain my bearings," Alyssa said, pushing off from the car. She picked up her bag and started bravely forward. Langley followed.

"Okay, how should we do this?" Langley asked.

"I don't know," Alyssa said. "I don't know how far they are into the spell."

"Then let's find out, shall we?" Langley said. She pulled a couple boards off one of the windows, making a space big enough for the two of them to crawl inside.

They ended up in the manager's office. The door to the lobby was open only a crack. From where they were they could hear the boys' chanting.

"What the hell language is that?" Langley said, sticking a finger in her ear and jiggling it. It felt as though she had a fly in there.

"Backwards Latin," Alyssa explained, rubbing at her own ears. Desdemona was doing her best not to curl up and yowl in pain. "They've begun the benediction to Satan."

"Great," Langley said. "How far does that mean they've gotten?"

"They're almost ready to bring the demon over," Alyssa said.

"Then it's now or never isn't it?" Langley said, drawing the Baretta and running for the door.

"No!" Alyssa yelled.

But it was too late, Langley was through the door and in the lobby.

"Stop what you're doing and up against the wall!" she yelled, pointing the gun at the three boys in traditional long black monk's robes.

Two of the boys stopped what they were doing and looked around, but the third, the leader, kept chanting.

"I said, 'Stop,'" Langley said, pointing the gun directly at the boy. He smirked at her and kept chanting.

"Shoot him!" Alyssa yelled. "Aim for the shoulder or something, you have to stop him before he calls the demon over!"

Langley took a deep breath and pulled the trigger. The bullet hit the leader in the shoulder, dropping him to the floor, but it was too late. It felt as though a tornado had unleashed itself in the lobby. Papers, broken furniture and spell components were blown willy-nilly around the room adding to the chaos as a gateway opened up behind the girl's
head. She was the first to see what was coming out. She screamed, a long high pitched wail filled with all the terror of the world.

Her scream was joined by that of the demon as it was dragged across the border between the worlds. It seeped through the gateway and came to rest above the girl's head. From her vantage point she could look directly up at it. She gave one last final scream and passed out.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph," Langley said, crossing herself for the first time since high school.

The demon hissed at the sight. It cowered in its space, whimpering and mewling.

"What's the matter with it?" Langley whispered to Alyssa. "Why isn't it attacking?"

Alyssa stepped forward. "The spell wasn't fully completed. What was said was enough to drag the poor thing over, but not enough to give its full powers. Part of its body is still back in its home dimension. It doesn't have enough power to break down the borders of the pentagram and attack Alphelia," she explained. "Poor thing," she said again.

"Poor thing?" Langley said, incredulously. "'Lyssa that's a demon, remember?"

"I know, I know," Alyssa said. "But it doesn't want to be here anymore than she does. It's as much a victim as she is."

"Uh-huh," Langley said, unconvinced. "Can you get rid of it?"

"Yes, it's just a matter of releasing it from service," Alyssa said. "If they'd managed to complete the spell, the only ones who could've done that are these boys here. But since they didn't any magic user can."

"Don't you dare!" one of the boys yelled, coming forward.

Langley pointed her gun toward him. "I wouldn't if I were you," she said. "Not unless you want to end up as Purina Demon Chow."

The boy paled. "You wouldn't," he said.

"Try me," Langley said, warming to this. "You dragged this poor bastard over here, the least you can do is feed him."

The boy moved back to his friends.
"Alyssa, you send Pretty-boy back home," Langley said. "I want to ask the boys here a few questions."

"Right," Alyssa said, digging in her work bag.

Langley walked over to the boys, keeping her guard up and her gun at the ready. The boy who'd challenged them glared at her. The other was busy giving first aide to the one she'd shot.

"Where'd you get the girl from?" Langley asked the one who'd challenged her.

"None of your damned business," he spat. "I don't have to tell you anything; you're not a cop."

"True," Langley said. "I'm not a cop; you don't have to tell me anything. But, I think you should know that the three of you are looking at life in prison at the very least. More than likely, you'll get the death penalty. Depending on the judge and jury you get you may be lucky if they cremate you so's no one'll desecrate your corpses. If it turns out that you were cooperative, instead of clamming up, it may go better for you in court. Besides, why protect this guy? No reason he shouldn't take a fall too."

The boy looked doubtful. "He had a funny name," he said. "I'm not sure I can remember it."

"Try," Langley said, coaxingly.

"I know he was a dark elf like you," he said. "He was thin, with pale hair and he said he sympathized with our cause, that he was a human who'd been the victim of elven magic when he was a baby. I think he's a little crazy."

"I know he is," Langley said, her mind reeling, "He's my cousin."

After Alyssa had sent the demon home and they'd untied the girl, Langley went out to call the police.

"Thirty-second precinct," a nasal voice at the other end of the phone said.

"Lemme talk to Zed Goldfarthing," Langley said. "Tell him it's Langley Scath and it's important."

A moment later, Zed picked up.
"Scath what the hell do you want now?" Zed said. "What's the matter? Lock your keys in your car again?"

"Zed, I don't have time to b.s. with you right now," Langley said. "This is important"

"What is it?" Zed asked, turning into a by-the-book cop.

"You heard about how my cousin was kidnapped?"

"Yeah," Zed said.

"Well, me and Alyssa found the guys who did it and we want you to come get them. Better bring a couple of the boys from the Black Magic Squad too. They tried to bring a demon over from the Other Side."

"Scath, this had better not be a joke," Zed said warningly.

"Trust me, Goldfarthing," Langley said. "This is no joke. Oh, and before I forget. You might want to stop by my grandmother's house and pick up my cousin Menk. If I'm right, he's the one who provided these jokers with Sloth and the girl they have now." She hung up before Zed could say anything.

Langley walked back into the hotel. Her ears were ringing and she was having a tough time keeping one foot in front of the other. She felt like she was going to throw up. Sure Menk was a creep and a sleazeball, but even this should have been beyond him.

Alyssa came over to her. Langley was taking this hard. Alyssa hoped she wouldn't have two vegetables on her hands.

"Are you going to be all right?" she asked.

Langley nodded. "Yeah, I guess so. I mean, this is what I got into this business for in the first place. I wanted to stop the bad guys, play cowboy. Never thought I'd be busting my own cousin for kidnapping and attempted necromancy. I mean, we all knew Menk'd go bad, but I was kinda hoping he'd go down for holding up convenience stores or something normal like that. I shoulda known." she turned to look at Alyssa, her eyes wide and haunted. "What am I supposed to tell Grandma? I mean, all she's gonna know is that the cops are going to come looking for Menk. I didn't even call her and tell her what to expect."

"She'll be fine, Langley," Alyssa said. "She's a lot stronger than you might think.
I'm sorry. I know this is hard for you, but can you keep it together till the cops get here? I have to take care of Alphelia and I need you to keep an eye on the boys."

"Yeah," Langley said. "I'll be okay."

Epilogue:

The case and subsequent trial made headlines for months. It was one of the most spectacular legal cases ever tried in U.S. courts. Langley Alyssa were called in to testify, as was Sloth. The other girl, Alpheila was never called to the stand because her therapist thought that it would be damaging for her to have to relive her ordeal so soon after it had happened, but a transcript of her testimony was read aloud and entered into evidence.

The jury's deliberation took six hours. When they came back they handed down a verdict of guilty to all four boys involved. All four were sentenced to life imprisonment at the Ironwood Correctional Facility. None of them were given any chance for parole.

After that, the entire case faded from the collective memory of everyone not directly involved. Sloth went back to high school and enjoyed minor celebrity for nearly being turned into a demon. Alphelia slowly came back to reality and Langley and Alyssa went back to trying to pay the bills.