

Thomas D. Tongue
Niskayuna, NY 12309
Email: tongue@imagiware.com

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Science Fiction

Nexus (6H05T)

by Thomas Tongue

Sitting in a dark recess of the great tree, Shifter watched over the rolling hills of amber grain leading back to Elysium, a city composed entirely of thought and memory. The tree was the designated meeting place if anything went wrong while interfaced with the Nexus, a world built from the collective consciousness of a hundred human minds. Situated at the origin of the world, the first thought from which all others are joined, the tree was the only constant in an ever-shifting reality, its form resembling a giant baobab with thick folds of bark and gnarled branches that clutched at the sky.

Unfettered by physical limitations, Shifter scanned the boundary between the plains and the city, looking for signs of movement. He knew someone at Cerulean would convince a detective to join the Nexus and find him. He hoped the investigator could unlock the mystery of his murder and find who helped the Wraith kill the meatspace

component of Mel Rhondout, a.k.a. Shifter. *It's been at least four hours. How long could it take to get a detective in here?*

Shifter shook his head. He knew this vigil was just a diversion from the unpleasant reality of his now-limited existence. The irony of the situation was not lost on him, that a ghost-hunter should now be a ghost himself. *If I go easy, I can probably fend off entropy for a few days. After that, I'm done unless I find how the Wraiths draw their power.*

From above, Shifter could hear the clacking of branches, the sound of something big descending through the tree's enormous canopy. Scrambling to a defensive crouch, he spotted the Wraith Abraxas land on the thick branch before him, her steel-blue skin and glistening eggplant-purple eyes posed an unnatural contrast against the land beyond. The Wraith's shapely female form stood erect, and sultrily approached Shifter. "I thought I'd find you here."

"That's far enough," Shifter said, mentally preparing to escape. "Without surprise, you know there's no way you can finish me alone."

"Oh, I'm done with that." Abraxas stopped, and reclined against a nearby branch. Examining her hands, their shape refined from smooth claw-like appendages to fingers with half-inch sharpened nails.

"So you're here to gloat then." Shifter's face contorted with enmity, as he recalled the Wraith's ambush, driving a shiv into his skull while other Wraiths used their thoughts to hold him. After the pain subsided and he was able to shift away, he wondered why the Wraith hadn't taken him while he was helpless. *Probably relishing the kill*, Shifter concluded.

“I’ve been savoring your quandary.” The Wraith’s broad grin revealed a set of perfect black teeth. “How to survive? You know how this place works as well as I. In the end, entropy will take you. If a ghost-hunter doesn’t get you first!”

Abraxas exploded in a swarm of midnight butterflies, her laughter born on the wind as they dispersed, a final whisper before they faded: “Your visitor arrives. Bring him to me when you are finished... if you wish to live.”

Scanning the grasslands to the city’s edge, Shifter spotted a man clad in a grey overcoat marching over the crest of a nearby hillock, a wake of golden wheat trailing behind him. Leaving the comforting womb of the tree, he floated out to meet the man approaching the tree’s massive gnarled roots, which spread along the ground like snakes intertwined and twisted before finally plunging underground.

“It’s about time you showed up.” Shifter landed in front of the man, and took a first impression. His appearance was unremarkable and quite smooth, lacking the definition a more experienced Nexusian displayed reflexively. In spite of this, Shifter could see he was a Hispanic in his mid-thirties, in strong physical shape, and had a flattering self image.

“You must be Mel Rhondout,” the visitor extended a hand to Shifter, “I’m Lieutenant Ortiz from Metro Homicide. Mind if I you a few questions?”

“Mel Rhondout is dead,” Shifter said. “I’m just his ghost. Call me Shifter.”

“Okay...” Ortiz shifted his weight, looking uncertain.

What, did he think I wouldn’t know? Shifter rolled his eyes. “Look, I’ll tell you anything you want to know, just don’t dance around the subject ok? I’m sure they told you how delicate a ghost is, and how you shouldn’t upset me or I might frag before you

get all your answers. It's bullshit. Last time I jacked-out was two days ago, so my neural image is pretty well formed. We've got plenty of time."

Ortiz looked taken aback, but quickly regained his composure. "I see. Well, why don't we start with what happened, eh?"

"I was doing the usual weekly maintenance, hunting down ghosts and dispersing them--"

"Ghosts. Those are leftover neural images from disconnected users, right?" Ortiz interrupted.

"Right," Shifter said. *At least Cerulean didn't interface someone without briefing them on Nexus basics.* "The persistence of thought patterns which allow users to shape perception also causes residual user images, at least for a short time."

"What's different about ghosts?" Ortiz looked around for a comfortable place to sit, and settled for a bulbous knot in a nearby root. "If everything in here is built on memories and thought, why do cities stand and ghosts fall?"

"Entropy," Shifter said. "Static things like trees and buildings last a long time because the neural energy used to create them is focused into one pattern, what the object *is*. Dynamic things like fountains and ghosts suffer from pattern rot and external contamination. The more they change in form, the more the thoughts which make them fragment."

"So if ghosts go away on their own, why bother hunting them?"

"They don't go away quickly enough." Shifter gazed off toward the city, for the first time wishing ghosts had even longer lives. "A ghost's lifespan depends on how long

the user was connected. More time means the neural pattern has higher convergence and more energy, making it more resistant to entropy.”

“What’s the harm in a few more thoughts rattling around the Nexus?”

“They cause some inconvenient problems,” Shifter said, “not the least of which is other users confusing ghosts for the genuine article. It’s kinda awkward to arrive late to a rendezvous and find your mistress at play with your former self.” Shifter flexed his eyebrows furtively. “We disperse the ghosts to keep the users happy.”

“I see.” Ortiz nodded thoughtfully. “Back to the incident, you were hunting a ghost at the time?”

Shifter nodded. “I was chasing this ghost through Izrain’s chambered spire, and I cornered him in this one nodule when it turned to me with a sinister grin that made my flesh crawl. That’s when I realized we weren’t alone.”

The world around Ortiz and Shifter melted away, light swirling into the skewed vision of what happened through Shifter’s eyes, sensations matching all that Shifter remembered. At the far end of a spherical chamber, a grinning imp floated defiantly as Shifter closed for the kill. The little man morphed into the shapely female form of Abraxas, her glinting obsidian fangs revealed by a broad, satisfied smile. *A Wraith! This is going to be better than I thought!* Shifter prepared to surge forward and engage, confident he could destroy the Wraith, hopefully learning some of its secrets before it dissipated completely.

Shifter willed himself forward, and was surprised when he held fast in the center of the room. “What the-“

“Struggle all you want, Shifter.” Abraxas drifted slowly toward him, and several other dark figures crowded into his peripheral vision, each a patch of indistinct night against the eggshell white walls. “I have you now, and no matter how hard you try, you cannot escape me.”

Shifter tried to move, to flex even a finger, but found his body paralyzed. Never in all his experience had a ghost or Wraith ever been able to go toe-to-toe with someone connected from the outside. Focusing on the circular entry to the room, he tried to shift away, to prove he wasn't bound... it didn't work. For a brief moment, panic coursed through him. *If they can do this, what else can they do?*

Shaking back his fear, Shifter sneered at Abraxas and continued to struggle. “Your friends must be burning heaps of energy to hold me. They can't keep it up forever.”

Producing a polished silver blade, curved like a serpent's fang, Abraxas floated in front of Shifter's immobile form. “They won't have to.” She played with the blade, drawing it to her lips as they changed from black to deep crimson. “Your struggle is over.”

Abraxas plunged the silver fang into Shifter's forehead, and electric pain like a thousand pinched nerves shot through his body. The room shattered into a thousand splinters, dispersing into the grain around the great tree. Ortiz looked shaken, and reflexively mopped his dry brow.

“Nothing but death feels like that.” Shifter looked down, fighting his own emotions. “Suddenly I was able to move again, and I shifted here to wait for help.”

“What the hell were those things?” Ortiz shook his head. “Did I hear you call them Wraiths?”

Shifter nodded. “Wraiths are ghosts that have learned to cheat Entropy. They gather thoughts to maintain cohesion, preying on other ghosts and perhaps even clients.”

“So a Wraith is a ghost with staying power,” Ortiz reflected. “I assume you hunt them as well as ghosts, right? So they killed you to eliminate a threat.”

Shifter stood up, and offered a hand to Ortiz. “I don’t think that’s the only motivation. She would have taken me while I was wracked with pain if it were that simple.”

“What then?” Ortiz got to his feet, and followed Shifter out into the grain, following the path back to Elysium.

“I don’t know.” Shifter looked back at the detective. “But the only way we’ll get an answer is to find Abraxas.”

“Well, I don’t know if that’s really necessary,” Ortiz said. “I think I have all the information I need to close the case.”

“How do you figure that?” Shifter’s brow furrowed. “You still don’t know who killed me!”

“Umm, I saw the instant replay.” Ortiz shifted to one foot and crossed his arms. “You got whacked by a bunch of thoughts circulating in Cerulean’s synaptic core. Pull the plug, Justice done.”

“I’ve got a page for you detective,” Shifter said, “nobody is going to let you pull the plug. Who do you think comes to play in the Nexus? Who can afford to pay for the access suites and spend days at a time immersed in this?”

Looking at Ortiz's silent form, Shifter continued his rant. "The rich! The powerful! And anyone who can garner their patronage to pay the fees!" Ortiz's stony face made it clear he was unmoved. "Together they wield enough influence to run the country. Somehow I don't think they're going to let you spoil their quiet little addiction."

"Fine," Ortiz said, "then we'll have them reset the memory. If they want to take the risk something like this will happen again, let them."

"Do you see all that?" Gesturing toward Elysium, Shifter looked at Ortiz incredulously. "Artwork from Izrain, Cartomass, Figlio and dozens of others. Burn the canvas of an artist, and their patrons will make you pay."

"It's comforting to know you've accepted the futility of seeking justice." Ortiz marched over to Shifter, an angry scowl on his face. "What can we learn from this Abraxas that would be useful?"

"The Wraiths were not formed in a vacuum. Someone made them, and I think someone must have helped Abraxas kill me."

"How do you figure?"

"The interface by itself is not capable of killing someone." Shifter tapped on his head. "It's all up here. I don't buy into the whole 'die in your dream, die in real life' crap those shams down on 57th talk about. Can the interface give you a bad headache? Yes. Can it kill you? No." Shifter started down the path again, without looking back to see if Ortiz was following.

Catching up to the ghost, "I inspected your plexishell sarcophagus myself. There was no evidence of tampering that Ms. Kerr or I could see."

Shifter had known Cindy Kerr for two years, since they were both hired to work in the Nexus. She was a sharp sysop, and she knew everything about the system. “I trust her judgement on that.” Shifter stopped at the top of a knoll, and sighed at the remaining distance to the city’s edge. “Look, this is going to take forever if we do this the mundane way. You have to learn how to fly.”

“Excuse me?”

“You need to unlearn certain aspects of reality to make things happen.” Shifter floated off the ground and spun in a circle around the detective. “Start by forgetting gravity.”

“I don’t think I-“

“You’ve already changed the perceptions around you.” Shifter gestured toward the swath of golden wheat tracing the detective’s path from the city’s edge. “You think this is a field of wheat, but its really Kamut. Where you walked, the grain is now wheat. Your subconscious can do it, all you need to do is take control.”

For several minutes, Ortiz struggled with grudging progress as he grasped the rudiments of flying. Finally, Ortiz fumbled over to Shifter. “I think I have enough to control where I’m going. Not graceful like you, but it will do. So how do we find her?”

“It won’t be easy.” Shifter bit his lip. “The Wraiths don’t have a known place where they can be found, for obvious reasons. The only good news is that she wants us to find her.”

“Excuse me?” Ortiz gave Shifter a puzzled look. “Why do you say that?”

“Before you arrived, she paid me a visit and told me to find her when we were finished.” Shifter considered Ortiz’s probing look. *She’s probably interested in feeding*

on him. If I tell him that, he might decide he has enough information and spook out. “I’m not sure what she’s up to.”

“I’m a detective, remember?” Ortiz shook his head. “I’ve been lied to by the best. You suck. So what is it you’re not telling me?”

“She told me to bring you to her.” Shifter frowned and broke eye contact with the detective. “She’s probably hungry.”

“So?” Ortiz shrugged. “She can help herself to my ghost when I’m gone. Bon appetit.”

“You haven’t been in for very long. I doubt you’d make much of a meal.” Shifter felt the detective’s silent gaze, waiting for more information. “She’d get more if you were still connected.”

“If she’s looking to go a few rounds with me,” Ortiz shadow boxed, “I’ll throw her some!”

Shifter shook his head. *He’s got no idea.* “Let’s get moving. It will take a while to find her.” Pushing off from the ground, he swept above the plain and flew toward the city. Looking back, he could see the detective following awkwardly behind.

Flying over the plains, Shifter pondered the search. *We could waste a lot of time looking through the cities, underdark and pockets.*

“So what’s the plan,” Ortiz said.

“We need to find a Wraith to help us find her.”

“No,” Ortiz said. “I mean once we’ve found Abraxas. Then what?”

A chill shot down Shifter’s back as he realized he didn’t have a plan. Ghosts have many failings, and one of them is a lack of creativity and intuition, things which are

unique to the human mind. The Nexus synaptic model lacks the wellspring of ideas that man drinks from, and by extension ghosts have a similar weakness.

“I take your silence to mean there is no plan.” Ortiz looked away from the sprawling city of gothic spires, grand impractical arches and bulbous sky gardens perched on precariously narrow stalks, and watched Shifter with uncertainty.

“I’ll figure it out. The Wraiths are a slippery lot, and unpredictable. The situation requires a dynamic approach.”

“But the basic idea is to get answers to my questions, and then what?” A fedora appeared on Ortiz’s head as he reached up to tip it, “Thanks for the info, be seeing you?” The hat disappeared as quickly as it arrived. “She killed you!”

“She may also be the only one who can save what’s left of me.” Shifter’s expression bore the weight of mortal concern and irony. “I’m just a ghost now, and without the Wraith’s tricks, my hours are finite.”

The two glided over the warren of streets, passages, impromptu parks and glistening architecture of Elysium, scanning the city below without further comment for several minutes. Finally, Ortiz spotted a flicker of motion, something sprinting through a forest of leafless blue trees. “Is that one of them?”

“Let’s find out.” Shifter dropped like a hawk closing on a field mouse, his hands stretched out like talons to capture his prey. A second later, he was on the ground wrestling with a figure, who struggled for a few moments, then dissolved into thick wisps of soot and smoke.

“Damn.” Shifter looked up as Ortiz fumbled into a landing nearby. “Just a ghost... pretty far gone too.” For a moment, Shifter felt dazed and sluggish. *That took*

more out of me than I thought it would. I need to be more careful, or I won't last long enough to find Abraxas.

“You ok?” Ortiz crossed the wood and placed a hand on Shifter’s shoulder.

“I should have let you catch it.” Shifter rose, and looked through the splintered trees to the forest’s edge. “Be watchful. Where there is prey, there is often a hunter. A Wraith could have been stalking this one for energy.”

“Why bother stalking its victim?” Ortiz said.

“Issues of relative strength.” Shifter scanned the skyline, “The stronger the neural pattern, the harder it is to take down and there’s less net gain for the Wraith.”

“Maybe we’ve gone about this the wrong way,” Ortiz said, joining Shifter’s examination of the cacophony of spires, towers and vertical gardens that ringed the park. “If you could mimic a weak ghost, we might be able to lure a Wraith out to attack you.”

“A trick I’ve used dozens of times,” Shifter said. *Why didn't I think of it this time?* “It’s worth trying.”

Shifter relaxed, and his form frayed around the edges. “This will cut my energy usage as well, and improve my longevity somewhat. Why don’t you hide in the ‘Hang-Around Lounge’ up there,” he gestured toward a canopy of ropes hanging from a tall beanstalk at the edge of the forest. “The wicker chairs are pretty comfortable if you don’t mind heights.”

“Wasn’t that place on 12th Avenue,” Ortiz followed Shifter’s blurry fingers, “Except without the high-wire act?”

Shifter nodded. “People bring all sorts of stuff with them from the outside. I like the Nexus version better. There’s a nice view of the city from up there.”

“So I’ll go wait for one of these Wraiths to make an appearance, then grab him from behind?”

“Pretty much.”

Watching as Ortiz flew to his hiding place, Shifter started his random walk amongst the sea-blue trees, mimicking the half-drunken, half-insane stagger that all ghosts fall victim to when it is near their time. *If we don’t find Abraxas, this isn’t going to be an act.*

In the Nexus, much like the real world, time is a funny creature. Boredom, waiting and anticipation draw out the minutes, until it is as if time has frozen. Shifter was reflecting on this particular temporal cruelty when he turned to find a giant praying mantis watching from several yards away.

“All right.” The mantis clicked, “I’ll bite. You don’t smell like a hunter, but your lame ghost-death imitation reeks of a performance. What’s your game?”

Re-shaping to his default image, an exercise which took more effort than ever before, Shifter spotted Ortiz spastically emerge from his perch and approach in a manner comparable to a drunken bumble-bee. “I need to see Abraxas.”

“Whoa!” The mantis stepped back, seemingly unaware of Ortiz closing from behind. “You’re the guy she whacked earlier, aren’t you!”

“News travels fast.” Shifter pressed closer. “She told me to come see her.”

The mantis nodded. “So you used yourself as bait to lure one of us out, hoping we’d take you to her.” The mantis spun around and clocked Ortiz in the face, sending him sprawling into the nearest tree. Adjusting its stance to watch both of them, “You’re

fortunate she told us where to take you upon entering Elysium. She does not normally hold court.”

Ortiz stumbled to his feet, surprised that the blow left no bruise or lingering pain. “Why should we trust you?”

“I could care less.” The mantis stalked off toward a previously unnoticed underground passage, like a giant gopher hole. “If she didn’t forbid it, I would have taken you both by now and been the stronger for it.”

“Wait,” Shifter followed after the mantis. “We’ll go with you.” He motioned for Ortiz to follow.

“How far is it?” Ortiz looked at Shifter, noting remnants of the telltale blurriness the ghost-hunter used just moments before.

Twisting its head back to face them, the mantis said “Distance is in the mind.” A leaf-green folded arm tapped its head. “If you believe it’s at the end of this short tunnel, it will be so.” Without further explanation, the mantis disappeared into the dark passage.

Ortiz raised an eyebrow toward Shifter, but the ghost-hunter simply shrugged and said “It’s at the end of this short tunnel.”

Through oppressive darkness and heat, they felt along the passage until finally emerging into a dimly lit chamber, it’s vaulted shape formed by ropy black sinews, as if the room were lined with obsidian muscle. The chamber’s light flickered from a human candelabra whose wrists bent to support fingers of candles. At the other end of the room, sitting on a throne of faces in various throws of pain and ecstasy, Abraxas watched the new arrivals with amusement.

“The Cathedral of Pain.” Shifter muttered. “Not one of my favorite places. I thought it was destroyed.”

“Many people thought that,” Abraxas uncurled from the throne and sauntered toward Ortiz and Shifter, who found their insect guide nowhere in sight. “Which is why it’s hard to find anymore. But its memory remains in us, and so it yet exists.” The ground rippled with tension as she crossed the room to them. “New address. Same exquisite décor.”

Ortiz fought his eyes away from her alluring form, and tried to ignore the thick scent of honeysuckle. “I have questions-“

“Of course you do,” Abraxas interrupted, gently caressing the detective’s cheek. “But nothing comes for free... Lieutenant Ortiz.”

“How did you-“

Abraxas placed a finger on his lips. “You are thought, and I am listening.” Maneuvering behind Ortiz while fixing her gaze on Shifter, she draped her arms around the detective’s shoulders. Whispering in his ear, “but, my day has been very tiring, and I am hungry.”

Gently breaking free of her embrace, Ortiz turned to face her while exchanging an uncertain glance with Shifter. “What do you want?”

“To feed.” Abraxas pressed closer to the detective, and put her arms around his neck again. “For every question I answer, you will let me take what I need. It won’t hurt... much.” Her smile broadened, and her deep ruby lips parted to reveal incisors of perfect night.

Ortiz glanced at Shifter, who was absently looking around and muttering to himself. “First you help him.”

Looking deep into the detective's eyes for a moment, Abraxas clicked her tongue, and the mantis emerged from a dark fold in the wall's muscle. “Bring me the cup.” Abraxas released Ortiz and turned to Shifter as the mantis approached with an empty golden goblet. Snapping her fingers in front of Shifter brought him out of his reverie.

Taking the cup from the mantis, she held it before Shifter and directed his attention to its contents. As he watched, the cup began to fill with a crimson liquid, until it was half full. “Drink this, and be refreshed.”

Feeling the warmth of the cup in his hands, Shifter swirled the liquid around for a moment. *It only looks like blood. Just drink it!* Shifter clenched his eyes closed and took the sticky liquid in one swallow. He instantly regretted it. A prickly pain spread throughout his being, the sort that comes to a limb which was asleep and now has a fresh supply of blood. Shifter clenched all over, and his face contorted with a rictus of suffering.

“Don't fight it.” Abraxas took the cup back from Shifter, handing it off to the mantis, who quickly departed. “That just makes it worse.”

Turning back to Ortiz, Abraxas slowly put her arms around him, drawing him closer. “Now its my turn.”

“But I haven't asked a question-“

Ortiz screamed out in agony as Abraxas raked her talon-like fingers down his back, distorting and fraying the detective's presence. She repeated her clawing action,

each time splintering Ortiz even further, her face in the throes of climax. Ortiz finally broke free, throwing both of them to the floor.

Shifter looked horrified at the Wraith, who sat laughing against a nearby wall as lumps swarmed beneath her skin. Shaking off the last prickles of rejuvenation, Shifter turned his attention to Ortiz, who lay motionless with his eyes fixed on some point beyond the arch of the muscular ceiling. “Are you ok?”

Ortiz swallowed, and sat up stiffly. “No, I am China-far from ok.”

As the spasms beneath her flesh subsided, Abraxas opened her eyes and gazed upon the detective. “That was good. You’ve seen a lot in your career,” rocking back her head, she closed her eyes briefly, “each case a tasty morsel.”

Still sitting on the floor, Ortiz snarled, “How did you kill Mel Rhondout?”

“I didn’t kill him,” Abraxas opened her eyes again, “one of my playthings did.”

“Elaborate,” Ortiz said.

“When you spend most of your life in the Nexus,” Abraxas gestured toward Shifter, “you require some medical assistance to keep mind and body together.”

“Huh?”

“She’s referring to zMites,” Shifter said, scratching his head. “Cell sized bots programmed to address specific health issues. Cerulean gives them to operators who don’t mind working big shifts, to make up for a total lack of physical activity. I’ve used them for years without any trouble, and she’s not the first to stab me in here. Some of the ghosts are downright nasty.”

“Ok,” Ortiz turned back to Abraxas, “so if normal zMites don’t do this, how did you reprogram the bots?”

“I didn’t,” Abraxas slid to her hands and knees, and started to move toward Ortiz again, like a hungry lioness prowling through an invisible savannah. “Ezra Morris did the job for me.”

“The med-tech?” Shifter blurted. “I’ve never said more than two words to the guy. Why would he do this?”

“Because I possess him.” Abraxas stopped in front of Ortiz, her eyes crawling over him with savoring hunger. “His being aches with the desire to satisfy my every whim. He would do anything for me.”

“You gave him up awful easy.” Ortiz tried his best to stare her down. “Why should I believe it?”

“When they do the autopsy,” Abraxas slinked behind Ortiz, “a catscan of the brain will reveal a claw shaped area where the zMites confused brain cells with fat cells and started shredding, triggered by the interface’s model of this imposed on Shifter.” She produced the curved blade from nowhere, flashed it before Shifter and Ortiz, then made it vanish again with a magician’s flourish.

“Why give him up?”

Abraxas pressed close to Ortiz, the smell of honeysuckle now so thick he could almost taste it. “I want some more first. I’ve had sour. Now I want sweet.” She gingerly bit at his ear, and the room dissolved into the darkened den of his parents house, where they re-lived the first awkward intimate moments of Ortiz’s life with his girlfriend Angela. But pleasant reminiscence turned to horror as the soft moans and gentle silhouette of Angela turned into Abraxas.

“No!” Ortiz cried, and the scene darkened, transforming back to the Cathedral of Pain. Using all his strength, Ortiz flung Abraxas away and stumbled to his feet.

“Come back here,” Abraxas snarled. “I’m not finished yet!”

“That’s all you get, bitch,” Ortiz faced off with the Wraith, his voice trembling with nervous energy. “I’ve got enough to close the case.”

“If you leave now,” Abraxas rose to her feet, “I’ll have to take Shifter to sate my needs. You don’t want that, do you?”

“You’ll take me anyway, once he’s gone.” Shifter quickly scanned for exits from the Cathedral, but found the walls closed over with black sinew. “You were just using me to lure someone who you could guilt into submission.”

“Not so,” Abraxas said, stalking toward them. “You’re more useful to me as you are, with your ghost-hunter experience intact. With your help, we’ll be able to track and feed on more ghosts, while being more effective at evading the other ghost-hunters.”

“Then your threat is hollow,” Ortiz said. “Goodbye, Shifter. Best of luck.”

“No!” Abraxas pounced across the room, nailing Ortiz in the midsection, shattering his image into thousands of luminescent ribbons. Abraxas lay still for a moment, as the scintillating arcs of light fell around her.

Searching in the vicinity of the passage that brought them, Shifter probed the slick wall for signs of an exit, for some way to escape.

“You cannot escape,” Abraxas said, still lying face down among the dying embers. “Even if you leave this place, you need me to live.”

“I would rather grow mad and rend myself upon Elysium than serve you.”

Rolling onto her side to regard Shifter, Abraxas propped her head against her hand. “Now why would you say such a venomous thing? What have I done to deserve such scorn.”

:How could you ask that?” Incredulous, Ortiz looked over his shoulder at the Wraith. “You killed me!”

“I killed the part of you that was already dead.” Abraxas floated to her feet, and the room swirled to an eggshell blue which congealed into the sysop interface room, a glass sarcophagus in one corner with the outline of a human form suspended inside. Crossing to the sarcophagus, she brushed her hand in front of the man’s face, his head bristling with hundreds of needle-probes, like acupuncture gone horribly wrong. “Your life was in here, even when you weren’t working. Cerulean was happy to oblige, because it made you a better hunter. They spent more on the zMites to keep your body together than on your salary.”

“You had no right-“ Shifter choked, feeling the sharp truth pierce his heart. It was easier to live in the Nexus, where he was like a god, than face the world as helpless as any other mundane.

“You belong to me now.” Moving away from the interface chamber, Abraxas crossed the room to Shifter. “Serve me, and I will teach you how to live in the Nexus.”

“What choice do I have?” Shifter said, allowing Abraxas to enfold him in her arms. *I will play her game for now, until I become a Wraith. Then there will be a settling of debts.*

“Seal it with a kiss.” Drawing him close, Abraxas pulled his mouth to hers, imparting him with tremendous strength and energy, and the knowledge of how to devour

the energy of ghosts and visitors. But with it came the poison that bonded him in her service, as a piece of himself left in exchange. Now he was like all the other Wraiths: ever-living, yet never free.