

CHAPTER 1

The sun was just showing itself over the eastern horizon that Monday morning, turning the sky in that direction a delicate peach color. Though it was still quite early, the carnival workers were already up and preparing for the day. Five more days in St. Louis, and then they'd pack everything up, and move on. They'd been here for almost two months now, and the crowds were thinning; it was time to get along. Because of the railroads and the recent developments in airship travel, the Midwest had grown much faster than originally thought. St. Louis now, in the year 1896, had a population of well over a million souls. It had been, up to this point at least, a good source of revenue for the carnival.

They were camped outside the city on a large piece of vacant grassland owned by a local farmer. It was always that way. By next spring this open land would probably be a plowed and planted field, and if they returned to St. Louis, they'd have to find somewhere else to set up. The early morning sun, just clearing the treetops to the east, glittered brightly in the windows of the tall buildings in far off downtown St. Louis, turning the city into a jeweled fantasy of itself. The cold morning breeze was snapping the pennants and multi-colored banners of the carnival, advertising their various attractions. The most popular with the paying public was always the sideshow with the bearded lady, the strongest man in the world, the human pincushion...and, of course, Alun the Amazing.

Their next scheduled stop after St. Louis would require a long train ride through some still-wild lands to the south and then west, over the forbidding mountain range that seemed to cut the cities of the west coast away from the rest of the land. By this time, most of the train robbers had been brought to justice, so they'd be relatively safe at least.

Their next stop would be Los Angeles, the largest city on the west coast except for San Francisco, which is where they'd be next summer. But for right now, there were more immediate things to think about, such as getting the various shows open and the mechanical rides inspected for the day's customers. Letting a customer die on an improperly inspected ride would be bad for business. And the various steam engines that ran some of the rides would have to be fired up too. All of it took time. If any of the carnival folk had still been asleep when the sun rose that morning, the hissing of various awakening steam engines and the shouting and catcalls of the roustabouts would have surely ended their slumber.

Alun Buckner awoke with the noises outside the wagon. He sat up sleepily in his bed, stretching and yawning, listening to the familiar voices

all around him. Some were laughing, some cursing, and occasionally there'd be a crash or a clatter followed immediately by more curses, catcalls, and raucous laughter. He grinned, throwing back his blankets, and stood, shivering for a moment. In the colder, more northerly climes he always wore long woolen underwear to bed. He was glad he was so attired this morning, even though the day would progress into warmth.

In about two hours, he'd once again become 'Alun the Amazing'—mind reader, psychic, and fortuneteller extraordinaire—a role he dearly loved to play and at which he'd always been extraordinarily good. And today promised to be extraordinary as well, if the client who had scheduled the upcoming appointment actually showed up.

But for right now he was still just plain Alun Buckner. He glanced up at his reflection in the small, cracked mirror hanging askew on the dirty, faded, mustard yellow wall of the old fashioned wagon he and his father called home. His sister didn't call it anything. He sighed, walked to the far end of his bedchamber, and poured some cold water from the plain blue pitcher into the large ceramic bowl. He picked up the mostly used up bar of soap, merely a sliver at this point, and proceeded to wash his face. The cold water always helped wake him. He dressed rapidly, slipped into his vest, and finally felt ready to face the day. He sensed his father approaching; this might be intuition, he realized, or just the knowledge of familiar things.

The wagon wasn't very big, of course; like the rest of the carnival's transportation, it had to be small enough so that it could be loaded onto flatbed railcars when they traveled from one distant location to another. Their draft horses were used only to get them from the railroad yard to whatever open field they'd be setting up on at the next location; the huge horses and brightly painted wagons were mostly for show and promotion. He grinned into the mirror, and heard the door creak open behind him.

"Ah, Alun. You're awake."

"Yes, Father," the young man responded.

"Big day today," Patrick Buckner reminded him, the satisfaction clearly evident in his voice. *Smug too.* Alun shrugged indifferently; he knew, even if his father doubted, that this would simply be another profitable and easy mindreading job, just like all the others had been.

For how long have we been doing this now? Five years already? We've been doing this for five years! The young man marveled, slowly shaking his head in wonder. *And still we're doing these little things.* Anger flared briefly, and was immediately masked behind his bright blue, now expressionless eyes. He wanted so much more than this, but he hadn't figured out how to make his own mark in the world as yet. Nevertheless, he

was confident that when the opportunity finally did present itself, he'd recognize it for what it was. Then he would no longer have to be some sideshow freak of nature. He'd be done playing the role of Alun the Amazing, and he and his sister could stay in one place, in a real home of their own, and have a real life, an ordinary life. Alun tossed his head, brushing his straight, red hair back impatiently from his face with his left hand, turning finally from the mirror to face his father.

Of course, Alun knew this man standing before him wasn't really his father; he knew he and his sister had been... adopted, as Father had put it. The older man's unruly crop of curly black hair, dark brown eyes, and brown skin would have given away the truth to anyone interested enough to care. Alun couldn't remember his real father's name—or that of his mother, for that matter. He'd worked hard to forget them.

But he did remember the beatings. Even as a young boy, it had been obvious that his parents had been somehow afraid of him, despite the fact that he'd loved them intensely, trying to please them in any way he might—until he realized he could no longer. He still remembered how they'd both explained so calmly and rationally, over and over, that his special talents needed to always be under complete control. This was something that was hard for a young child to comprehend or to appreciate; hence the beatings.

And then Mother suddenly died; Alun had been six. Father had beaten her one too many times, for many vague and usually unnamed infractions. This was always in the seeming privacy of their bedchamber. When the coroner had come to the circus that day, and was told she'd fallen from the roof of the wagon, he'd just nodded, looked up at the roof, and taken the body away. But Alun knew the truth; it would have been impossible not to, considering the close proximity of the trailer's interior. She'd just been hit one too many times.

After a very abbreviated and very cheap funeral in a small backwater somewhere in Kansas, it had been only his father, himself, and his sister, who was three at the time. The beatings continued, of course. Father explained that he beat Alun because he loved him. His father had said that to him over and over again, usually right after an especially severe beating. But Alun's only solid visual memory of that whole time was of the wide, black, leather strap that was used to 'help teach him to keep his mind in his head,' as his father had put it—unless he was in costume and performing, of course. The strap that still occasionally gave him nightmares would come alive in his dreams like some supernatural and unkillable demonic snake.

He occasionally recalled that his sister, three years his junior, was never beaten. But there was an obvious reason for that. Pandra was mute. She'd

started to talk as any normal child around two, of course; but she talked about things daddy did when mommy was away. Things that hurt. Though she wasn't beaten, Father had spanked her and slapped her mouth whenever she said anything, telling her to keep her mouth closed, and not to speak at all. And so, he'd ultimately gotten his wish. Pandra, as their father had been wont to say, was 'simple in the head.' Being mute, she couldn't mouth off as he'd done on occasion, and then there was the fact that she had no special power; no special ability to see into other people's lives and minds, and no way to fend off Father's...continuing and deepening interest in her.

She'd simply watch vaguely from the silent redoubt of her mind as their parents, and then Father alone, worked him over for what Alun had considered to be games or just very minor infractions—things like knowing ahead of time what present he'd be given for his birthday or on Christmas. The gifts had stopped for him at five years of age; there was no point, his father had told him angrily, and since then, there had been no gifts in his life at all.

And Pandra would just sit and watch silently, with only mild half-interest, not even able to fully understand what was happening. Father sometimes called Pandra an idiot; a person with a brain so badly damaged that she could not function as a real person in the outside world. She was, he'd liked to say, a model of the inherent deficits in females in general, only greatly magnified. In this matter, Alun had to agree with his father; all Pandra would do was stare with a sometimes blank, sometimes mildly interested expression as he was being disciplined.

In fact, it was that unnervingly vacant stare of hers that had inspired his gradual development of a similar stare that he'd use when he met a new client. It always unnerved and impressed the straights, whether they were men or women, young or old. It gave him a kind of power that was important in his role as Alun the Amazing. He'd watched Pandra, then looked into a mirror, trying for the blank unknowing. It had taken several weeks of trying, but he'd done it. It had been no small feat for a young boy, he now realized.

But when it had counted most, he'd realized that his love for his sister would never have allowed him to let Patrick Buckner take just him away, and leave Pandra behind as the man originally planned; Alun had been insistent about that, and with time so very short, Patrick Buckner had simply acquiesced.

Patrick had discovered Alun when Alun and Pandra were young; Alun had been nine, and Pandra six. Alun couldn't recall much of his former life as a child prodigy traveling with Begley's Circus Sideshow—except the

beatings. He'd never forget the beatings. Sometimes he thought his lack of almost all other remembrances was simply because he'd chosen not to remember his real parents—he'd certainly worked at that.

In reality though, this carnival, with its transitory lifestyle, was not all that much different from the circus life. Patrick had been nice to him after he'd taken him from the circus, and though Patrick had sternly encouraged Alun to not allow his mind to wander unless he was working with a client, he'd never beaten the boy, or his sister. Not even when Alun had tried him early on, trying to goad him to see if he really was a better man than his real father had been.

Even more importantly, this man, who'd started out in their lives as a complete stranger, had never even once tried to use Pandora in those terrifying and disgusting ways he knew his real father sometimes had when his mother hadn't been home and his father had a little too much to drink. That was often, Alun recalled, still angry he'd not been old enough and strong enough to make his father stop what he was doing. The drinking and that other thing increased as well after Mother died; Pandora was a substitute for the dead woman, his father explained, physically, at least, as he'd carried the child into the seeming seclusion of his bedchamber. Alun supposed that guilt would always live inside him, gnawing at his soul like a rat.

Now, years later, as a young man, he found he was extremely grateful to be with Patrick instead of with...them. And he found he could now only reach his special mental talents when he was in costume, and holding his walking stick—what he'd come to call his 'seeing rod.'

Sometimes he found himself wishing the carnival had exotic animals like the circus had had. He remembered the animals fondly—young elephants, a pair of cute and playful hyenas who loved to chase a ball, and even two trained lions from far away Africa. The animals had been his real and only friends back then, he recalled. They would come when he'd call them, sharing with him their sometimes affectionate, sometimes red and dangerous thoughts. He always found it odd, upon reflection, that he could remember the names of the animals, but not those of his real father or mother.

Patrick Buckner, standing there with a heavy, dark green, ceramic cup of steaming, black coffee in his hand, had no idea what the boy's father's name had been; he was just another carny running the same kind of scams that he himself had been running back in those days. But Patrick had quickly realized that Alun was no mere sideshow freak; he was no con. Alun was truly special. Alun was the real deal, and Patrick had figured that out very quickly. One paid consult, and he'd realized the startling truth; the boy's

mind would be pure gold, in its most literal sense. And the rising interest in things spiritual and mental that had allowed the various theosophical societies to flourish in America hadn't hurt them any.

The kidnapping had been a fairly simple operation; the boy had read it all in the thoughts of Patrick Buckner as he'd planned it out. The boy's real father drank heavily that particular day, and it only took a very small amount of sleeping powder in his beer at a local tavern, where Patrick had arranged to meet him. Patrick had given the pretext of discussing future psychic readings for himself and his friends. The sleeping draft had laid the already drunken man out for the rest of the night. By the time he'd awakened in the gutter outside the bar at two the next morning and stumbled back to the circus grounds, Patrick, Alun, and Pandra were well away from Nashville, Tennessee, already heading by rail to the south toward New Orleans and a new life.

Taking a six-year-old moron-girl with them, as Patrick considered her to be in the most secret part of his mind, had been an unconsidered and sudden complication to his plan. At first Patrick had regretted that he'd agreed, but as it had turned out, the girl was quiet, and she could dress and care for herself, so in the end, it was not too much of a burden.

Considering the abundant abilities of her brother, and his potential to bring in large sums of money—something Buckner had been dreaming of for most of his adult life—keeping the girl to please her brother was a small price to pay. All he needed was a good hand at the poker table of life; he'd felt right from the start that the wild card he'd always needed was Alun the Amazing.

Back then, as now, he had no interest at all in knowing anything about Alun's family; it simply didn't matter to him who they were or where they came from. Alun was his property now, bought and paid for with a little liquor and trickery, he believed, and he planned to continue making the most of it. *Hell*, he thought that morning, standing there, looking at the boy, *today things were finally going to pay off, and in a very big way.*

The money they'd made up to this point hadn't been as much as he'd hoped, and had come in a rather feast or famine way. But he was firmly convinced that he just needed to make that one really big score, and he'd be able to quit this wanderer's life, and settle down in the high-society style he'd always felt he deserved. Life had dealt him one bad hand after another up to this point, and by this time he was ready to throw in the cards, and deal some for himself this time.

He'd often fantasized that he'd like to open a fancy, glittering nightclub with a real live band and beautiful chorus girls in skimpy costumes and giant

flamingo feathers who would willingly share his bed with him. At other times, the fantasy consisted of owning a high-class tavern; the kind of place famous stage actors and cinema stars would frequent, and pay handsomely for the opportunity. In all the fantasies, he'd ride to work in a chauffeur driven Bentley or Packard steam-car.

But that was all still something for the future; the money he'd made up to this point, running all around the world with Alun, had gone all too quickly to the myriad barkeeps, pool sharks, and prostitutes along the way. He was still being dealt that bad hand. Now, Alun's words brought him back to the present.

"I know what we're planning," the young man said somewhat petulantly. "I'm the one who has to do it, after all."

"Well, the note he sent said he'd be coming to the carnival early today. This just might be the biggest score of our lives, Alun. Did you see the note? Real gilt lettering on parchment—the man doesn't fool around. I really feel this is the big score we've been waiting for all these years." He nodded authoritatively.

That would not be saying much, considering our past record of 'big scores.' "I know, Father," Alun said more calmly now. *Temper, temper...*

"Well, just be certain, Alun; that's all I want."

I'm always certain. "I understand." His father turned then and walked out, closing the door behind him. Alun sighed, and finished preparing himself for the nine o'clock opening of his act. This really was going to be a big day for him; perhaps it would indeed be that seemingly mythical 'big one' his father had constantly talked about for all these years. Time would tell; it would all depend on how much the man might be willing to pay for Alun's advice, and how long they'd be able to string him along. He glanced at his pocket watch, sitting open on the table beside his bed. Seven o'clock. It was time to roll out for breakfast.

Alun picked up his watch and slipped it into the pocket of his black silk vest. Then he slid into his black opera coat and old-fashioned top hat, which he placed carefully upon his head at a rakish angle. He snatched up his black ebony walking stick with the large, round, polished quartz tip held in a sterling silver bezel shaped like a bird's talon; this was the seeing stick he'd had since childhood.

He looked once more in the mirror; with all of his clothing black, his pale skin, red hair, and piercing blue eyes added an element of the uncanny to his appearance, and that lent his character an appropriately otherworldly look that, up to this point, had impressed his clients. He secretly doubted that this

would impress the man they were going after a little later this morning. Somehow Alun didn't think someone named Thayer Knight III would be easily impressed, or easily robbed, for that matter.

Alun met Patrick and Pandora in the carnival mess hall; a long, brown undecorated tent that sat at the far back of the fairway, where the customers never went. Patrick was animated this morning, engaging others in jovial conversations and jesting. *He's nervous. I am too*, Alun realized. *No need to be*, his mind told him calmly. *He's just a man like all the rest. The only difference is that he has lots of money...our money.* Alun grinned at his silent thoughts.

After they were served their breakfast of toast, bacon, and omelets, they sat and ate in quiet, jovial companionship. Alun glanced at Pandora. She gave him a faint smile; it was the only facial expression she was capable of. Alun smiled back. He loved his sister dearly and longed to find some way to lift her from the tunnel of silence into which she'd been pushed and slapped. Pandora lifted a forkful of eggs, and ate, oblivious to her surroundings.

CHAPTER 2

Thayer Knight III sat in the back seat of his huge, custom Daimler saloon. Mr. Knight, now the sole heir to a gigantic family fortune, and sole owner of the Knight Airship Engine Manufacturing Company located in North Los Angeles, was used to traveling in luxury. The covered passenger area of the shiny black custom extended-body steam-powered limousine would easily seat eight passengers, even with the small, black walnut folding table that now stood open in the center of the passenger area.

Today there was no one riding in the back of the vehicle with Knight; there would be no prying eyes, no snoopy reporters, no all-too-eager and excited young cinema starlets hoping for their big break into show business that Thayer would sometimes promise them if he thought it would guarantee their complete sexual compliance. Most often, he'd discovered, it did. Today was different though. Today there was no one to spy on him. He wasn't here to be entertained as many of his acquaintances might be by some sideshow psychic. For Knight, this encounter was all business. This was just too important to share with anyone beyond his bodyguard who'd been with him for years.

He reached into his vest and withdrew his watch. He flipped open the eighteen-karat-gold, minute-repeater watch his father had given him when he entered college many years before. He glanced at the time, having to tip the watch to catch the errant sunlight filtering through the window, casting a ghostly glow over everything inside the automobile. Knight shuddered. Ghostly was not a word he was taking lightly these days, to be certain.

He carefully closed the lid, which was delicately decorated in the finest French cloisonné enamel work depicting a pastel colored airship against a cerulean sky, and slipped the watch back into his silk vest, giving it a gentle pat. He swiveled his seat, rapping hard and only once on the sliding, cherry wood panel separating him from the driver's compartment. He was about to strike it again with his heavy walnut walking stick, but the wooden panel had slid open almost immediately.

"Yes, sir?" The voice of his bodyguard in the front passenger seat was calm and unperturbed.

"See to it that we're on time, Hendrix, would you?"

"Yes, sir," the man responded, sliding the panel closed once more. The Daimler immediately began picking up speed, and Thayer turned his seat, settling back into the genuine leopard skin upholstery, recalling the young woman who'd indulged his fantasies on that same leopard skin upholstery just the night before. He smiled at the memory of her tears; he'd

hurt her more than he'd intended, but well...such things happened from time to time.

He lifted his custom gold cigar cutter, and trimmed the fine Cuban cigar he'd withdrawn from an intricately hand-chased niello and sterling silver case. The case had belonged to his great-grandfather, and he'd stolen it from his own father four nights before he died. Knight knew the old man wouldn't need it, or miss it. He ran the cigar under his nose appreciatively, inhaling the aroma deeply and with much pleasure. Then he placed it between his wet lips, turning it to moisten the end, and lit it with a wooden match from a recessed compartment in the table. He drew in the aromatic smoke, sat back, and sighed contentedly.

This would be the fifth psychic he'd been to see in the last year since his wife had died in that tragic tumble down the stairs in their mansion in the hills of Los Angeles. Since that unfortunate event, he'd gradually begun to suspect, only suspect at first, that spirits don't just...lie down with their body. And that was when he'd found he'd become obsessed with the strange notion that the spirit of his wife lingered on somehow, not a haunting ghost in the traditional sense exactly, but as a spiritual essence trying nevertheless to make contact with the living. It was a most upsetting concept; one that was being explored by the various theosophical societies now coming into fashion in America and Europe.

Once or twice he'd actually thought he'd seen her...shade? Was that the correct word? Ghost seemed like such an old-fashioned and used-up word to Knight. He'd thought he'd seen her in the mansion, standing silently before the great mirror over the vanity in the main bath of the house that had been hers in life. She'd just been...staring at her reflection, and after he'd blinked, she was gone again.

He'd also seen her on the stairway that had been the cause of her untimely demise, gliding smoothly down toward the lower floor, seeming to float over the steps. Then she'd stopped suddenly at the landing where her body had finally come to rest, head lolling at an impossible and quite grotesque angle. She'd just stood there, staring down at the newly replaced oaken floorboards. It seemed to Knight that she could still see the small pool of blood. And then, in that terrible next moment, she'd looked up directly at him, and his blood had run cold. That was when Knight had finally realized he was actually seeing her.

And he'd seen her more often after that first terrible encounter on the landing in his house. He'd even seen her out on the street in broad daylight! She was simply strolling amid the other shoppers in downtown Los Angeles. He'd watched in amazement as unknowing individuals walked right through

her shade, neither feeling, nor reacting to her presence. One time he'd stepped from his lawyer's office, and she'd been standing there right in front of him! He'd stepped back instinctively with an exclamation of surprise and shock, drawing wary and inquiring stares from passersby. He'd ignored them, repositioned his hat on his head, and strode off, feeling, if not actually seeing, the stares that followed him down the sidewalk. *Crazy*, the stares shouted after him in his mind. *He should be locked up...* It took all of his willpower that day to keep from running away from those accusing stares and thought-accusations.

And most damning of all, once he'd seen a very young child's eyes widen and fill with tears and fear as she'd passed...the baby in its stroller being pushed by its unwary mother. It had been most disturbing; that was when he'd come to realize that he had to...*HAD TO* know if her spirit could somehow contact the living, and tell of the events that precipitated her demise.

The previous so-called 'psychics' he'd consulted had, of course, been frauds. He'd spent a fair amount of money so far this year traveling incognito to various theosophical study groups in Chicago and Philadelphia. None of the people he'd paid for information had been able to tell him anything concrete. His trip to New Orleans involved a visit to only one so-called 'psychic.' And finally he'd gone all the way to Tallahassee, Florida to see the three women and one man who'd been touted as renowned psychics by some of his friends. He snorted a derisive laugh. Oh sure, they'd gotten a few general things right about him, but that was just intelligent guesswork and shrewd observation based upon his expensive clothing and jewelry and nothing more. All of them had taken his money and pretended to make contact with Edwina's spirit, but all had missed key details.

And later, after he'd left the various cities, under the extreme duress his men had placed the so-called 'psychics'—the duress of pliers-extracted fingernails, steel pipes rapped hard on the bottoms of their feet, shins, and the tips of their toes, and heads held under ice water—they'd all eventually come clean, confessed their chicanery, and then they were allowed to die. Thayer didn't appreciate it when people lied to him, and liars got just what they deserved. There was no sleep lost.

This 'Alun the Amazing,' though, had come most highly recommended—he was touted to be the very best by some of Thayer's most trusted advisers, business partners, and consultants. Close business associates in San Francisco, Detroit, and Pittsburg had all told him that this young man was truly extraordinary; that Alun the Amazing was the real

thing. *That remains to be seen.* He drew on the cigar, and let the smoke drift in a slow blue cloud from between his lips.

The big saloon slowed, and made a right hand turn. There was a small bump, and then the crunching of a rocky path, neither cobbled nor paved. They'd arrived. He glanced once more at his watch. *Right on time.* The world ran on Thayer's time, it seemed. He smiled a very self-satisfied smile; the world was always right on time for him. The motorcar moved slowly now, and Thayer watched from the window with mild, disgusted interest as the carnival tents came into view. *Such a vulgar place. Ah well, such is the nature of spiritualists and fortune tellers...*

Alun was sitting at his table waiting when Thayer Knight III and his bodyguard entered the tent. He looked up in feigned mild disinterest at the rich man who had asked for a reading. His eyes passed quickly over the older man, evaluating, calculating. Knight seemed to be about fifty years of age, with wavy, graying hair and a meticulously trimmed, small, upturned moustache. He had at least one gold ring on almost every finger, and most of them held large and obviously natural gemstones. Across his chest a heavy watch chain that could be nothing but gold depended from buttonhole to vest pocket. *Typical rich guy,* Alun thought.

The man's grey eyes were haughty and disdainful, and seemed to see right through Alun, rather than actually look at him. His clothing was impeccable. Alun looked back at him with a practiced coolness; the man's wealth mattered only in so far as how much of it he'd be willing to part with to learn the answers to his questions.

"Please," Alun said in a smooth, quiet voice, "be seated." He gestured to the chair on the other side of the small, black-draped table. The man sat, his bodyguard left the trailer, and Alun began to close down his mind. He needed a blankness bordering on oblivion to see. "Tell me, Mr. Knight, what are your questions?"

Thayer snorted. "Really? You don't know what my questions are? How can you call yourself a psychic with that kind of approach? Are you planning to just waste my time, young man?"

Thayer was shocked and surprised when Alun laughed. "I see much, Mr. Thayer Knight III, but our time together is limited; I advise you, for your sake, do not waste it."

The older man was shocked and taken aback; nobody spoke to him in such a manner! "Tell me your fee, psychic," he spat out.

Alun paused. *A thousand.* The thought came strongly, eagerly. "A thousand in cash to learn the true answers to your questions."

Thayer pulled his tooled leather wallet from his jacket pocket, thumbing through the cash, and impatiently slapped the twenty fifty-dollar bills on the black-draped table. "There you are, psychic," he spat. "Now speak to me, and be quick about it. I desire to know if the dead may truly speak to the living." He stared aggressively at Alun.

Alun ignored the man's disdain, and calmly picked up the money, making a rather grandiose show of slowly and deliberately counting it.

"I'll not cheat you, young man," Thayer said, now quite annoyed.

Alun smiled at him, picking up his 'seeing stick.' He stared into the polished orb that surmounted it. He relaxed, knowing the words would come—they always did. His mind went blank for an instant; total unawareness of himself. He looked up suddenly in shock, his eyes focusing on Thayer. "I see...murder disguised as an accident; I see someone tumbling down flights of steps. I see...but no, that is all."

"What do you mean, that is all? Tell me what you've seen or, by God, I'll have you flayed!"

Calm him, his mind whispered to him. *I don't need combat...*

Alun sighed and whispered, "I saw a beautiful woman of early middle age, perhaps thirty. She had long, light brown hair. She always wore it up on top of her head." Alun glanced up at Knight. "She was shoved down a flight of stairs, Mr. Knight. Murdered. She was very well dressed. I see an organdy taffeta formal gown. It is as though she was going to a ball, or perhaps to the opera. She was murdered, Mr. Knight, but I could not see the face of the killer."

"Why not?"

"Because all is not made clear at one sitting, Mr. Knight. Perhaps you could come back another day?"

"I cannot," the older man shouted in anger, slamming the flat of his right hand on Alun's tabletop, with barely controlled rage, "I have important business to attend to in Los Angeles two days hence that cannot wait on some alleged psychic."

Another thousand, and do it now. "Very well, Mr. Knight," Alun said smoothly, "if you will give unto the spirits another thousand, I shall see what they allow me to see."

The old man threw down the bills; they were clearly nothing to him. "Well, speak up, man."

"The dead cannot actually speak to the living," Alun said, "I believe that is your question? But the spirit record of all events is perpetually recorded in the aether, and it cannot be erased."

“So a psychic such as yourself can read this...spirit record and see past events?”

“That is so.” *Tread lightly.* “But only to some extent, Mr. Knight.” *Deny what you know about this.* “What I have seen is all that may be seen. The killer of the woman, whomever she may be, is hidden from me—I cannot see him; nor will anyone else be able to break through the darkness.”

“Him?”

Alun paused now, unsure of what to say next. He stared into the crystal atop his seeing stick, frantically collecting his thoughts. Then he looked up again and said, “Whomsoever slew that woman will forever remain anonymous; though I know him to be a man by his clothing, his face remains a shadow in the aether. As for the woman, I know her to be related to you in some way; your wife perhaps?” Alun looked up at Thayer. *That was a stupid thing to say.*

Thayer rose with no further word, and stalked from the wagon, letting the leather flap that served as a door during business hours swing shut behind him. Alun took a deep breath. The back curtain behind Alun parted, and Patrick entered the room. “Whew,” he huffed. “That was...tense.”

Alun laughed. “He murdered his wife to get his hands on her share of the business; he pushed her down a flight of stairs in their own house. In reality her first husband actually invented the engine technology he’s claiming belongs to him. He was killed in an accident with that very engine a year before she met Knight. Knight stole the engine design and named it after himself. He’s a fraud.”

“Even so, I’m glad you told him you couldn’t identify the killer.”

“As am I,” Alun responded. “That is a very dangerous man.” And that was as true a statement as any psychic in history had ever made.

Thayer Knight III sat in his luxurious suite at the top of the Harrison Hotel in downtown St. Louis. He rose occasionally, pacing nervously from wall to wall. He poured himself a shot of the very finest whiskey, downed it, and turned to face his bodyguard. He slammed the crystal shot glass to the credenza. “The man obviously knows too much.”

“He knows nothing, sir,” the big man said in a conciliatory tone. “You told me yourself, sir, he said he said he couldn’t see the killer’s face. No face, no identification. Simple.”

“He was lying; I could see it in his eyes. He was shocked by what he saw. I believe he knows the truth.”

“If you keep killing all the psychics you consult, sooner or later the coppers will put two and two together, and pin the killings on you.”

“Then make it look like an accident. If what he says about this...aether is true, I can do nothing further anyway. This will be the last one we visit. I have already spent too much time on this.”

“I believe that is wise, sir,” the bodyguard said in a quiet tone. “And if you think about it, a place like an old wooden carnival wagon could easily have a dozen kinds of accidents; an overturned kerosene lantern perhaps...”

“Whatever ‘accident’ suddenly befalls them, it must happen this night. See to it.”

“Yes, sir.”

It was late; the carnival was closing down, the last customers straggling out, heading back to their motorcars and buggies. Alun was sitting in the wagon with Patrick and his sister. He was nervous, restless. He paced the length of the trailer, chewing distractedly on a thumbnail. Then he turned and paced back, repeating the action.

He’s coming back. We must flee. The thought was a surprise, but not surprising. He looked over at Patrick. “We must leave, Father. We are being hunted.”

“Nonsense, my boy. The man clearly said he was leaving tonight for Los Angeles. He believed you, Alun, I can tell. You did an excellent job today, I have to say. Two thousand in cash!”

We must flee...with or without Father, Alun’s mind clamored, almost in a panic now. *I’ll leave with Pandra after he goes to sleep; there’s no other way.* Alun was shocked at that thought; still, survival was most important, and if he and Pandra were gone, Patrick would probably be safe. His mind was made up. He watched keenly as Patrick folded the bills and put them in the old, tattered cigar box he kept under his bed.

And at eleven that night, two figures might have been seen skulking from the circle of wagons that was the carnival. The two figures moved silently through the verdure, finally approaching the roadway. They turned and walked toward the city center. An hour later, a delivery-truck driver took pity on them, and stopped. He agreed to take them to the St. Louis Aerodrome. The odd looking but nice young man traveling with the silent and apparently mute girl tipped him handsomely and turned, walking through the doors of the aerodrome. The driver started his truck, and headed for home. It had been a long day, and his wife was waiting at home, hopefully with a still-hot dinner.

Alun and Pandra wandered the aerodrome, finally coming to the ticket counter. Alun paid for a berth to Los Angeles; it was a big city, and it would

be easy to become lost among the two million or so people living there. *And there'll be lots of places to hide, I'll bet, lots of empty buildings. We can find one and make it ours.*

At eleven-thirty, a massive fire erupted suddenly in the wagon bearing the garish, multicolored sign advertising Alun the Amazing. The fire burned rapidly, apparently starting near the door, and no one inside the wagon escaped the flames. Investigators thought it somewhat odd the way the fire spread so quickly, but then, it was a carnival after all and who knew how much kerosene these people might store at any one time. And it could have been worse; there had been only one fatality. That fatality had been a man of about fifty years, who had mercifully died of smoke inhalation before the flames had reached him. Of Alun the Amazing, there was not a trace.