

Prologue

excerpt from the *Archives of the Order of Many Paths Vol. 1*

On a dark wet October morning drowsed the Spirit Protectorate late into the day. Dreamt he of a silent and boisterous cloud looming darkly o'er the city, rolling ever nearer. It reflected the ruddy glow of unseen flames, and the earth did tremble before the wind that drove it in. He woke around midday to the unpleasant realization that he had missed his dawn appointment with the other protectorates, to plan the up and coming Samhain celebration. He contacted the Earth Protectorate, as yet unable to shake off the uneasy residue his dream had left in his mind.

It was a groggy voice that greeted him from the other end of the line, not at all like a man who had been up for hours. Earth apologized to Spirit for not being at the meeting, explaining what spirit had already expected to hear: he had slept until only few minutes ago. Spirit cut off his explanation, telling Earth that he too had lain semi-conscious and dreaming for the duration of the morning, and suggested that Earth call Air, while Spirit called the Fire and Water Protectorates to confirm his growing suspicions.

And so it came to be revealed that not one Protectorate of *the Order of Many Paths* was present in the woods as the sun came up that chilly October morning; all had dreamed the morning through. An alternative meeting was arranged for that very evening beneath the full moon, to discuss the possible import of that morning's occurrence.

Each did reveal a vision. Earth had dreamt of subtle shockwaves shaking the earth to announce a greater quake. Air did dream of a stagnant breeze wafting through the city, implying a rank presence nearby. Water did dream of an ominous fog

blanketing the regions nearby. And Fire dreamt of smoke roiling throughout the neighborhood.

They knew then the necessity of a different Samhain ritual this year. A divination ceremony unlike the usual celebration of the endless cycle. When the veil thinned that 2000th year of the current era, they would seek answers to the many questions raised by that fateful morning's visions.

On that last night in October, the myriad members of the *Order* gathered in the nearby wood to prepare for the ritual designed by the elders to ascertain the message the gods were trying to tell them. Each member meditated, focusing their spiritual energy in the method prescribed by each person's chosen Path, and sending it to the Spirit Protectorate in the center of the circle.

Those present beheld the Spirit Protectorate cross the veil dividing this world from the *Other*. As he so stood between realities, the Spirit Protectorate spake:

And so it shall come to pass, as the two that struggle for domination wrangle one with the other for control of the houses, that reason and moderation shall fall by the wayside. The multitudes shall, in their ignorance, choose among their leaders with little forethought, with greater and greater numbers of them abstaining from the choice. Yea, even only the radical shall choose, erasing all moderation from the leadership of our nation.

In this time, the right, in her preoccupation with currency, and the left, in her reliance on bureaucracy, shall pass utterly into the realms of corruption. For power and money shall they secretly pander to the high corporations. The right shall work directly with them, as the left slogs down social movement with insipid over-administration. Because they seeming work against each other, the merchants and those stricken with poverty alike shall believe that the houses are protecting their interests.

The powers of government shall use political strife to their advantage, using ththeir struggles with radical nations to

further their own influence and power. In the name of defense and security shall the lines of freedom, privacy, and individuality continually be blurred. Through their control of technology and communications will they slowly wrest the rights of the multitude forever from the people's grasp.

Fear not, though, Our children, for we shall not stand idly by as the people of this greatest of nations are oppressed. As the dark day dawns, a child shall be born to a woman of the green isle and a man of indeterminate origins. His features shall be dark, but his eyes shall change like the chameleon. Vested in him shall be wisdom and the knowledge of ages. He shall have great power o'er the system, and shall use it to free our peoples!

Go you now and prepare for his coming, for *The Order* shall have the duty and responsibility to teach him and help him accomplish his destiny!

Chapter I

Dr. Henry Calrusso scowled darkly into his black coffee, hands resting lightly on the crisp sheet of paper in front of him, seeming almost reluctant to touch it. His eyes lifted to negligently scan the room as his thoughts raced. He passed over the expensive pottery and priceless oriental rug and eventually caught his reflection in the polished mahogany of his desk. It seemed to him he looked oddly out of place in his extravagant surroundings. His grey hair was ruffled, and he was still clad in his bathrobe. His eyes squinted at the early morning light coming in the bay window. He was not a man used to being awakened at daybreak. If it was any man other than Greg Mandry, he probably would have had him summarily dismissed. Calrusso finally spoke, saying simply, "Where did you find this?"

"I was investigating the sources of a student of mine. He was writing a paper on the theological implications of modern physics. It was something of a bizarre twist of fate actually, since my Teaching Assistant usually handles things such as this, but I had a personal interest in the subject. This *Order of Many Paths* has much written on it, so I was exploring their archives." Gregory Mandry, was a small man both in mass and stature. He didn't wear glasses, and his face looked oddly out of place without them. Relatively young and unassuming, one could hardly guess by looking at him that more letters came after his name than were in it. "It *is* uncanny how alike the current political situation is compared with that described in this 'prophecy.' It's very hard to believe it was written clear back in 1999."

"I can see why you brought this to me, even in the wee hours of the morning. It may well be a coincidence, but no one could know for certain how the system would work nearly 40 years in the future. This certainly bears some consideration."

Mandry only watched as Calrusso got up and began pacing the room. He knew it was best not to interrupt the Captain (as all in the Conglomerate called Calrusso) as he was deep in thought. The imposing figure moving about the room was generally placid, but could chill the bones with one of his legendary rebukes. So Mandry simply re-read the manuscript where it lay. Alas, nothing had changed noticeably from the fifty other times he'd read it since he had discovered it shortly after midnight. Caught in thought, he didn't hear what the Captain said to him.

"Pardon me, sir?" Mandry said with his most placating smile; just this side of a grimace.

Calrusso's already obsidian eyes seemed to grow even more dark. "I said you should call the Chairs," he said coolly, "and perhaps some significant others, that we might discuss the portent, if any, of this *prophecy*." This last was uttered derisively, almost under his breath, but not quite.

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By the time Calrusso got to the vast meeting room, which didn't exist according to any plans, records, or blueprints one could find in the National Data Source (which was really the only place one could search), most of the participants had already arrived. Four of the six ornately carved chairs surrounding an impressive table were already filled. Once Calrusso took his place at the head of that table, there would be only one vacancy.

To leave the table's description at impressive would be a half-truth. It was not merely impressive, or even merely enormous. It was glorious. It had a gold inlay atop a pure silver star (or perhaps it was platinum, nobody really knew for sure). The inlay superimposed a round map of the world in uncanny golden detail upon the shining star. Names and titles were etched stylishly, deep into the maple finish before each throne-like chair.

As he made his way to the chair at the head of the table, Calrusso noticed the several other people who all but filled the substantial space not dominated by the central table. There were smaller tables situated behind each chair at the main table, and each of these was filled to capacity. Calrusso assumed these to be some of the minor chairs in the conglomerate, as well as the occasional hired roughneck or escort. Even the smaller tables behind the as yet empty chair was full with now silent onlookers. Only the gallery behind the main chair was empty.

As Calrusso sat, he splayed his hands on either side of the plaque that simply said:

Henry Calrusso

Information Technology and Communications
Chief Chair

At that moment, Calrusso turned to see a tall, exotic-looking man come into the room.

"Good lord!" The tall man said with resignation, "What would be four minutes early everywhere else in the world, is as usual, a half hour late in this company. I place myself at your mercy." He then bowed gracefully with only the hint of a smile.

"You're fired!" said the only obviously female figure at the table, almost musically.

The tall man pouted. "But Kristina," he whined, "you said I was doing a great job last night."

"there was no meeting. . ." Kristina started to say, seeming perplexed. Then it dawned on her " Bastard!" she finished laughing warmly.

The tall man took his seat at the place marked "Randal Puller," now smiling openly. Calrusso only harrumphed to get everybody's attention.

"I'm certain you all realize that it is nowhere near time for one of our quarterly meetings. You must be equally aware that these mid-quarter meetings are by no means common. . . .

"Aw, quit your stalling, Hank," A dark woman drawled in a heavy Texas accent, "what's this about?" She was wearing a business suit that largely disguised the fact that she was female. The only distinguishing feature of her outfit was the oversized cowboy hat sitting on her oversized head.

"Always quick to the bottom line, Juanita," Calrusso acknowledged the large woman. The six people seated at this table had known each other long enough that a certain amount of frankness and familiarity would by no means hamper communication. "Alright then, this is why we're here." At that moment, scarcely detected servants silently deposited carefully sealed envelopes in front of each Chair. Each envelope was summarily glanced at, then opened and read without further adieu.

Kristina Satchell simply stared in awe at the paper on the table before her. "Did that say the 2000th year of the Current Era?" The others stared similarly at their own copies.

"Current Era? As in A.D.? That's not possible" returned Puller

"Not impossible, just improbable" added the extremely thin man whom the table identified as William Bray. He seemed in a daze not entirely caused only by amazement at the manuscript. Indeed, he seemed not to be amazed at all.

Juanita Ritkin also seemed unamazed. She looked merely perplexed. "What's so impossible about it?"

"Hello. . ." said Puller mockingly, "Did you happen to read the paper?"

"So some punk kid figured out what we were up to early on. If this little satire hasn't got out by now, the author probably works for us."

"The 2000th year 'Nita; 1999, if you prefer. Hey Captain, you couldn't have been much more than fifteen when this happened." Satchell shot the question across the table at Calrusso"

"Twelve, actually." he replied.

"And you started building up the Conglomerate when you were. . ."

"Twenty-three"

"More than ten years later. You getting this, 'Nita?"

Ritkin gasped as reality finally dawned in her somewhat slow mind. "So they called a strike before the ball even left the pitcher"

"Rather before baseball had even been thought up" Retorted Puller

"My stars," wondered Ritkin, "so that's why they're callin' it a prophecy"

"Sounds more like one of the rambling dissertations Bill likes to give when he's been up for four or five days," quipped Satchell. Bray just smiled gracefully as if he were used to (or even expecting) this kind of abuse.

"The question is, ladies and gents, how would this *Order of Many Paths* know about something that wasn't even a twinkle of sublime ambition at the time?" Greg Mandry finally spoke up as much to get the discussion rolling as out of any need to curb this good-natured bickering. For the moment, all that answered him were blank stares.

"Blind chance" Bray surmised. "Some nutcase starts rambling over forty years ago, and it happens to bear a slight resemblance to current events"

"Come on," Ritkin disagreed. "Admit it! That there's a really eerie description of current political policy coming from a 20th century priest." The large woman was slow, but certainly not stupid.

"Let's assume that it is truly a prophecy," Mandry asserted, "What should we do?"

"If it is truly a prophecy, nothing," Bray stated solemnly. "Truth is truth. We could very well bring about the very means of our destruction in our attempt to avoid it."

"See what I mean about those rambling dissertations?" Satchell demanded. "Bill Darling, we know how you think those substances you so painstakingly put inside you body increase your spirituality, but sometimes you just sound like a loon. Of course something can be done. Something *must* be done. First thing we need to do is figure out what, exactly, is threatening us. I'm not saying this is a true prophecy, I'm not even sure there's any such thing. But wouldn't we really be better off safe than sorry."

Mandry nodded and rose, as if to indicate he'd already folled this train of thought. "The key," he said, "is this business about the child. This mysteriously wise and knowledgeable youth it speaks of. Compared to the vague description of the circumstances surrounding the whole affair, The description of this Child is crystal clear."

"Irish mother, mongrel father," Satchell mused. "There can't be *too* many millions of children with that kind of parentage."

"The key is the eyes," added Puller.

"Please! I know several people whose eyes change slightly with their mood or with a change of clothes."

"It doesn't say slightly," Puller related smugly, "It says 'like a chameleon.' Besides, even if it is subtle, it drastically narrows our possibilities when combined with the parentage issue.

"I hadn't thought of that," admitted Satchell reluctantly.

"I had," stated Mandry simply and modestly. "Every medical practitioner affiliated with *World Insurance* or *World Research Group*, as well as any linked to my Sub-chairs are already on the lookout." He glanced at Calrusso for approval, "I took the liberty." Calrusso nodded once, very deliberately. Mandry went on, "All we really need to do at this point, is decide what to do once we locate all possible candidates."

Calrusso finally spoke up again. "The way I see it, our course of action really will depend on his. If he's to attack politically, we'll need a political defense. A capitalistic thrust, will need a capitalistic parry, and so on. At the moment, we're essentially just boxing shadows. Any ideas?"

Each member of the party clustered around the table looked deep into the polished metal, or patterns of wood grain in front of them. Their brows were furrowed, and some bit savagely at unoffending lips or locks of hair. They looked for all the world as though they expected to find their answers deep within their objects of scrutiny. Finally, Puller lifted a hand tentatively.

"Would I be right in assuming this is a kind of war; a struggle for survival?" He asked, somewhat uncertainly. Each Chair hesitantly nodded their heads.

"In that case," Puller continued, "perhaps we should be guided by Sun Tsu's *Art of War*. According to that ancient master of confrontation, it is essential to simultaneously discern your opponents form and hide your own. Thus you can make assessments while your enemy is lost." He looked about at the others, feeling out their reactions. Most were nodding in mute understanding. Juanita looked as lost as if she'd suddenly wandered into a parallel universe where cupcakes eat you. That was fine, maybe someone would explain it to her later.

"In short," he went on, "We will need to monitor our potential enemies as closely as possible, without seeming to do so."

"Excellent!" Bray said sardonically. "I have a trenchcoat and a newspaper myself, and I'm quite certain Kristina would make a very fetching tree."

"Just because we're taking 2000 year old advice doesn't mean we have to use archaic techniques. I was thinking something a little more modern." He looked pointedly at Calrusso.

Calrusso sighed. "I see what you're getting at Randy, but it just isn't feasible. The American People have given up a lot of their privacy in the name of national defense, but there's no precedent for the amount of diligent surveillance you suggest. Not without a major criminal infraction, at any rate, and it'd be hard to pin something like that on a kid. One of those damn techno-weenies that snoop around in the Source would be bound to notice something while we're building the infrastructure."

Puller nearly howled with frustration, grasping desperately. "What if the infrastructure were already there? Isn't there something we can turn to our advantage here?"

"Atomic Computers" Mandry almost whispered.

"What was that?" the others asked with one voice.

"Atomic computers," Mandry shrugged. "We've been using them for years to monitor vital signs in patients from within the bloodstream."

"Too risky," Calrusso grunted. "All it would take is the wrong hacker monitoring the wrong doctr that's pissed him off. If anyone were to connect our "patients" with the signs of the prophecy, however unlikely that may be, it'd be really easy to put together the reason for our concerns. We'd be fulfilling the prophecy ourselves, just as Bill said."

"We can work around that," claimed Mandry. The others looked at him questioningly. "One of my research projects was recently discontinued. We were trying to get atomic computers to recognize thought patterns. They were supposed to anticipate a wealthy homeowners needs in a fully automated houshold. I've got about a million left over units scheduled for destruction next week. They're already off the Source's inventory logs."

"How do we conceal the feedback?"

Bray cleared his throat. "Do you still have the old data from the experiments?"

Mandry nodded once.

"I can easily rig a program that shows those records to anyone looking from a non-conglomerate line. We'll have our feedback, the 'techno-weenies' as you call them would only see boring old data."

A wicked grin spread like a plague across the faces of all those at the table. "Do it," Calrusso said simply. All rose at once to leave the table, each feeling a bit smug. As they gathered up their individual companies, though, a quizzical look crossed Puller's face.

"Greg?" he addressed Mandry, who looked up quickly. "Why was the project discontinued?"

"The program was never quite right. Also, the computers were slightly too big to successfully navigate the tiny capillaries in the brain. The volunteers inevitably died of a stroke eventually."

"Couldn't that happen to these children?" Puller asked doubtfully.

Not until well into adulthood. . . ." Mandry began dispassionately.

"Besides," Calrusso cut in quickly, "this is a war as you said yourself. In any war, there are casualties." And with that. All discussion came to a halt.

Chapter II

The sun shone brightly through the large bay window, not exactly a common occurrence in this wet suburb of Portland, Oregon. A girl of about fourteen years sat in the bright nook by the window and heaved a deep sigh. Her eyes shone with unbidden tears as she looked at the vibrant and overwhelmingly *interesting* world just beyond her reach. Even though it was bright and sunny, it was mid-October, and bound to be somewhat chilly. Her mother would never consent to her being outdoors so late into Autumn.

As if on cue, her mother's voice came floating from the kitchen, lilting with that peculiar musical cadence of her mother's homeland. "My poor wee Aenlynne, sure'n ya know you canno' go outside today. It's nearly December. Now don't you be goin' heavin' such sighs when there's nothing either of us can do about it."

Aenlynne heaved another sigh out of spite. Perhaps there was nothing Aenlynn could do about it, but her mother was the one keeping her prisoner indoors for the vast majority of each year. Ever since she had been diagnosed with a mysterious illness at age six, her mother had treated her as though she were made of fine crystal; immanently breakable. Aenlynne had even gone to the trouble of getting the doctor to expressly tell her mother, in no uncertain terms, that the cold would most likely have no adverse effects. Her mother's only reply was to say simply, "Ah, but there's no harm in bein' safe, is there?" The doctor had to agree, grudgingly.

The summertime was terribly warm and moist. That wasn't too bad in itself, but Aenlynne felt like she was missing something. She didn't know how it felt to go outdoors bundled up against the chill. To walk around dry under an umbrella while everything around you was getting wet. She had no idea what it felt like to jump in the summer puddles like the other kids did; to partake in snowball fights on the rare occasions it snowed enough to make a decent crossfire possible. Even in the summer, her mother would not let her out of the back yard if it was wet out.

Before she could wade too far out into depression, a ring came at the front door. Aenlynn nearly flew to the door, hoping against hope that it was not one of those obnoxious door-to-door salesman, or worse: a door-to-door evangelist. All of her fears were laid to rest as she opened the door to a relatively pale face, belonging to a lanky adolescent body. After hasty greetings, Aenlynn stepped aside to let the boy in.

Just as he passed in front of her though, she tackled him to the carpeted floor. She pinned him down quickly, and rained demure kisses on his cheeks once she was sure he couldn't get away, knowing this would embarrass him to no end. She got up quickly as she heard her mother coming, lest she either misconstrue Aenlynn's makeshift tribute to her friend, or reprimand Aenlynn for expending too much energy. "How've you been Ronso?" She asked as the poor fellow picked himself up off the ground.

"How could I be doing anything other than well after a greeting like that from a dark Irish beauty?" Aenlynn's guest said flippantly in his best imitation of her mother's lighter brogue.

Aenlynn's mother decided to come in at that point and greeted Ronso as well. "And are you feeling well, young Ronso? Ya look a wee bit flushed."

"Only as flushed as any man would be, enterin' into the presence of your substantial beauty, madame. 'Tis truly a pity you're already married."

Both women laughed at this. Aenlynn giggled because it sounded truly alien to hear an Irish accent come out of this plainly Hispanic young man, complete with a slight Spanish accent. Her mother laughed fully because she was delighted at how effortlessly that kind of flattery escaped the young man's lips. It very nearly sounded sincere, but for the hint of a smile shining around his eyes. The Mariah household certainly seemed brighter when Ronso was around, and Mrs. Mariah was very grateful for his unwavering loyalty to her daughter, Aenlynn.

"Mom, can we go up to my room and play holo-games awhile?" Aenlynn pleaded.

If it had been any boy but Ronso, she would have insisted on their staying squarely in her sights. But this boy had known her daughter since before she got sick. If Mrs. Mariah trusted anyone with her daughter's well-being, and her heart if it came to that, it was Ronso Sketan. So she simply nodded absently and headed back toward the kitchen.

"So why aren't you in school?" Aenlynn asked Ronso as she glanced at the clock. It was nearly noon.

"Holiday," he said simply, and winked. Ronso's absenteeism was notorious at the private school he attended. His teachers didn't complain, since his grades were superb. His parents had never found out, since they were constantly out of town. Even Mrs. Mariah had stopped asking him embarrassing questions when he stopped by during school hours. She had given up after the first few times he had given bogus Native American religious observances. "How come you're not studying?"

"I've already finished the stuff my mom gave me. Sometimes I think she keeps it easy 'cause I'm. . .," she let the rest of the thought hang in the air. For some reason they never spoke of her unnamed illness. She never even really suffered from it besides the occasional headache. Her numerous doctors kept her on heavy psychological medication, and her mother kept her prisoner. No one ever listened when she said she felt fine now.

She had simply become resigned to the monthly blood work and yearly evaluations. Her makeshift captivity still rankled, though.

At this time, Mrs. Mariah came in with some sandwiches and salad. No junkfood. As Aenlynn's mom left, though, Ronso pulled out some beef jerky and corn chips from his backpack. The two ate and played without much conversation that wasn't related to the game they were playing. After a few merry hours, Ronso finally stirred.

"My butt's asleep," he said with a grimace.

"That little butt?" Aenlynn quipped, "I'm surprised you found enough of it to sit on that hard."

Ronso laughed and tickled her fondly. "We can't all have big watermelon asses like yourself." He stated matter-of-factly, giving her derrier a quick pinch before separating.

She laughed helplessly, first at his tickling, then at his comment. When she finally stopped her blue eyes shaded with a misty grey outline. Ronso caught this sign at once. He'd been reading her mood through her eye color for years. He had to stop her train of thought before her eyes turned terribly dark.

"Let's get out of here." he said suddenly.

"You *know* my mother will never allow that. I swear, sometimes she thinks I'm an invalid."

"Okay, let's say I get her to let you go, will you help me with a project?"

Aenlynn suppressed a grin. Ronso had often told her of his illicit activities, usually accompanied by her uproarious laughter. He affectionately referred to these endeavors as "projects, and he never really caused much harm; just mischief. Aenlynn's sheltered childhood had kept her from much of the mischief most adolescents get into to one degree or another. The thought of helping her friend pull off one of his 'projects' gave her heart an involuntary flutter, though her eyes remained clouded.

"Of course I'd help you, but it's a moot point, anyhow. It can't be more than fifty degrees out, and you know my mother."

"Yes I do. Ever since I was a little kid. She trusts me. If anyone can break you out of here. . . ."

"I don't know," she said, more to be difficult than out of any real resistance to what he was suggesting. "I don't think she's quite forgiven you for the 'Peanut Brittle Incident' last Christmas."

"Oh come on! How was I supposed to know that dog was allergic to peanuts. Besides, the vet said he would've been fine if your dad hadn't given him whiskey before."

"You're full of it! You never took him to any vet," she accused.

Ronso just winked and grinned. "Sure I did. And if you give me twenty minutes alone with your computer, I'll be happy to show you a receipt."

"Ha! As if I'd trust anything you managed to root out of The Source. While you were at it, you could pull up a sheet telling me the president shit gold last night."

"Naw. Federal records are watched pretty closely, and that kind of information would be classified. 'For the Department of Excremental Affairs only.'" His eyes twinkled as he waited for her laughter to die down. "Seriously though, you need to get out before you snap from cabin fever. If that happens, they'll just up the dosage on your chill pills, and you'd *really* be asleep at the wheel."

Aenlynnne was utterly shocked at his talking openly about the one thing they *never* talked about. She wondered what he'd seen in her affect, to make him take such steps. She knew he'd always been uncanny at knowing her thoughts and emotions even better than she often did. Maybe she really did need a break.

"OK," she relented, "*if* you can get my mother to agree. I'm not sneaking out of here again."

"Let it go, Lynne. You were eight, and he didn't even use a belt. Your watermelon ass can't possibly still hurt after over half a decade."

"Maybe it does," she sniffed mockingly.

He gave her an obscene gesture and went off to find her mother. Mrs. Mariah was in the den, answering her business mail on the computer. When he saw this, his hopes raised a bit. When Mrs. Mariah was working, she would agree to almost anything to avoid distraction. As he searched for a angle to pursue in his quest to get Aenlynnne outside, he decided flattery was always a good place to start.

"Why Mrs. Mariah," Ronso started, warming to his subject, "I don't think I've ever seen your eyes so beautifully green. I'll bet your husband looks at them sometimes and involuntarily reaches for his golf clubs."

"Thank you Ronnie. But you know my refrigerator is always open to you, so where is this going?" She raised an eyebrow at him archly.

"I'm hurt Mrs. Mariah!" he exclaimed in mock disparity. "Can't a guy compliment a friend without being accused of ulterior motives?"

"Ronnie," She said somewhat impatiently, "You just compared my eyes to putting greens. What do you want?"

"You're out of milk," he said thinking quickly.

Mrs. Mariah looked momentarily peeved. "You want milk so bad, go home and drink some."

This was not exactly going where Ronso wanted. He wanted in her good graces, not in the doghouse. He was stuck now, but he thought perhaps he could get her frustration to work for him. He floundered bravely onward. "I would, of course, but we're out too and. . . ."

"Ronso Sketan," she began ominously, "if you're after thinkin' I'm about to set down the day's work to run out and buy you some cow juice, you're a ranting loony."

Ronso was starting to think this might work after all. All he had to do was feed her frustration, then offer a solution so fast, she would be too relieved to naysay it. He had to time it right, though. He and Ainlynnne wouldn't be going anywhere if he got tossed out of her home.

"Of course not, Mrs. Mariah. I wouldn't dream of it. I can't choke down that non-fat stuff you're so fond of with a beer bong."

"Beer Bong?" she demanded. She was starting to turn pink now. A little more of this and he'd have her utterly flustered. "I didna have the slightest clue what a beer bong was for 'ntil I was in college. How do you know these things."

"My dad," Ronso replied, lying more than just a little. Then he looked at Ainlynnne's mother quizzically, perhaps overplaying the innocence act somewhat. "Beer bongs were around way back when you were in college?"

When he saw Mrs. Mariah turn bright red in a semblance of apoplexy, he switched direction so fast he nearly sprained his tongue. "If I'd have thought my offering

to drive out and get you guys some milk would upset you, I wouldn't have said anything," He said smoothly. He even managed to look somewhat contrite. It must have worked too, because he could practically see Ainlyne's mother swallow any number of the nasty things she was about to say to him. "I was only trying to help," he added just for good measure.

"You don't have to ask me to go to the store," Ms. Mariah said once she got her composure back.

"I'll remember that next time," he said as he backed out of the room. "We shouldn't be too long." Ronso crossed his fingers as he went back upstairs to tell Ainlyne. As long as that *we* hadn't fully registered, he reasoned, Ainlyne's mother couldn't object when they returned; he *had*, in a roundabout way, told her they were both going.

He was still glowing with his triumph when he burst in the bedroom door. A look of utter disbelief crossed Ainlyne's features when she saw his cocky swagger and self-satisfied smirk. "She gave you permission to take me out of this stinking cage?" Her eyes were filled with hope and incredulity at the same time.

"She sure did," Ronso gloated, "Although, she probably doesn't realize it yet. We should certainly get going before what I just told her fully penetrates her brain."

With that in mind, they packed up a few things and were out the door before Mrs. Mariah had any idea what was going on.