

After by Xanthe



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Story Notes:

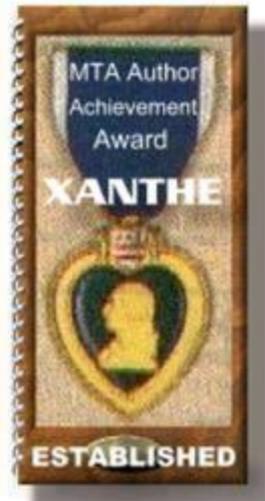
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Awards

Winner of a Wirerim for Best Post-Colonisation Skinner story



This story also won the 1999 Spooky award for Outstanding Mulder/Skinner romance.



This story wasn't beta'd.

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"I see painted blue walls, maplewood floors, and running water - the sort of house we used to know - and situated somewhere safe, with a stream running nearby, and a meadow for a garden. There's a beautiful woman..." The man, who was seated, cross-legged, on a large, smooth rock, paused dramatically, for effect, and his audience pressed closer, anxiously awaiting his next words...which were not forthcoming. "It's hazy..." The man's hazel eyes danced mischievously and Gatt held his breath, hoping that he would continue. The fortune-teller had been plying his trade for several hours now, but Gatt didn't think he'd ever tire of listening to that dull monotone, which somehow entered your soul, creating visions and descriptions of a time he could barely remember, and entrancing him. A glance around showed him that he was not the only one to be affected by the fortune-teller's skill.

The bearded man having his fortune told grunted, and reached into his pocket, finding a small watch, with a gold face.

"Will this clear your vision?" He asked, hopefully. The fortune-teller grinned, and the watch disappeared into the folds of his sleeves. "The woman is your daughter. The house is a commune where you will be offered refuge," he said, with a wry shrug. The bearded man looked disappointed, but the fortune-teller laid a hand on his arm. "It's a future," he said earnestly. "That's more than most of us have been lucky enough to have." His hazel eyes darkened, hinting at an inexpressible sorrow. "It's a safe future too. You'll have your loved ones with you, and you'll grow old. Who could ask for more?"

The bearded man thought about it for a moment, and then his face broke into a smile. The audience breathed a collective sigh of relief, grateful that he hadn't demanded the return of his watch. The fortune-teller was tall, but very thin, and he didn't look as if he could have withstood a physical attack, although he was clearly more than quick-witted enough to hold his own verbally.

Gatt gazed at the man, taking in his disheveled traveling garb; the loose dark pants, the dusty navy sweater worn over a thick, patched cotton shirt - layers of clothing Gatt would have thought unnecessary on a sunny day like this. Yet there was something almost sickly about the man; his face was too pale, his eyes too intense, and his body language fidgety and nervous. For all his skill, it was also apparent that the fortune-teller wasn't wealthy. Who was, these days? Yet, despite their poverty, who could resist parting with a treasured possession; a watch, or shoe, an earring or gold tooth filling, in order to be rewarded by a story woven by one of the Gifted? For this man clearly was Gifted. You could see it in the wild leap of his eyes, the absorbed tug of his fingers on his full bottom lip, the torn and bleeding flesh around his bitten nails that spoke of a soul not at peace, tormented by visions. Gatt had seen other Gifted people before, but never one as urgent and restless as this man.

He sat down by the wayside, letting the fortune-teller's voice fade into a background tone, soaking up the sunshine. Who knew how long that would last? His attention wandered, and he saw the silent man, seated on a solitary rock a little way off, his fingers idly whittling a piece of wood with his knife. This man scared him. He'd been part of their traveling group since the beginning, as had the fortune-teller, yet in the three days since they'd set out Gatt had barely heard the big man speak. He was tall, and imposing, his hairless scalp covered by a red bandanna. He wore black pants, and thick-soled boots, his solid, muscular chest and shoulders barely concealed under a vest that had clearly been cobbled together from a multitude of other garments, using a thick, uneven, blanket stitch.

"Don't you want to listen to the fortune-teller?" Gatt asked, curiously. The big man didn't seem even remotely curious about the tales being woven and spun over on the rocks. There was silence for a moment, and then the man lifted his head from his whittling, and gazed at Gatt with thoughtful brown eyes. Gatt felt as if he had woken a dark, marauding panther from its sleep, and drawn attention to himself. He wished for a brief moment that he had not spoken.

"I can hear him from here," the big man said in a low tone. "For what it's worth," he added, under his breath.

"You don't think he's Gifted?" Gatt asked, edging closer so that he was crouched by the big man's knee.

"I think...that the need to know the future is most pressing in times of the greatest uncertainty." The big man shrugged.

"Would you have your fortune told?" Gatt pressed, intrigued.

"No." The man got up, uncurling his body with feline grace.

"Have you never had it done?" Gatt couldn't understand it. How could anybody not want to know what would happen to them? He'd had his own fortune told on countless occasions, mostly by charlatans, and never by one of the Gifted. He wished he could afford to have his future foretold by the hazel-eyed man, but he had given all he possessed to the Guide, in

payment for this journey, and had nothing left.

"No." The big man growled, opening his water bottle and taking a swig, and then, curiously, offering it to Gatt, who accepted this gesture of friendship eagerly.

"Why not?" Gatt asked.

"Because I already know it." The big man took back the proffered water bottle, and replaced the stopper.

"You know? Without it being told to you? How?" Gatt's eyes were alight with curiosity. The big man looked down on him for a moment, a glimmer of amusement in his dark eyes.

"You remind me of someone," he said, and his eyes flickered in the direction of the crowd around the fortune-teller. "Damn." He rolled his shoulders, and moved his neck from side to side. "How much longer must we wait here? The weather's held steady for hours," he grumbled, glancing at the sky.

"The Guide says there'll be a storm before tomorrow morning. It's too much of a risk to start crossing the Deadlands before the storm. There's no shelter for miles. You're in a hurry?" Gatt asked. The big man's eyes flickered back to the fortune-teller once more.

"Always in a hurry, yes," he sighed.

"Gatt." On a sudden impulse, Gatt held out his hand. The man regarded it thoughtfully for a moment, and then took it.

"Skinner. Walter Skinner," he replied. Gatt wondered what statement the big man was making by using two names, but he knew some people had trouble letting go of the customs from Before. "Gatt's an interesting name." Skinner remarked.

"I kind of made it up." Gatt grinned.

"You don't say." Skinner shook his head, his eyes amused. Gatt hoped he wasn't laughing at his name. "How old are you?"

"Eighteen." Gatt said, swiftly. Skinner raised a slow eyebrow. "Sixteen," Gatt amended. "I lied to the Guide. He won't take anyone younger than that on this trip - he said they'd just slow him down."

"And you needed to make this trip badly?" Skinner asked.

"Not really." Gatt shrugged. "It's just..." he hesitated, fearing that the man would laugh at him.

"Go on." Skinner nodded, his dark eyes seeming to search into Gatt's soul.

"I think it's my destiny," Gatt murmured, flushing. He saw a frown furrow across Skinner's forehead.

"Someone told you this?" Skinner asked.

"Not exactly. I just feel it. Zaria is where I must go. I don't know why, and I don't know whether I'll stay there. I just know it's where I have to go."

"Hmmm." Skinner stared into the distance for a moment.

"You don't believe in destiny, or fortunes do you? You don't believe that people can know the future, or that the Gifted man over there truly sees, do you?" Gatt spoke more hotly than he had intended.

Skinner shook his head. "I don't have any answers," he spoke softly. "There was a time, once, when I thought that every problem had a solution, and that with enough effort and perseverance, each man or woman could find their own truth..." He paused, his eyes glancing anxiously at the sky and back to the fortune-teller, whose voice had become strident, and high pitched.

"And now?" Gatt asked, as the silence stretched out between them.

"Now...well...now I think that the truth can be found in some very strange places indeed." Skinner shook his head, and got up. Gatt watched as the big man walked over to the crowd gathered around the fortune-teller.

"That's enough." Skinner's voice was low and firm, compared to the fortune-teller's excited tones. There was a rumble of discontent among the crowd. "Show's over," Skinner said.

"I'm on a high...I'm seeing visions..." the fortune-teller protested, his hazel eyes glowing unnaturally.

Skinner glanced at the sky. "You're seeing static," he said firmly. "GO!" His voice boomed out, and the startled crowd dispersed, some of them muttering under their breath.

Gatt watched, curious, as Skinner looked at the fortune-teller, and the Gifted man returned his stare. There was a long silence between them. Gatt wondered if the fortune-teller would become angry at having his trade interrupted, and start an argument with the big man, but finally he exhaled deeply, and then laughed out loud.

"Whatever," he said, with a shrug of his skinny shoulders. A lock of his dark hair fell into his eyes as he got up, and wandered over to the camp, where the Guide had already begun to pile up wood for a fire.

They ate early that evening, with many anxious glances at the sky. Gatt sat and watched his traveling companions, their faces illuminated by the firelight. There were 43 of them in all, a mixture of people, mostly young. Of course, it was rare to see anybody who was truly old

these days. Gatt tried to remember what his Grandmother had looked like, but he just had the haziest vision of white hair, and cloudy blue eyes. Each member of the group had paid the Guide a good sum for their safe passage across the Deadlands to Zaria. This was known to be one of the most dangerous routes in the world, and those who attempted to make the journey without a Guide had mostly not arrived at their destination. Gatt shivered, as the wind blew up around them, and he clutched his blanket tightly around his shoulders.

"The storm's coming," a voice beside him said. Gatt turned to see the fortune-teller, wrapped in two blankets, yet still shivering slightly.

"Yes." Gatt shrugged, feeling nervous about talking to one of the Gifted.

"Before daybreak," the fortune-teller predicted.

"Yes." Gatt nodded, wishing he could think of something interesting to say. "Do you think it'll be a bad one?" He managed to stammer at last.

"Who knows?" The fortune-teller shrugged. "Fox." A hand poked out from the front of the blankets.

Gatt shook it, giving his own name. "Did you make your name up too?" Gatt asked.

Fox laughed. "No. Strangely, it was a present from my parents. How about you?"

"My name, Before, was Garrett. After...well, I just chose to shorten it."

"I've never had that problem at least." Fox grinned. "People shortening my name," he added. "It's strange..." he mused. "Before, I used to hate my name, but After...somehow it suits the times. Maybe my parents were fortune tellers too, and didn't know it," he chuckled.

"Your parents...are they...?" Gatt paused. It wasn't good etiquette to ask, but sometimes he couldn't help himself. His curiosity got the better of him.

"Dead? Yes, but not During. Before."

"Oh." Gatt wasn't sure whether that was better or worse.

"And yours?" Fox asked.

"They died During." Gatt nodded. "My little sister too." Gatt noticed the change in Fox's stance, the stiffening of his shoulders.

"Your sister? I'm sorry." He shook his head. "I had a sister once. She disappeared."

"Yes." Gatt shrugged. Half the world had died or just disappeared During, and a good proportion had died or disappeared in the events After as well. There weren't that many

people left in the world, or so he had heard. It was hardly surprising. The constant storms, earthquakes, tidal waves and volcanoes that had ripped apart their planet seven years ago, had died down of late, but life was still unpredictable, and harsh. Hurricanes, storms, and other natural disasters still ravaged the world, wiping out all but the strongest - or luckiest. Gatt could barely remember what life had been like Before, but he had some vague, distant memory of houses standing in blocks, seeming so strong and safe. That strength had been an illusion, and all that existed now were ghost towns, the occasional empty façade, or even the remains of an entire street, but mostly, there was just rubble. Endless piles of rubble.

"Did you lose your whole family?" Fox asked.

"Yes." Gatt was so used to his loss that it meant nothing to say the word.

"You did well to survive, alone," Fox murmured.

"I'm fine. I do okay." Gatt gave an impish smile, flushing to the roots of his blond hair..

"I grieve for my own losses, every day, but then when I meet someone like you...well, I'm reminded of how lucky I really am." Fox smiled back.

"You lost someone?" Gatt asked.

"Yes. Her name was Scully." Fox's face had a wistful, sad quality to it that made Gatt want to comfort the man.

"Tell me about Scully," he asked, loving the sound of the fortune-teller's voice, with its flat cadences that soothed the soul. Stories were the only escape from the harsh realities of life After, and Gatt would eagerly spend hours listening to other people recount their life stories.

"Scully? You want to hear about Scully?" Fox gave a sly grin. Gatt noticed that he wasn't the only one who wanted the fortune-teller to entertain them. A few other people had edged their blankets closer, and were lying on their backs, gazing at the stars, or the firelight, letting the man's words drift over them until it was time to sleep. Even the big man, Skinner, was listening, his fingers never idle as he whittled away at the piece of wood he was working on.

"Scully." Fox's voice almost crooned her name. "She was fire, and ice, all in one. She was earth and water, the brightness of the moon in a dark sky." Next to him, Gatt heard Skinner give a decided grunt. Fox paused and glanced at the big man, his eyes alight with something akin to mischief. "Scully had hair the color of those flames there," Fox pointed at the fire, "and eyes bluer than chipped ice." Gatt was sure that ice was white, chipped or not, but somehow that didn't matter. He certainly wasn't going to interrupt. "You know, Scully was tiny - she barely came up to my shoulder - but she was stronger and braver than any other woman I've ever known, and any man, save one." Fox smiled at Gatt, but his eyes drifted across to Skinner, who shook his head in disgust, although Gatt noticed that the corner of his mouth tugged up into an unwilling smile. "Scully wasn't just beautiful...oh no." Fox

waggled his finger at the little group huddled around him. "She was clever too. She knew how to heal the sick, how to see truth among so many lies, and often she helped me see it too. She was the brightest star in the sky, and she lit up my world." Fox pointed up at the sky, and Gatt followed where his finger directed, and saw Venus, glowing brightly.

"You loved her?" he breathed, entranced.

"Yes." Fox smiled.

"Did she love you?" Gatt asked.

"She never said so," Fox grinned, "but I think she did. Yes."

"Did you ever tell her?" Gatt pressed insistently.

"No. I'm a fool." Fox sighed theatrically.

"That, at least, is true enough." Skinner's low voice interrupted the mood. "I think we'd all like to get some sleep now, if you've finished holding court."

"What about the brave man?" Gatt asked, finding the mystery in the tale, and reluctant to allow the story-telling session to come to an end.

"That's another story." Fox grinned.

"I'd like to hear it."

"Another time." Fox shook his head, glancing at Skinner slyly.

"Did he die too? During?" Gatt pushed his luck.

"No. He raged against the storms and earthquakes we suffered During, and he saved my life. When the savage forces of the enraged elements came for me, he did battle with them. They roared at him, and he stood up and roared right back at them, defying them, and the storms were too afraid of him to take me." Fox's eyes held a wicked glint, rendered even more animated by the flickering light of the fire.

"How did he defeat them?" Gatt asked, breathlessly.

"He's a warrior, powerful and strong - stronger than any storm. A hero forged in the heat of the inferno, able to pit his wits against the very might of chaos, with a will so implacable that he..."

"I think we've heard enough." Skinner's voice cut through Fox's monologue, and he threw another blanket at the fortune-teller, hitting him square on the head.

Fox gazed at the big man for a long time, his lips twisted into an amused smile, and Skinner

stared back at him, his face expressionless, his arms crossed over his chest. Gatt watched, wondering if an argument was brewing, but the big man seemed more exasperated than angry, and Fox appeared merely amused by the insult of having his story cut short. Finally Fox nodded, and grinned.

"Like I said, another time," he whispered to Gatt, and they both watched as Skinner strolled over to his bedroll, unpacked it neatly, and laid a blanket out on the ground. Gatt yawned. He was tired too, and who knew when the storm would strike? Clouds had started to billow and roll across the sky, and they might not get much sleep. He went to his own bedroll, then watched in amusement as he saw that there wasn't any room around the fire for Fox. The man had left it too late to unpack his bedding – all that remained was just a small strip of space next to Skinner's blanket. Gatt almost laughed out loud - the big man had made no secret of his lack of tolerance for the fortune-teller, and Gatt was sure that he wouldn't welcome having Fox sleep so close to him. Fox winked at Gatt, the leaping flames making the gesture seem almost grotesque. Then the fortune-teller went and lay down on the ground next to Skinner.

"Are you sure you don't want me to tell you another story?" Fox asked the surly man who was already settled inside his own blankets.

"Very sure." Skinner grunted. "A hero forged in the heat of the inferno? The might of chaos?" he snorted, mocking the other man's story-telling. Fox just laughed.

Gatt was awakened by the sound of a scream jack-knifing through the air, slicing into the sultry darkness. He sat up, alarmed, wondering if they were being attacked, but nobody else had stirred...except...Gatt squinted through darkness and saw Fox, his body shaking, and his limbs twitching. Beside him, Skinner was also awake, propped up on one elbow, watching as the fortune-teller screamed and twitched in his sleep. The staccato screaming punctured the still night air, and Gatt could see the Gifted man's mouth open and close as he shrieked out his pain. Skinner reached out a hand, and Fox shuddered, and gibbered, twisting away from it. Skinner's hand found Fox's head, and he stroked the fortune-teller, as if he were a cat to be soothed. Fox grew quieter, his screams subsiding into low, pained moans, his body suffused with a violent fit of shivering. Gatt was surprised when Skinner reached out, and pulled the other man against his chest, wrapping the blankets around them both tightly, for warmth. Fox's shivering stopped, and his breathing became quieter. Skinner murmured something that Gatt couldn't quite hear, and Fox muttered something back. Skinner's lips dipped down, and touched the top of the other man's hair in a series of calming kisses, and then Fox became quiet, his head supported on the big man's chest. Finally, there was peace around the campfire once more. Gatt closed his eyes, puzzling this curious exchange, and waited for dawn to arrive.

It never happened. Instead of a dawn, the sky lightened into an ugly red color, rays of angry black breaking through like streaks of dark blood. The air had become unnaturally still, and Gatt could feel himself starting to sweat.

"It's going to be a bad one," the Guide informed the assembled group, as they gave up any hope of further sleep, and rolled up their bedrolls.

Gatt noticed Fox, sitting cross-legged on the ground under the cover of a tree. He was wrapped in his blankets despite the sultry heat, and his eyes were closed. His head was rested on the tree trunk, his exposed throat looking vulnerable, open to the elements, and his Adam's apple was convulsively bobbing up and down. Nobody was taking any notice of him - they were all too busy gathering up their property, and listening to the Guide. Gatt was therefore the only one who noticed when the fortune-teller began to go into a fit, his muscles twitching, and his whole body shaking - before being overcome by a series of violent spasms.

Gatt looked around, scared by the man's illness. He had heard rumors about the Gifted, and had seen others who were affected by the sudden surges of electrical energy that preceded a big storm, and it always frightened him. Such people often bit through their tongues, or choked on them. Fox was a fool to even consider traveling alone if he was so prone to Storm Sickness. Gatt hesitated, unsure what to do, and too scared to approach the fortune-teller. He glanced over at the crowd around the Guide, listening with half an ear as the man told them about nearby caves that would provide shelter for the next few hours.

"Why didn't you take us to them sooner?" Gatt heard Skinner protesting.

"I didn't know the storm would be a big one." The Guide shrugged. "It might have been a squall, and then you'd have complained if I'd taken you out of our way to the caves."

Gatt turned back to Fox once more, wondering if he should alert someone to his condition - but someone already knew. The bearded man, who had given Fox his watch yesterday, was creeping up on the prone man, as he lay, oblivious, on the ground. Gatt opened his mouth in shock as the man rifled through Fox's pockets, reclaiming not only his own property but other trophies as well.

"Stop!" Gatt charged across the sands, not sure what he'd do when he got there as the bearded man was twice his size. He threw himself onto Fox's assailant, who gave a hoarse yell and back-handed him across the face, throwing him some distance and leaving him winded. The thief returned to his victim, but as he reached out to go through the other man's pockets again, a hand caught hold of his wrist, and twisted it painfully behind his back, causing the bearded man scream out in pain.

"Stealing from a sick man?" Skinner hissed, throwing the thief to the ground, and then kicking him hard in the stomach with his boot. "And picking fights with children? Is there any cowardly act you aren't capable of?" He retrieved the thief's booty, and placed it pointedly in his own pockets. Gatt didn't think that anybody would risk trying to steal it from there. "Count yourself lucky that I don't slit your throat," the big man growled, taking his knife from his shirt as if he were considering doing just that.

"He was fair game." The bearded man scabbled in the dirt, trying to get to his feet. "There aren't any laws any more, old-timer."

"Yes there are. There are my laws, and you've broken them. If I were you, I'd keep out of my

way for the rest of this journey." Skinner said grimly, aiming another kick at the man's departing backside.

Skinner glanced over at Fox, then went to crouch down beside him. He placed the prone man on his side, arranging his legs and arms carefully, and then inserted a hard wad of cloth into his mouth to protect his tongue. He paused for a moment, and pushed Fox's sweaty hair out from his eyes, murmuring something to him, and finally the fortune-teller's fit subsided, and he lay quivering on the ground. Only then did Skinner get up, and go over to Gatt.

"Many thanks, boy." He held out his hand, and pulled Gatt to his feet. "I'm sorry you were hurt trying to protect him. I thought, after last night, that the fit might have been averted. I was wrong. The storm is too strong for him to fight," he sighed, and returned to the man on the ground, whose eyes had opened and were rolling around alarmingly in his head. Skinner crouched on the grass beside him, waiting, his hand holding his knife loosely, his whole stance alert, as if were guarding some precious possession. Nobody came close, as Fox slowly regained consciousness, and glanced weakly up at his protector, then gingerly removed the wad of cloth from his mouth.

"Hi. Had another one, huh?" He gave a ghost of a grin.

"Yes. It's hardly surprising. This storm is going to tear the place apart. I give us a couple of hours before it hits." Skinner glanced at the ominous sky. "Will you go under again? There are some caves apparently. Can you walk?"

"I'll try," Fox said wanly. "Are they far?"

"An hour's walk." Skinner shrugged. "I can carry you if need be."

"No. I do like to retain some dignity." Fox made a face.

"Warn me next time," Skinner said firmly. "You were nearly robbed." He reached into his pocket, and handed Fox the spoils that had been stolen from him.

"Who?" Fox glanced around.

"Your friend from yesterday. The one who'll end up in the nice house, with the meadow and stream?" One of Skinner's eyebrows was raised in a faintly ironic gesture. "It seems too good a fate for him if you ask me," he murmured.

"Hey, I just say it how I see it." Fox grinned. "What did you do to him? You didn't kill him, did you? That would make us really unpopular around here."

"No, I just knocked him around a bit. He'll live. Our young friend here alerted me." Skinner nodded his head in Gatt's direction. "You should have done. You must have known that you were going into one."

"All right, Walter." Fox sighed. "I'm sorry. I thought it might pass if I rested. You worry too much." He grinned; a slow, heart-warming, winning smile. Skinner gazed at him for a long time, and then made a noise that sounded peculiarly like a cross between a snort and a chuckle.

"You could have bitten through your tongue. Imagine the tragedy of a silent Fox, unable to talk." The big man's voice was deadpan, but his eyes were amused. "Who would entertain the world then?" Fox made a face at him, and Skinner crouched down, took hold of the edge of the blanket, and gently wiped away some dirt from the other man's face. "I'll get you some water," he said.

When Skinner had gone, Fox turned his attention to Gatt.

"Thank you," he said. "Here." He beckoned the boy over, patting the ground beside him. "When I'm feeling better, I'll tell your fortune for you," Fox promised.

Gatt shook his head. "I don't have anything to give you."

"It's free - payment for helping me." Fox smiled. "I warn you though, I don't always see clearly. I might not see anything for you. That doesn't mean there isn't anything though. Don't make that mistake - some people do."

"Are you truly one of the Gifted?" Gatt asked.

"It's what we're called. If you're asking me whether what I see is true, then I think so. It certainly seems real enough. Of course, Scully would have a different explanation. She would say that the increased ionic activity caused by the frequent electrical storms, and severe weather conditions, have affected the synapses in my brain, causing both the fits, and hallucinations." Fox's tone altered as he spoke, and Gatt had a sudden image of the small red-haired woman he had learned about the previous evening. He heard her voice through the fortune-teller's lips - the voice of a woman long dead, her tone captured perfectly, and lovingly, by someone who had refused to allow her memory to die. "I prefer to call them visions though." Fox winked.

"Skinner...I thought he didn't know you but he does, doesn't he?" Gatt asked.

"Walter? Yes. Of course." Fox looked surprised.

"I thought he disliked you. He seems so..."

"Grumpy?" Fox laughed out loud. "Surly? Yeah - he seems that way. I thought so too, once."

"I took you for a fool - to be traveling without protection."

"In my situation that wouldn't just be foolhardy, it would be lethal." Fox nodded. "Walter is very good protection, believe me."

"Yet he doesn't like you?" Gatt pressed, confused by the big man's attitude towards the fortune-teller, the edge of exasperation in his demeanor towards him.

"Doesn't he?" Fox grinned. "Can you help me up, Gatt? I'm feeling much better."

Gatt nodded, holding out his arms, and it was only when the fortune-teller leaned his weight upon him, that Gatt realized how thin the other man was. He could feel the bone through the fabric of the man's shirt. Skinner returned a few moments later, and handed Fox his water bottle, watching with those grave, dark eyes, as Fox drained the contents down in a series of needy gulps. Gatt felt a wave of curiosity. Why were they traveling to Zaria, he wondered? What was their story, this big, silent man, and the Gifted one he watched over with equal parts fondness and irritation?

The journey to the caves took longer than the hour they had been promised, and Gatt noticed how Fox's strength faded as the journey progressed. The wind had whipped up again, and the morning sky was now almost completely black. Fox could barely lift his feet, and only Skinner's arm, slung around his waist, kept him upright. They reached safety just as the howling wind turned into a banshee scream, the trees behind them having their branches torn off by the force of it. The caves were dark, but they offered protection and that was all that was important. Skinner deposited Fox against the wall, and glanced out of the cave mouth, his expression anxious.

"It's going to be a bad one, isn't it?" Gatt asked.

"Yes." Skinner's eyes were dark and troubled. "He's not very good when they're this bad," he murmured. "Luckily he should sleep."

"You put something in his water," Gatt deduced. Skinner's grave eyes fixed on him, with a darkly unreadable expression.

"He'll be angry about it when he wakes up, but he doesn't see himself during this sort of storm," he shrugged. "It's better this way."

"How long have you traveled together?" Gatt asked. Something that might have been a smile tugged at Skinner's lips.

"During," he replied. "Since During."

"Seven years?" Gatt didn't know why he was surprised, but he couldn't fathom what exactly there was between these two strangers.

"Seven. Yes. I knew him Before, of course."

"You did?" Gatt crouched at the cave mouth, watching as the storm laid waste to the countryside, changing its contours in one sweep, as if an artist had painted one canvas over another, completely obliterating the original.

"Yes. We worked together." Skinner glanced over to where Fox lay, huddled in blankets, his pale face etched with weary lines. He looked very young.

"Doing what?" Gatt asked.

"Government work. Back when there was a government." The slight clench of the big man's jaw implied that a government was something he missed. Gatt didn't. He had no concept of what it must have been like to live in an organized society. He barely remembered the streets of his hometown, the safety of his house, or the warmth of his family. It was long gone. He knew only the desolation that countless earthquakes had visited upon his world, the savage bite of the wind as it tore across the land, and the darkness that preceded a bad storm. He had survived, when many had not. He was one of the lucky ones.

"Tell me how Daring was for you," Gatt requested, leaning his back against the cave wall, and watching as the big man took off his bandanna, and wiped it over his wide, sweaty forehead.

"I'm no storyteller," the big man grunted. "Better ask him when he wakes. He'll spin a story for you. He loves to be the center of attention."

"You don't like him much, do you?" Gatt said, curious. The big man's head snapped around, and his eyes gleamed a curious golden brown in the darkness of the cave.

"Is that what you think?" Was all he said.

The storm passed, and sunlight replaced it as if by magic. Fox woke up, groggy and bad-tempered.

"You know I hate being sedated," he complained to Skinner. "I told you not to use that stuff again, didn't I?"

"Yes." Skinner nodded.

"But you didn't take any notice of me," Fox scolded, glancing up angrily at the big man.

"No. I didn't," Skinner said calmly, folding up the blankets and packing them away, before slinging the pack onto his back, and holding out his hand to help the other man up.

"I can manage," Fox said, huffily. Skinner shrugged, and watched as Fox tried to lever himself off the ground, holding onto the wall of the cave for support. Finally he made it, took one step, and staggered into the other man, who wordlessly reached out and held him up.

"It was a bad storm." Skinner slung one of Fox's arms over his shoulders.

"I hate feeling this weak." Fox made a face.

"Yes. I know." Skinner walked him out into the sunlight, and they both blinked in surprise, like new-born lambs, taking their first steps into a brave new world. "Did you have any visions while you were sick?" Skinner asked softly, and Gatt thought that Fox's face went even paler than it already was, if that were possible.

"Only the same as usual," he whispered, his face consumed by a kind of wretched pain.

"Okay. All right." Skinner nodded. "It's all right, Fox. I'll take you there."

"Will you?" Fox stopped suddenly, and reached out to touch Skinner's face. The other man's fingers came up and softly brushed the hands that caressed his jaw.

"Of course. I promised," he said softly.

The sunlight seemed to revive Fox, and as the afternoon wore on he became bright and animated, as if the sun itself contributed to his mood. Gatt was amazed at the change in him. The Guide had insisted they camp another night, not daring to risk crossing the Deadlands in the immediate aftermath of the storm. They were all tired anyway - the static electricity that had built up before the storm had finally blown away, but it left many of the group listless, and plagued by bad headaches. Only Fox seemed truly animated. They camped on a patch of grass, and there was at least a stream nearby, and plenty of firewood from the stricken trees.

Gatt was thirsty after helping to build the fire, and he took a trip to the stream - which the storm had helpfully transformed into a small lake. He paused as he approached, catching sight of the fortune-teller and his silent, forbidding protector. Fox had just emerged, wet, from the stream, and he shivered as he pulled his clothing back on. Skinner was sitting by the water, and as Fox finished dressing, the big man held his arms and legs open.

"Come here. I'll warm you," he said, and Gatt started in surprise. Skinner's voice was so tender that he barely recognized it. Fox smiled, and his eyes were full of an emotion so strong it brought a lump to Gatt's throat. He watched as Fox sat down between the big man's thighs, and was enveloped in a loving hug. "How does that feel?" Skinner asked, his lips brushing Fox's hair as he held him close.

"As good as always. I wish..." Fox sighed, and rested his head on the other man's shoulder.

"I know. When we stop traveling," Skinner promised. "I hope that's soon. I keep worrying that you'll give up on me, and disappear into the air with the next storm."

"I don't think that'll happen." Fox grinned. "I don't think you'd let it happen. A storm would have a fight on its hands if it wanted to tear me away from you."

"That's true." Skinner's fingers began a slow caress along the side of Fox's face, and then he gently tipped the other man's jaw up, and his head dipped down and claimed a long, deep kiss from the fortune teller's lips. Gatt saw Fox's shoulder's relax, and his fingers fasten around Skinner's shoulders. When the kiss finished, Fox's eyes seemed incandescent,

radiating a kind of joy that Gatt had never seen before. Their eyes met, over Skinner's back, Gatt's blue ones, and Fox's, wrought in hues of golden-green. They looked at each other for a moment, and then Fox's face broke into a wide smile, and he laid his face down on Skinner's shoulder again, closing his eyes. Gatt tore himself away from the scene and walked downstream to fill his water bottle.

The savagery their world had endured had wrought many changes in what was left of humankind. People clung to what they loved, and enjoyed it without question. Gatt wasn't surprised that Fox and Skinner were clearly lovers, but he was intrigued by the nature of their love, barely remembering the feeling of love, or of being loved, from his childhood. He felt a sudden wave of envy, wishing that he had someone who cared for him, someone to care for in return. He recalled his little sister, with her blonde braids, and silly chatter, and wished her back. It was the first time he had thought about her in years.

They started their journey across the Deadlands the following day. Gatt stayed close to Skinner and Fox, finding the big man's presence reassuring. He had heard so many rumors about the Deadlands, that he was apprehensive about actually setting foot inside them. Fox was full of nervous energy, walking with a long, loping stride, and keeping up a non-stop chatter which his companion barely troubled to comment on, other than giving the occasional grunt. Gatt adored listening to the fortune-teller. He seemed to know so much.

"The Deadlands. People used to live here, once," Fox told the boy. "There was a big city in that direction," he pointed, "but it was swallowed up in one of the biggest earthquakes to shake the world During."

"Do you suppose that it's still standing - somewhere beneath the surface?" Gatt asked, imagining silent streets, covered by earth, lost and forgotten.

"More likely it's churned up into nothing." Fox shrugged.

At first the Deadlands seemed no different to the region they had just left, and Gatt began to relax. There were trees here, and occasional streams, grass, and the jagged remains of roads, and, of course, the endless rubble that could be found everywhere. As the days passed though, he grew more anxious, and noticed that Skinner's mouth had become set in a straight line, and that Fox seemed less animated. The entire group walked in a grim silence, as they negotiated the deep chasms that sliced through the ground like dark wounds upon the face of the earth. Trees stood, starkly, bereft of leaves, and Gatt saw very few living things. The air here seemed unnaturally still, devoid of birdsong or the activity of any kind of wildlife.

"No wonder they call it the Deadlands." Fox paused for a moment to take a swig of his drink. He hadn't had any fits, or nightmares since the storm, and his sickly pallor had almost faded. His hazel eyes still danced too brightly, and he still fidgeted enough to make Skinner frown irritably on occasion, but other than that, there was no sign that he was one of the Gifted. He managed to keep pace with the group, no small feat for a man who had been so ill a few days previously, although he did stare wistfully at the fire on their third night of hard walking and sighed:

"There are times when I really miss cars. Don't you, Gatt?"

Gatt shrugged. "I can barely remember them." The violent electrical eddies that swirled their way so viciously around the world had rendered all forms of motor transport useless.

"I heard some people down South have taken to riding on horseback again," Fox commented.

"Of course first you have to find yourself a horse," Skinner pointed out.

Fox grinned. "True. Then you have to learn how to ride it. Somehow, I don't think I'd be very good at that."

"You'd learn. If you had to." Skinner grunted.

"Yes." Fox shrugged. "We've all learned so much. It's amazing how you do if you have no choice. Survival instinct I suppose...I heard that in the ancient Minoan civilisation..."

Gatt smiled, and lay back, soaking up Fox's endless conversation. When he opened a lazy eye some minutes later, he saw Skinner watching his companion as he talked, and in that unguarded moment, he caught an expression in the other man's eyes he would never have known the big man possessed. Part fondness, part amusement - and part devotion.

They were barely half way across the Deadlands when the first disaster struck. They heard a far off noise, like a roll of thunder - distant, rumbling, and low. Gatt paused, wondering if he had misheard, and then turned around as the sound became louder and more distinct. He opened his mouth in a wordless shout, and soon the air around him was rent by screams as the traveling party began to run. Behind them, a ripple of dust snaked in their direction, and as it grew closer it became a wave of writhing, seething earth, churning the ground in front of them like a giant worm furrowing a channel in the sand. Gatt came to his senses and started to run as well, but massive fissures opened up in the ground around him, huge cracks that turned into ravines, and he was soon jumping and zig-zagging his way to safety, trying to outrun the devastation that pursued him. He was almost safe, when the ground beneath his feet simply disappeared. One moment he was running, the next his legs were moving in mid-air. He hit solid ground, and glanced off it, pain shooting through his ankle and wrist as he bounced, and then he began to fall. He let out a scream, and saw someone ahead of him turn, and run back, and then a big arm reached down and caught his wrist just as he was about to disappear into the gaping black hole beneath him. His body swung violently against the side of the hole, and he felt his ribs snap and almost passed out from the pain.

"Hold on! Hold on," a voice told him insistently and he looked up into Skinner's dark eyes.

"I'll drag you down too. I'm too heavy..." Gatt whispered, just wanting to let go, hurting too much to care what happened to him. He saw Fox peering anxiously at him over Skinner's shoulder.

"No. Hold tight, I'll pull you back up. Fox - sit on my legs to steady me." Skinner lay down on the edge of the chasm, and caught hold of Gatt's other hand, and then heaved, his muscles bulging from the effort. Fox reached out and tugged the youth up, lifting him under the armpits and between them, they managed to drag Gatt onto solid ground.

"The quake didn't hit over there." Skinner pointed with his head in the direction of where the rest of the group were gathered, anxiously watching the rescue. "Can you walk there, Gatt?"

"I...no," Gatt whispered. His ankle hurt too much, and he knew instinctively that at least one of his ribs and his arm were broken.

"Fox and I will help you then." Skinner nodded, and between them the two men managed to carry Gatt to relative safety.

"What now?" Gatt asked, as Fox took out his water bottle and held it to his lips. "I can't travel like this. I can't walk. Oh, god, you're going to leave me...you should leave me..."

"Hush." Fox's fingers gently examined his ankle and wrist, but the anxious look in his eyes showed Gatt that it wasn't good news. The Guide crouched down next to him and they both exchanged glances.

"The boy's right," the Guide said, scanning the sky with a worried expression. "If he can't walk we must leave him here."

"If you leave him here he'll die," Skinner protested.

"If we stay, we'll all die," the Guide replied. "This is not a good place to be. Let the boy take his chances."

"Alone? In the wilderness?" Skinner shook his head. "It's not an option."

"You stay with him then. Nurse him back to health and then follow onto Zaria later. I'll draw you a map."

"Between us all, I'm sure we could transport the boy," Skinner said forcefully.

"He'll slow us down," the Guide replied firmly. "These people have paid good money for this trip. I'll see them safely to Zaria."

"Over his dead body?" Skinner gestured at Gatt.

The Guide shrugged. "I'm sorry," he said.

Skinner took a deep breath, then looked at Fox. "We'll stay with him," he said. Fox looked up, his eyes torn and confused. "Yes? Fox?" Skinner sounded almost as if he were pleading.

"We can't leave him," Skinner said. "Can we?"

Fox glanced down at Gatt but the boy shook his head. "You should go," Gatt murmured.

Fox clenched his fists, and looked into the distance for a moment, struggling with himself. Finally, he let out a deep sigh. "No. Of course we can't leave him," he said.

Skinner nodded. "We'll stay," he told the Guide.

The other man shrugged and knelt down, drawing a very basic map on the ground. "Of course, it might all be different by now," he told them with a sanguine shake of his head. "Who knows?" He got up and started to walk away.

"Not so fast." Skinner laid a hand on the Guide's arm and drew him back. "This boy gave you everything he owned to make this trip. You haven't seen him safely to Zaria so I suggest that you return his possessions to him."

The Guide looked as if he were going to argue, then saw the knife that had appeared in Skinner's hand, and changed his mind.

"Very well." He fumbled in his leather knapsack, and drew out an old gold locket, handing it over to Skinner who threw it in turn to Fox. The Guide turned to go.

"You're forgetting something else." Skinner stopped him again. "We paid you too." The Guide sighed, and reached into his knapsack again, finding a gold ring, and a tiny cross on a chain. Skinner handed the cross to Fox, and pushed the ring onto one of his own fingers. "Thank you." He nodded towards the Guide with mock graciousness, and the other man grinned.

"I'll strip them from your corpses when I make the return journey," he promised.

Skinner shrugged. "I don't think so. I'm pretty good at surviving," he replied.

They watched as the group of travelers set off without them, staring after them until long after they had disappeared over the horizon, then Fox began stripping some fabric from one of the blankets, which he tied firmly around Gatt's ankle. Skinner crouched beside him, and gently examined the boy's wrist.

"It'll need to be set." He glanced at Fox who glanced at Gatt.

"Just do it," Gatt whispered. Skinner nodded, and found a piece of wood, while Fox prepared another strip of fabric. Gatt wasn't sure which of them pulled the pieces of his broken arm back, and which tied the makeshift splint in place. He just knew that he was glad when it was over.

They pooled what food they had in their packs. Skinner sighed as he glanced at the meager rations.

"I'll catch something," he murmured, taking out his knife, and some sharpened sticks he had whittled, and then getting to his feet and surveying the landscape. "You two stay here. Don't move. I'll be back soon."

Gatt didn't mention it to Fox, but he didn't remember seeing any living thing running wild, so he thought that the big man might be gone a lot longer than he had led them to believe, in his quest for food.

"Don't look so anxious." Fox laughed at him. "He'll be back."

"How do you know?"

"He's never broken a promise to me yet. He said he'll be back and he will."

"Do you love him?" Gatt asked, surprised at the question that had emerged from his half-delirious lips.

"It's more than love." Fox gazed into the distance. "I saw a man once, crying and throwing himself around because he'd lost his pet dog. The dog was the only thing he had left from Before. He loved it with his heart and soul, and when it died it broke him. He lost the will to live and died soon after."

"Yes. I can understand that," Gatt muttered. He had heard many similar stories.

"I often thought it was strange - to survive the horror of During, and then to die over the loss of a dog, but now...well, now I understand." Fox shrugged. "We used to have a concept of a soulmate Before but I never knew what that meant then. I do now. I'll die the same day Walter dies."

"Is that something you've seen?" Gatt asked.

"No. It's something I know," Fox replied with a degree of certainty. "Don't worry, Gatt. It won't happen for a long time yet. Walter will see you safely to Zaria first."

"And you? Aren't you going to Zaria too?"

"No." Fox shook his head. "Our path takes us South at the outskirts of Zaria."

"Where are you going then?"

"To get justice for the world," Fox grinned, "and maybe to save it. Now tell me, why are you so interested in reaching Zaria? What's there for you?" The tall man arranged his long legs so that he was more comfortable, and then gazed at Gatt expectantly.

"I don't know. Just...my destiny I think."

"Ah. Destiny." Fox sighed. "Maybe I should do that reading for you now."

"Would you? I'd love that," Gatt replied excitedly, and Fox nodded, and placed another blanket over him.

"Zaria..." Fox murmured, holding up Gatt's locket. "Who did this belong to, Gatt?"

"I don't know. It's not mine. I stole it..." he flushed. "During. When all the looting was done. I stole it then."

"Don't worry about it. We all did that sort of stuff." Fox shrugged. "You were just a kid."

"Did you steal the ring, and the cross?" Gatt asked.

"No." Fox sighed. "They were the last things we had left after we'd traded everything else. We held onto them for seven long years, because they meant something to us. In the end though, this journey meant more. I'm not sure whether it hurt Walter more to give up his wedding ring, or me to give up Scully's crucifix. I'm glad we have them both back, and I've managed to earn some more to keep us going in the meantime."

"Skinner...he doesn't approve of you fortune-telling, does he?" Gatt asked.

Fox smiled. "I don't know. He never says. Of course you can't second-guess Walter. I've made that mistake in the past and lived to regret it, believe me." He tugged on his bottom lip ruefully. "So - Zaria. You're right, Gatt, your future does lie there."

"It does?" Gatt angled his head so that he could look into the other man's unnaturally bright hazel eyes.

"Oh yes, and it's a shining future too." Fox's face was serious, and his body was quivering slightly as he entered into an almost trance-like state. "You have an important fate, Gatt. You aren't destined to die out here in the Deadlands."

"What about love?" Gatt asked, then flushed. "That is...is there someone for me?" He had forgotten what it was like to care for people and to be cared for. Being with Skinner and Fox had reminded him, and now he knew that it was something he wanted for himself.

"Of course." Fox laughed out loud. "Three people in fact! You'll live a long time, and be very happy, and it starts for you in Zaria. Trust me. You're going to be a great man." Fox touched Gatt's arm gently. "Maybe one day we can come and visit you in your big house in the prosperous new town they'll build in Zaria?"

"Of course." Gatt grinned delightedly. "What was Zaria called Before? Was there a town there then?" He asked.

Fox shook his head. "Zaria's new. One of the new lands thrown up from the bottom of the sea." He thought about it for a moment. "Of course Scully would have a better explanation

of it than that. Shifting land masses, plate tectonics, tidal wave activity - that sort of stuff. Nobody will take any notice of that though. People will talk of Atlantis, and everything will become legend. One day, Before will simply be a memory of a time of when gods walked on the earth, and we were all magicians."

Gatt nodded, his eyes closing, not understanding a word of what Fox was telling him. He fell asleep and didn't see the sadness on the fortune-teller's face as he tucked the locket back in Gatt's pocket.

When Gatt woke, Skinner was busy roasting something over a small fire.

"Snake?" Fox was complaining. "You want us to eat snake?"

"It's protein." Skinner grinned in the firelight. "Of course if you want to go and see if you can catch a nice fat rabbit, please be my guest, but you might be gone for a long time."

"Snake though. Yeuch." Fox made a face, and Skinner laughed out loud.

"You'll eat it," he predicted, and he was right. "We'll stay here until Gatt's ankle mends, then we'll set off again. We'll take it slow, Gatt. You'll be fine," Skinner said with a confidence that was somehow infectious.

The second disaster struck two days later, just before daybreak. Gatt awoke to the sound of screaming and sat up, disorientated, to see Fox writhing on the ground, literally foaming at the mouth. Skinner was leaning over him, trying to hold him still.

"What is it? What's happening?" Gatt shouted, noticing that the air was sultry and still, the heat oppressive. Skinner nodded his head grimly at a point somewhere in the distance.

"That's happening. A dust-devil."

Gatt turned and saw the swirling cloud as it raced across the Deadlands toward them. These phenomena were rare, and nobody seemed able to explain them, although everybody seemed very sure that they had never happened Before - not quite in this way at least. The cloud was pink in hue, and its interior swirled violently as it moved.

"We should run!" Gatt yelled, the air seeming too thick to carry his words.

"There's nowhere to hide," Skinner yelled back, "and Fox isn't going to be running anywhere. He's too deeply under."

This was different to the way Fox had been before the storm, Gatt observed. The fortune-teller was positively frenzied, his whole body jerking spasmodically as the dust-devil came closer. "It'll home in on him anyway," Skinner shouted. "They always do. Hold on tight, Gatt, this is going to be a rough ride." The big man threw his own body over the fortune-teller, sheltering him from the eddying cloud as it tore into them, hovering over their prone bodies for a while, showering them with pink dust. Gatt felt as if he would be borne skyward by the

pressure of the cloud, and he hung onto Skinner's wrist with his good arm for several long minutes, struggling for breath as the cloud covered them completely. Finally it lifted, and swirled off into the distance, but the air remained hot and sultry in its wake. Gatt sat up, gasping for breath, and Skinner gingerly eased himself off Fox. The other man was pale, and his body still thrashed on the ground. His eyes were open, and had rolled back alarmingly in his head.

"I can see!" He screamed. "I can see you, all of you! I'll find you! I'll hunt you down..."

"It's okay. He sometimes gets like this," Skinner told Gatt reassuringly.

"As bad as this?" Gatt asked, watching as Skinner placed a wad of cloth in Fox's mouth, and then gathered him up in his arms, soothing him with meaningless words.

"Not this bad, no. I've never seen him this bad before." Skinner's face was etched with worry lines. "Ssh, baby, ssh." He rocked the other man back and forth, and slowly Fox began to quieten.

"He seems to know you." Gatt crouched down in front of them but the sound of his voice made Fox shriek and start to convulse again.

"When he gets like this I'm the only one he can stand to be near him," Skinner said apologetically. "I don't know why."

Gatt nodded and took a step back, sitting down on his dusty blankets. "He looks so ill," he whispered.

"It takes it out of him. He'll be tired for days. Damn, this is not a good time for this to happen." Skinner glanced angrily at the sky. "Damn. It's almost as if they knew."

"Who's 'they'?" Gatt asked.

"Them." Skinner shrugged. "The mythical 'them'. Fox has been searching for them most of his life, but now he thinks they're searching for him - that's what he thinks the dust-devils are."

"And you don't agree?"

"Well...Fox has always tended towards paranoia but he's been right a lot as well. So...maybe." Skinner shrugged. "It's not just him - I've noticed that all the Gifted get targeted by any freak weather condition going. I just wish I knew what the hell those eddies are. They scare the balls off me."

"Me too," Gatt confided with a grin.

Skinner continued to hold Fox, gently smoothing his hair with his hand and whispering something to him. Finally the other man became calm and several minutes later he opened

his eyes.

"Bad one?" Skinner asked softly. Fox nodded, his eyes having trouble focusing. "Hold still then, Fox, hold still." He removed the wadding from the other man's mouth, and placed the water bottle to his lips. Fox drank greedily.

"Not drugged?" He gasped at last when he was finished.

"No." Skinner reached into his pocket and drew out a small packet of some sort of dried, powdered root. "I think you should though - it'll help you sleep. Yes?" He reached for the water bottle but Fox shook his head, trying to catch the other man's arm with his flailing, unco-ordinated hand.

"No. Saw something...saw..." He pulled Skinner's head down to him and whispered something in his ear. Skinner listened for a long time, nodding occasionally, then he got up and wrapped Fox in several blankets. He placed a small quantity of the powder in the water bottle and held it to Fox's lips.

"Don't want..." Fox whispered.

"I know. Drink it anyway." Skinner tipped the bottle up and Fox took a gulp. He was asleep within seconds.

"What did he see?" Gatt asked eagerly.

"The same as usual." Skinner shrugged. "Only more vivid. The closer we get, the more visions he has."

"What visions?" Gatt pressed.

"Fox is on a quest." Skinner built up the remains of the previous night's fire and lit it again. Gatt noticed that Fox had started shivering, although the air was still warm from the furious sweep of the dust-devil. "This is nothing new, you understand. Fox has always been on a quest, since the day I first met him, and, you know, I think it's still the same quest." He crouched thoughtfully beside the fire, and then nodded. "Yes, the same one."

"He said he was going to save the world," Gatt whispered.

"Yeah, well." Skinner shrugged. "I think it's a bit late for that." He glanced around them at the Deadlands. "What he's looking for isn't salvation - it's redemption, and he's been looking for it for a long time."

"He said you aren't going to Zaria."

"We aren't. He's seen a vision - an old weather satellite station from Before. It's about 20 miles out of Zaria, to the South, on old land. If it's still there."

"You're going there?" Gatt asked.

Skinner shrugged. "I told him we would. I said I'd take him there, to search for his truth."

"Does the quest end there?"

"I hope so." Skinner rolled his shoulders back, relieving an ache in them. "I suspect it won't though. We've been following these visions for a long time, and we haven't reached the end yet. Scully helped him for seven years and now I've done the same. I hope the seven isn't symbolic. Sometimes I think it has a certain biblical significance to it."

"You don't have to help him. You could walk away," Gatt suggested.

"No." Skinner glanced across at Fox's still, pale form. "No, I couldn't do that," he said firmly.

"What do you think he'll find there? At the satellite station?"

Skinner was silent for a long moment, then he looked up straight into Gatt's eyes.

"Well, that depends on what you believe," he murmured. "He believes that this world is being prepared for colonization by an alien force. He also believes that their initial colonization attempts failed, and that they were behind the devastation of During, using some weapon we cannot hope to understand, something that affects the weather and the very center of the Earth's core. He thinks During, and even now, After, are the attempts of these beings to root out the weak among us, killing off all but the strongest of us. Those who are left are destined to become some kind of slave race to our alien overlords."

"You believe all this?" Gatt gasped, his eyes wide with amazement.

"I believe...I believe that the world is a strange place." Skinner shrugged. "He believes it, that's the important thing. When he gets to that weather satellite station, he hopes to be able to get some definitive answers."

"And then?"

"Then he'll have to track down the people who did this and make them stop." Skinner grinned. "There see - it's so simple." He laughed out loud.

Fox didn't regain consciousness until later that evening, and he was weaker than Gatt had ever seen him before. He was unable to move, his muscles still occasionally going into spasm, and his eyes didn't always focus the way they should. His face was pale against his dark hair, and his eyes glowed too bright.

"I have to pee," he murmured wretchedly, a dark pink hue seeping momentarily across his pale features as the implications of this admission sank in.

"I'll take you." Skinner levered the sick man easily into his arms.

"I hate this." Fox turned away from Gatt's gaze in humiliation, burying his face in Skinner's shoulder.

"Don't be an idiot. It's only me." Skinner replied, resting his forehead against Fox's for a moment. Fox nodded, but he still didn't look up.

They returned a few minutes later, and Skinner placed Fox back in his blankets, then sat back on his haunches and stared at both the sick travelers. Gatt could see the thoughts running through his head. He was stuck out here in the Deadlands, with two ill people on his hands, and no way of getting to safety. They could, at any moment, be caught up in another quake, or dust-devil, or storm...or worse. There was no shelter, little food to eat, and their water supply would run out soon. Gatt wondered what the big man would do, and whether he would give up totally in despair at their desperate situation. Instead Skinner gave a rueful shake of his head, and smiled at them both.

"Time to go snake hunting," he said, getting to his feet and disappearing off into the encroaching darkness.

"He'd be better off leaving us," Gatt remarked to Fox. Fox's head lolled back, his head resting on the pack which Skinner had propped up under his shoulders.

"Yes, he would. He won't though. I'd suggest it if it would do any good, but there's no point. He'd just get angry, and he's no fun when he's like that." Fox grinned.

"Fun isn't exactly a word I'd use to describe him," Gatt murmured.

"You don't think so?" Fox raised an eyebrow. "He makes me laugh all the time. Haven't you noticed the way he pretends to be so grouchy when really he just wants to smile? How he laughs when he thinks nobody's looking, and how he listens, really listens, to everything and everyone around him? I love that about him. He lets me tease him to death and never takes offense."

"He mocks you a lot too." Gatt observed.

"Yes. I love that." Fox grinned. "Shit, listen to me. I make us sound like an old married couple. I suppose we are, in a way. I never thought I'd hear myself say that about Walter Skinner. These past seven years have changed the whole world, but I never realised just how much they'd changed me." His face grew wistful.

"When you told that story about the warrior, that night around the fire - you were talking about him, weren't you?" Gatt asked.

"Yeah. He hates it when I do that, it drives him crazy - which is another reason for doing it of course."

"Was it true? Did he save your life During?" Gatt tried to get a finger under his bandage in

order to scratch the itch on his ankle that was bothering him.

"Yes, he did."

"Tell me." Gatt looked at his companion over the fire. Fox looked tired and ill, but nothing could dampen the light in those irrepressible dancing eyes.

"During...May 18th, 2000. Astrologers say it was some weird line-up of the planets, but Scully would laugh at that kind of crap. I don't know what you remember about it, but we had no warning." Fox put up a hand to pull on his bottom lip for a moment, and was clearly shocked by how clumsy, and unco-ordinated the gesture was. His hand dropped back down to his side like a stone. "One minute we were talking in his office, and the next our whole world collapsed around us. I suspected something like it would happen from the work I'd been doing, but I had no idea of the scale of it. There was an earthquake that split a whole continent in two, sending shock waves over the entire world. Walter heard the sound and looked out of his window, but it was already too late. The next minute we were falling, masonry tumbling around our heads. Walter grabbed my arm, and Scully's, and began to run but we were on the fifth floor, and the corridors were moving under our feet as we tried to escape. Scully..." Fox paused for a long moment, then took a deep breath and continued with his narrative. "Scully was badly hurt. It all happened so fast. One moment we were running, and the next we were lying trapped under a pile of rubble. At first we stayed there, thinking we'd be rescued. We didn't know at that point that there was nobody left to rescue anybody. Walter thought it was a bomb, and I agreed with him. We finally managed to dig Scully out, but she was never going to make it. She hung on for a couple more days. Before she died, she gave me her cross." The tiny chain appeared in Fox's hands as if by magic, and he dangled it between his fingers, in silent contemplation of what he had lost that day.

"After the first 'quake came countless others, and then the storms, endless storms. A few hours after Scully died I had my first fit. I don't know what the hell was going through Walter's head as he sat there in the dark, in the rubble of our old workplace, with a corpse, and me foaming at the mouth and shrieking like a banshee, but when I woke up he was holding onto me. I don't think he's let go since." Fox gazed into the fire for a long moment. "Of course it took me a long time to get used to being held," he said. "Metaphorically speaking I mean. Walter finally dug us out, but the world was unrecognizable, and I knew then that it would have been better for us if we'd died. The luckiest people died, During," he said with a rigorous nod.

"There followed endless days that looked like nights, and nights that went on for months. Looting for food, waking each day to a changed landscape. Everything shifting, nothing certain, except maybe Walter. He wouldn't leave me - and in those days that was a good thing. I was fitting every few hours, and I wouldn't have survived During without him. We found shelter, and he ventured out to get news and food while I slept. News...shit, how I miss CNN." Fox grinned across at his companion. "You take the news for granted until it's gone. For three years we didn't even know what had happened to us During - hell, we still don't, not really. Nothing electrical worked, and besides, all the equipment was fucked up anyway. The devastation was total. People kept asking 'why?' but nobody had any answers. It was Walter who tried to set up one of the earliest attempts at an interim government, but

it didn't work. During was too savage, it took too many of us, and the world never recovered from it. In some ways, I don't think Walter did either. Maybe none of us did, except those of us who were young enough to adapt." Fox glanced meaningfully at Gatt.

"I don't think any of us realized, until we lost it, just how good our world had been, how much we had." He looked down ruefully at the ragged, mismatched clothing he wore. "Mourning for a paradise lost," he murmured, "and we didn't even know it was a paradise until it was gone. Now there are so few of us...scattered to the four corners of the earth, each of us trying to survive as best we can. For all our fancy toys, our technology, and our illusions of invulnerability, at the end of the day we're nothing more than flesh and blood, with nothing in our favor except our own ingenuity. I suppose I kept thinking that the whole nightmare would end, that I'd have my old life back...but that never happened, and you do get used to it eventually, don't you?"

Gatt nodded, his eyes wide. He had his own memories of During - everybody did - but he never tired of listening to other people's stories.

"It was three years before I kissed him for the first time." Fox smiled, reveling in a private memory. "We were lying on an old mattress beneath a makeshift shelter he'd made, and I just woke up one morning and felt his arms around me, and knew that I loved him. It was as sudden as that. Up until then, I think maybe his constant presence had even rankled with me. I needed him, and I resented him for that. He took my moods and silences the same way he took my fits and sickness, with that stoic forbearance that I took for granted for far too long. That morning, I woke up, and looked at him as he slept, and couldn't stop myself kissing him. It was an impulse, and once I'd done it I had to do it again, then again." Fox grinned at himself, and shook his head. "You think I'm crazy. You don't want to hear this stuff." He raised an eyebrow at his companion but Gatt shook his head. He loved stories, of whatever kind, and he loved Fox's stories more than any others he had ever heard.

"Go on," he urged. "Did he wake up? What did he say?"

"Yeah, he woke up, and he didn't say anything. Not at first, anyway. He just lay there and watched me, kind of puzzled. I think I apologized. I probably blamed my sickness or the visions or something. I can be a devious bastard like that." Fox grinned. "He just sighed, pulled me closer, kissed me back, and fell asleep again. After that, well, everything was different, and yet nothing had changed. In time...in time I came to understand that love is more than I had ever imagined it could be Before. You'll find that out too, someday. Don't get me wrong - I don't love him because he looks out for me when I'm ill, although maybe at first I wondered if it was gratitude. It goes much deeper than that. As the years passed I felt I wasn't complete without him, and I wondered how I'd never known it Before. I can't describe it - maybe this is something that even I don't have the words for." Fox gave a self-deprecating shrug. "What about you, Gatt? What were your experiences of During?"

"I was knocked out by the first 'quake. I don't remember any of it," Gatt said. "When I came to, I was scared. I saw my family..." He stopped, and bit on his lip.

"It's okay. I'm sorry - don't tell me any more," Fox told him, soothingly.

"It doesn't matter. I found a group of people - I stayed with them for a long time. I...this shames me, but sometimes I forget my family. I'm used to this world. It's full of adventure," Gatt admitted.

"Don't be ashamed." Fox shrugged. "Walter and I mourn for what we lost, but you're young enough to enjoy what is. We'll never get our world back - it's your world now. I'll find the people who killed our world though. I promised myself that much."

"You're so sure it was people who did this? It wasn't just chance?" Gatt asked.

"Yes. I'm sure." Fox nodded, his face set in determined lines.

The sound of footsteps broke into their conversation and they both glanced up. Skinner returned to the circle of the fire, and Fox groaned as he saw the other man had brought them back another snake which he proceeded to roast on a sharpened spit.

"Snake again? We're so blessed," he sighed.

"That's not all." Skinner laid a small creature on the ground, and they all studied it intently for a few moments.

"What the hell is that?" Fox demanded.

"I have no idea. Some kind of vole?" Skinner suggested.

"Or maybe a kind of rat?" Gatt offered.

"Or a mutant. A rat-vole." Fox winked conspiratorially. "These are the Deadlands after all - they're bound to have all kinds of weird things living here."

"Hmm. Well, whatever it is, it's meat, and we need that," Skinner said, skinning the creature and skewering it, before giving it to Gatt to hold over the fire.

"You two eat. I'm fine." Fox put his head back and closed his eyes, then opened them again as Skinner rearranged the pack under his shoulders so that he was in a sitting position.

"You'll eat." Skinner told him, cutting the meat into pieces and handing one to Gatt, and one to Fox.

"I'm not hungry." Fox made a face, then flushed under the scrutiny of Skinner's steady gaze. "Okay, I feel like all the energy's been sucked out of me. I can't...actually move," Fox admitted, and Gatt felt sorry for him. He remembered how the man had tried to touch his face earlier, and failed.

"Here." Skinner held the roasted snake meat to Fox's mouth and the other man took it and chewed, his eyes full of misery.

"I hate being this fucking weak and dependent," Fox growled.

"I hate going out hunting all day, then getting home and slaving over a hot fire for hours cooking dinner for no gratitude whatsoever," Skinner retorted, with a grin.

"My ankle is itching like crazy - I hate that," Gatt offered sympathetically, joining in.

"And you know what else I hate? What I damn well loathe?" Skinner rocked back on his heels and fed Fox another piece of meat, then took one himself.

"What?" Fox and Gatt both asked at the same time.

"What I hate more than anything else in the world is roasted goddamn snake." Skinner sighed, and placed the morsel in his mouth, chewing it with mock relish, and finally Fox started to laugh.

After four more days, Skinner judged that both Fox and Gatt were well enough to travel. It was clearly sooner than he would have liked, but another series of tremors made it too dangerous to stay. Their progress was slow but steady, and Fox grew stronger with each passing day. Gatt grew used to their company, to Fox's outrageous stories, and Skinner's mocking responses. He enjoyed the evenings spent around the fire, with Fox talking, while Skinner whittled away at endless pieces of wood with his knife. Skinner had committed the Guide's map to memory, and they arrived on the other side of the Deadlands in one piece. Gatt was relieved when the stark scenery of the Deadlands gave way to green grass, and the stunted trees were replaced by vibrant, living specimens. The new land was beautiful and lush, and Gatt longed to reach his destination. At the same time, the thought of leaving his new found friends saddened him, and each day brought their parting a step closer, until it was time for him to continue to Zaria alone.

"Good luck." Fox placed a hand on each of his shoulders. "Remember us, when you rule all of Zaria." He grinned.

"What's that?" Skinner frowned.

"Fox saw my future," Gatt explained. "I was right - my destiny does lie in Zaria. He foretold a great future for me there."

"Did he? Hmmp." Skinner glanced sideways at his companion who winked at him. "Here." Skinner placed something in Gatt's hand. Gatt gazed down at the small wooden talisman, shaped like a fox's head, intricately carved.

"So you don't forget us," Skinner muttered, looking embarrassed.

"I couldn't. You saved my life." Gatt looked down to hide his tears. "Good luck on your quest," he said quickly. "You should let him read your future you know," he remarked to Skinner. "He's very good."

"I told you before, I don't need him to tell me where my future lies. I already know." Skinner gathered up the pack and fastened it around his shoulders, then glanced questioningly at his companion. "Ready, Fox?"

"Yeah." Fox grinned and exchanged a high five with Gatt. "See ya, kid."

Gatt watched as the two men turned and walked south.

"You already know your future?" He heard Fox ask, in a mocking tone. "You never told me. Enlighten me, oh silent one. Where does your future lie?"

"With you. By your side. I'm surprised you needed to ask." Skinner shrugged. Fox made no reply, save to press his lips briefly against the other man's bare shoulder, and then they disappeared from sight.

THE END

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