

TRUTH UNTIL PARADOX

A MAGE: THE ASCENSION ANTHOLOGY
EDITED BY STEWART WIECK



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THE ASCENSION

TRUTH UNTIL PARADOX



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INTROIT



JACKIE CASSADA

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies...

—23rd Psalm

Inside the Mission Street Shelter, the line of street people moved steadily past the tables of hot food and sandwiches. Johanna Talbot looked at her watch and tried to calculate how much longer she would have to offer cheer to people whose lives had little room for optimism. The shelter's doors had opened at sundown, over two hours ago, and Johanna had spent most of that time standing behind the serving table trying to dole out finite portions of hot soup to a seemingly infinite number of hungry people.

"The line's starting to thin out, Sister Jo. Why don't you take a break?" Clarence Dawson left his post behind the sandwiches and moved to stand next to Johanna, resting a large brown hand on her shoulder as he spoke. Johanna smiled at the shelter manager gratefully.

"Thanks, but I'm leaving early tonight. I should be all right for another few minutes."

Clarence shrugged. "Whatever you say, but you look pretty ragged to me. You might want to get home before the storm breaks. The wind might blow you away if you get caught in it." He chuckled as he returned to the sandwich table.

Johanna ladled a large serving of pale-orange soup into a bowl and handed it to a grizzled old man who mumbled something inarticulate before moving on to the nearly depleted array of sandwiches.

"What's this stuff?" An elderly woman in a faded print dress at least two sizes too large for her bony frame peered suspiciously into the soup tureen.

"Shrimp bisque," Johanna answered, offering a bowl to the woman.

"Where are the shrimp? I don't see any shrimp in here."

"Um, I think it's been run through a blender, Ms. Potter." Johanna congratulated herself for remembering the woman's name. She had been working at the Mission Street Shelter for six weeks, long enough to recognize the regulars who came most nights for a hot meal and sometimes a bed. They were street people, homeless and hungry. Once Johanna had dutifully prayed daily for the relief of the "faceless" suffering. Now she gave them food and saw that they had faces — and names.

"Call me Irene," the woman said, finally accepting the soup and moving down the line toward Clarence and the sandwiches.

"What kind?" Johanna heard her ask the manager of the shelter.

The ceiling lights flickered momentarily, followed by a low rumble of distant thunder. It had been raining on and off all weekend, and tonight promised no change in the weather. Visualizing her black umbrella still resting in its stand in her apartment, Johanna hoped the rain would hold off until she got home. One of these days I'll have to replace it with something more colorful, she thought. It was one of the few things she had brought with her from the convent when she came to San Francisco, though, and she hated to part with it.

"Ma'am?" A male voice, hoarse and weary, brought her back to the present. A young man, not more than thirty and accompanied by two children, shifted uneasily as he waited for her to ladle out three bowls of soup. Johanna tried to smile at him, but a tightness in her

throat made the corners of her mouth shake. She gave up and settled for what she hoped was a sympathetic grimace. Sometimes she forgot that homelessness was not restricted to luckless individuals. Whole families were finding themselves suddenly without roots.

Impulsively, Johanna hooked her ladle over the edge of the soup tureen and shoved a hand into the deep sidepocket of her denim vest. "Wait a minute, sir," she said. "I have something for the kids." She concentrated on the packets of candy corn lying on her kitchen table. She had bought them this morning in anticipation of Halloween. Softly she hummed to herself, focusing her thoughts. *All places are one place*, she reminded herself. *My hand is both here in my pocket and there, reaching for the small, tasty treats*. Cellophane crinkled under her touch, and she triumphantly retrieved the candy.

"Here," she said. She held the packets in the flat of her hand for the man's inspection. "I thought I'd brought some with me. For Halloween?" At the man's nod, she offered two packets to each child. It's not enough, she thought. Never enough. She watched the trio as they continued through the food line.

"That was nicely done," she heard. Johanna turned, surprised by the soft, cultured tones that had caught her attention. Out of habit she retrieved her ladle and dipped it in the tureen.

"Not necessary, thank you, I've already supped." The man who had spoken to her looked out of place among the shelter's inhabitants. Johanna judged him to be close to her own age, perhaps even younger. His clean-shaven face and carefully tailored clothing spoke of regular baths and unexpired credit cards. His voice held a trace of an accent, too faint to identify. He stared at her for a long minute, during which Johanna became painfully aware of her own unprepossessing appearance. Her short blond hair and pale blue eyes, together with her small frame, had prompted the sisters at the convent to refer to her as "diminutive." Here, at the shelter, Clarence had once described her as "a scrawny waif."

Johanna forced herself not to flinch from the stranger's arrogant scrutiny. Suddenly, she felt a coldness that had nothing to do with the sudden gusts of wind that blew into the shelter's dining room from the opened door. An almost physical sense of pressure made her stumble backward, and she reached out for the table to steady herself.

"Is anything wrong, Sister Jo?" Johanna nearly gasped with relief at the sound of Clarence's voice. All she had to do was say the word and the stranger would be escorted out to the street. But what word could she say? He had made no overtly threatening advances. He merely stood opposite her and stared intently in her direction.

"*Please, don't be hasty.*" The man's voice rang with urgency, and at first Johanna failed to realize that he had not spoken the words aloud. Her resistance crumpled as she recognized an appeal in his tone that she could not ignore or shunt aside.

"Everything's fine, Clarence," she said, speaking slowly to keep her voice from trembling. "He and I..."

"*Gideon,*" she heard inside her mind.

"Gideon and I know each other." Johanna felt her face flush. Lying had never been her forte.

"That's right," Gideon said, proffering a hand in Clarence's direction. "Jo and I go back a ways." As the two men shook hands warily, Johanna felt Gideon's presence leave her mind.

“Well, in that case, I’ll butt out,” Clarence said, stepping backward and looking about the room. “We seem to have run out of takers, Sister Jo,” he said.

Johanna wrenched her eyes from Gideon’s face and saw that the food line had dissipated. The shelter manager smiled warmly at her. “Why don’t you go on home before the rain catches up with us?”

It took Johanna less than a minute to retrieve her jacket from the back room where the shelter’s staff stored their things. As she straightened her collar, reluctant to return to the outer room, her hands fingered a thin, gold chain around her neck. Reaching inside her cotton shirt, she pulled out the stylized sun pendant that hung from the chain and brought it to her lips in a gesture that kindled a spark of memory within her...



Her lips brushed the back of the Mother Superior’s hand.

“You have doubts, my child?” The older nun stood motionless as the black-clad young postulant knelt before her.

“I hear voices... a voice... in my mind, Mother Superior,” Sister Johanna whispered. “The thoughts that come to me lately are not my own. I’m frightened.”

“Are you overtired? There is such a thing as too much devotion and too little sleep.”

“I think I may be going mad.”

“Not every inner voice is the voice of insanity, Sister Johanna.” The Mother Superior of the Convent of the Heavenly Spirit extended both hands for Johanna to take. “The Maid of Orleans heard voices. So did Bernadette.” Johanna felt herself lifted to her feet by surprisingly strong hands. The Mother Superior was smiling.

“I think that you are not insane, daughter. I think you are beginning to Awaken.”

Johanna’s pulse quickened at the sound of the unfamiliar term.

“Awaken?”

“Behind all religions, even this one which we claim to be the one true faith, is a truth greater than any single body of beliefs. When we stand on the verge of discovering that greater truth, something within us emerges — or Awakens — to guide us into the fullness of our knowledge.” The Mother Superior’s face seemed to glow as she spoke. “Come,” she said to Johanna. “I will show you a mystery...”

Still clutching the symbol of the Celestial Chorus, the order of mages into which she had been initiated at the convent, Johanna sought inside herself for some direction. She had volunteered to come to San Francisco, where the Chorus had only a nominal presence. Her instructions were to make herself useful and wait. She had done both those things. And now Gideon had walked into the shelter and spoken directly to her mind.

“Is this why I was sent here?” she asked, seeking an answer from within.

“If not this, then what?” Johanna recognized the voice that sounded from within her. It belonged to that fragment of divinity inside her that made it possible for her to alter reality in ways that could only be described as magic. She had learned that the Awakened spirit within her was called an Avatar, but in her own mind she envisioned a creature of fire and light and painful beauty, not unlike the descriptions of angels in the holy texts of

many religions. Though it had been a long time since she had heard its celestial melody, her being resonated in tune with its harmonies. She tucked the pendant and chain securely into her shirt again and went to meet Gideon, uncertainty and anticipation rising in antiphonal measures within her.

He was waiting for her by the outer door, his aristocratic features bearing no evidence of impatience. As she said good night to Clarence, who was busily restocking the food counter for the latecomers, Gideon took her arm. The gesture bore all the markings of an old-fashioned courtesy, but the firmness of his grip hinted at something more custodial. Once again, Johanna fought down the urge to panic.

“There’s really nothing to fear,” he said to her as they put the shelter behind them and headed north, toward Union Square. It wasn’t until they had walked several blocks that Johanna remembered that she had intended to go home, and that home lay in the other direction.

“What do you want?” she said, finally voicing the thought that had been in her mind since Gideon had made his appearance.

“I need your help,” he said simply. Johanna glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. She revised her earlier estimation of his age, placing him now at that indeterminate thirty-something. Under the glare of the streetlights, which illuminated the darkness, he looked more vulnerable than he had inside the shelter. It was that unshakeable self-confidence he had projected, and had since dropped, which had made him seem younger. Uncertainty had left its mark on her own face, she knew.

“How do you know I can help you?” she asked.

“Because you’re a mage,” he answered in a voice purged of all pretense. He waited for a break in traffic, then steered her quickly across Mission Street. As they paused on the other side, Johanna looked carefully at him.

“So are you,” she said. He nodded, once.

“Do you know this city?” he asked.

“Sort of,” Johanna replied. After she had left the convent, she had spent her first two weeks in the city wandering around, gawking at the overwhelming mix of sights and sounds which contrasted so radically with the sheltered peace within the cloister.

“Then take me somewhere where there’s a crowd, where we can both get lost.”

Johanna thought of The Lost Chord, a club near Union Square. She had visited it more than once, attracted to it first by the name and later drawn back by the quality of the bands that played there. Initially, she had felt awkward — and a little guilty — at entering an establishment so far removed from the life of prayer and devotion she had known at the convent, but the vibrant music that filled the club spoke to her of a different way of praying, a raucous paean in celebration of life that was no less meaningful for its lack of reverence than the solemn choruses in which she had once participated. She had come to San Francisco to taste of the city, to sample the world in its fullest before deciding whether or not to put it behind her and take up the life of a nun once more. Her guilt had soon faded.

“I think I know a place like that,” she said. She pried her arm from Gideon’s grasp and set off in the direction of Geary Street.

Gideon hurried to catch up with her. “Take a roundabout way,” he said, looking around him nervously.

“Don’t you ever say please?” Johanna asked as she kept walking, turning down a side street without breaking her pace.

Two blocks from the club, a disheveled teenager in ragged jeans and bare feet accosted them. “Spare some change?” His speech was slurred. Johanna recoiled from the odor of cheap wine and pot that wafted from his direction. She tried to push past him, but he blocked her path. Johanna had just noticed that his left eye was completely red when Gideon interposed himself between her and the panhandler.

“Bugger off,” he snapped at the youth. As if someone had punched him in the stomach, the man staggered backward and tripped on the curb.

Time seemed to warp around Johanna as Gideon took her arm once more and pulled her past the fallen figure. Backlash, she thought, moving in slow motion past an endless building. She had always been careful not to work obvious magic in front of anyone not already aware of its existence, and so she had never directly experienced the phenomenon known as Paradox Backlash, when the laws of reality struggle to reassert themselves in the face of blatant violations. Gideon had not made physical contact with the red-eyed man, but had used his power as a battering ram. She glanced at Gideon, and noticing his apparent unconcern, forced herself to remain calm. By the time the club was in sight, her temporal sense had returned to normal. Gideon let go of her arm and looked apologetic.

“I saw one of those red-eyed people earlier this evening,” he said. “It unnerved me then, too.”

Johanna nodded. “There was a wrongness about him. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but I just wanted to get away from him.”

A few more hasty steps brought them to the door of the The Lost Chord. Gideon paused to look around, then motioned to Johanna. “Let’s go inside, quickly,” he said. He let Johanna lead the way.

Inside the club, both Johanna and Gideon scanned the crowd. A few people were dancing to the hypnotic music emanating from the stage. All the tables were filled with the usual mix of drinkers, talkers and listeners. Johanna fastened on the music, picking out phrases of Gregorian chant and Eastern harmonics amid the pulsating throb of electric guitars. She recognized the band, a group called Mantra, from earlier visits. Despite the gothic look the band members affected — all black clothing and white makeup — their sound spoke to her of a spirituality their image denied.

Gideon grabbed her hand and pulled her through the crowd to a table that had suddenly emptied. They sat while a waitress removed glasses and bottles. Gideon ordered beers for both of them. Neither spoke until their drinks arrived.

“Lucky for us those people were leaving,” Johanna said to break the silence. “I was beginning to think we’d have to go somewhere else.”

Gideon raised an eyebrow. “It wasn’t luck,” he said quietly. “I believe the people who were sitting here suffered a sudden attack of uneasiness and had to leave. It’s amazing how effective a simple tweak to the human nervous system can be.”

“Oh.” Johanna felt her face harden with disapproval.

“Don’t be so quick to pass judgment on me,” Gideon said. “We needed this space and we have fewer options than most. We need to talk.” As he spoke, he glanced about the room, nervously searching the club’s interior.

“You said you needed my help,” Johanna said. “Why?”

Gideon took a long pull from his glass.

“I’m on the run,” he said.

“From whom?” Johanna asked. “And why?”

Gideon leaned back in his chair until his head rested against the wall. Only the slight drumming of his fingers on the tabletop betrayed his uneasiness.

“You’ve heard of the Men in Black, haven’t you? Superiors? HIT Marks?” he said.

“The Technocracy,” Johanna said, whispering the words even though she knew that her speech was unlikely to be overheard. The terms were familiar to her, the strike forces of the confederation of Technomancers who waged unceasing war on mages of her kind.

“Well, the Progenitors, actually,” Gideon said. “I wasn’t sure how familiar you were with the ins and outs of the enemy.”

“I know the Technocracy owns San Francisco,” Johanna replied. “And I’ve heard of the Progenitors — they’re the bio-scientists, aren’t they?”

Gideon nodded. “Among other things.”

“It won’t be easy to hide yourself from them for long,” Johanna said, “at least not in the city.”

“I hadn’t a hell of a lot of choices,” Gideon said.

“Why are they after you?” Johanna asked, beginning to search the crowd for clues that she and Gideon were being watched, realizing as she did so that she had no idea what she was looking for. She knew that the Men in Black were just that — but half the city wore black just to be in fashion. HIT Marks were supposed to be part machine, which should make them stand out in a crowd, she supposed. She had no idea what distinguished Superiors from other people. She finally settled for trying to identify anyone who seemed to be taking undue notice of herself and Gideon.

“I have something they want,” Gideon said.

“What do you want from me?” she asked, suddenly nervous at the prospect of involvement in Gideon’s predicament. She forced herself to remain calm, breathing deeply and reciting the beginning of a soothing chant to herself.

“Shelter, for starters,” he said, a wry grin toying with the corners of his mouth. “After all, I did find you giving food and shelter to the needy. I happen to be one of the homeless myself, at least for now.”

“If a place to sleep is all you need, you could have taken a bed at the mission,” Johanna said.

Gideon shook his head. “You felt what happened on the street earlier. I can’t afford to surround myself with too many people who are ignorant of the existence of magic. They would seriously hamper anything I might have to do to protect myself if someone tracks me down.”

“I wasn’t thinking,” Johanna murmured, dropping her head as a sudden sting of shame coursed through her. “I should know better than to even consider putting innocent people at risk.”

Gideon reached across the table and touched Johanna's chin with his fingertips. She raised her head to look at him.

"Don't bother about it," he said, lowering his hand. "You're obviously not used to this kind of plotting. It wasn't a bad idea, just an unworkable one." Gideon glanced quickly at his watch, then scanned the room once again.

"We can't stay here too much longer," he said. "I do need to find somewhere relatively safe to go." He paused, as if ready to say more, then merely looked at Johanna. This time she could not mistake his intent.

"Does this mean you want to come home with me?" As she spoke the words, Johanna realized that she was enjoying Gideon's company despite — or perhaps because of — the hint of danger that surrounded him.

"Is that so impossible?" Gideon smiled at Johanna, a smile full of innocence. Once again Johanna saw the years drop from his face. "I'm not making improper suggestions or anything. I just want a place to stay for awhile."

Johanna's face reddened. "It's not that," she said. "It's just..."

Gideon straightened in his seat. He leaned forward, his gaze anchored on Johanna.

"The man at the shelter, your coworker, called you Sister Jo," he said. "Are you a nun? Is that why you seem so hesitant?"

Johanna closed her eyes, carefully considering her answer...



"I'm not certain that I belong here, Mother Superior," Johanna said.

Her mentor nodded her head thoughtfully and continued to finger her rosary beads. "The life of a contemplative is not for everyone," she murmured. "Your vows are not yet final."

"It's not that I've lost my faith in... in the One. I just don't know if I can spend the rest of my life here in the convent."

"Perhaps what you need is a change of scene," the old nun said as she kissed the cross that hung from the ritual beads, then turned her full attention to Johanna. "We call our Tradition of magic the Celestial Chorus for a reason, child. Unlike the other orders of mages, who often work individually, our best work is done in a group. But every choir has its soloists, those whose voices are so strong and clear that they demand to be heard without accompaniment. You have a strong voice, Johanna, and whether or not you have been called to sing alone is something you and your Avatar must decide."

"But if I leave the convent..."

"The convent is not the Chorus. Most of the sisters here are Sleepers, devout women who believe in God and who do much good with their prayers but who are ignorant of the presence of mages within these walls. The Chorus finds the trappings of this place of meditation conducive to its work, and we find no real conflict between this form of faith and our own true purpose. The Church is not perfect, but we work within it for the greater good." The Mother Superior paused in her speech.

"I don't want to hide behind walls, Mother Superior," Johanna said.

The Mother Superior chuckled. “Oh, we don’t hide, Johanna. If your destiny lies with us here in the convent, you will see that for yourself. In the meantime, there is work that you can do for us that will take you outside these walls and give you a taste of the world. You will take a leave of absence — a vacation of sorts. The official term, I believe, is ‘exclaustration.’”

“Out of the cloister,” Johanna translated.

Her superior nodded. “Literally,” she said.

“And what of my vows?” Johanna asked.

“Your vows — poverty, chastity, and obedience.” The Mother Superior cupped Johanna’s chin in her palm and stared at her with twinkling blue eyes. “You have not yet made any commitment to the sisterhood that cannot be broken. Until you take your final vows, only you can determine which of them you may keep and which can be put aside due to circumstances. Although you will undoubtedly want to sample that which you must forswear if you return to the convent, I do not expect that you will amass a fortune overnight, nor do I think you will abandon yourself utterly to physical pleasures. And in the end, it is your Avatar who will command obedience.”

“How long will I have to make my decision?” Johanna asked.

“Until your work for us in San Francisco is done,” the Mother Superior said. “You will always be a member of the Chorus, Johanna. That is not the question. The question is, will you also be a nun?...”

“Is something wrong?” Gideon’s voice broke her reverie. Johanna opened her eyes and realized that he was waiting for her reply.

“Am I a nun?” Voicing the question herself brought her no closer to an answer. “I’m not sure. At one time I thought I was.”

Gideon arched an eyebrow in puzzlement.

“I’ve taken a leave of absence from the convent,” Johanna replied. “And my name is Johanna.”

“That suits you better than Sister Jo,” Gideon said. “But it also explains a few things.”

“Like my reluctance to take you home?” Johanna asked, beginning to relax.

Gideon nodded. “You’re Celestial Chorus, right? The religious mages?”

“Yes,” Johanna said, amused in spite of herself at the facile tag Gideon had attached to her. “And you?”

“What do you think?” Gideon’s voice sounded almost playful.

Johanna looked him over carefully. “I would guess that you are one of the Order of Hermes,” she said finally.

Gideon laughed. “Is it that obvious?”

“It seemed the most likely,” Johanna said, “at least judging by appearances.”

“Go on,” Gideon urged. “I so seldom get a glimpse of myself from the outside.”

“You dress conservatively, for one thing,” Johanna began, suddenly feeling awkward at trying to attach tangible evidence to an intuitive guess. “If you carry anything that focuses your power, it’s relatively easy to conceal — unlike the gadgets and fetishes of some of the other mage Traditions.” She shrugged. “I can’t pinpoint it any closer than that.”

“It’s not really that important,” Gideon said. “No more so than if we were guessing each other’s astrological signs.”

“I’m not really familiar with any of the other orders of mages, at least not in San Francisco.” Johanna said. “They keep a very low profile so the Technocracy — or anyone else — won’t notice them.”

“Then I was lucky to find you, wasn’t I?”

“As lucky as you were to find this empty table so quickly?” Johanna asked.

Gideon shrugged. “I went looking for a mage,” he said, “and shelter. The combination seems to have brought me to you.”

“What’s that?” Johanna said, catching a sudden movement near the front of the club. Two men in black dusters, their faces shaded by broad-brimmed hats, had just thrown open the door and were arguing with the bouncer.

Gideon jerked to attention.

“We need to leave immediately.” He was on his feet by the time he stopped speaking.

Johanna stood up, grateful that her slight frame would help conceal her actions from the figures she sensed were now moving toward them through the crowd.

“Where’s the back door?” Gideon asked.

“To your left, past the bathrooms,” Johanna said.

“Can you find your way there in the dark?” Gideon asked, his hands feeling along the wall as he spoke.

“I think so,” Johanna said. She heard him grunt with satisfaction as he finally located a line of shielded electrical wire.

She reached out to touch Gideon’s shoulder, but drew back as she felt a current of power gather about him and heard him mutter something that sounded like a formula — or an equation.

A loud crack of thunder penetrated the din of the club. Almost simultaneously, all the lights went out. “Now, get us out of here before they get the lights back on,” she heard Gideon say close to her ear. His hand, still faintly tingling, grasped her shoulder. Amid the confusion that followed, Johanna pulled her companion steadily through the milling crowd. They reached the rear door and tumbled out onto a small alley just off Maiden Lane.

Once outside the club, Johanna looked up at the sky. Heavy cloud cover obscured the stars, but the rain had not yet begun. She caught a look of amusement on Gideon’s face.

“I suppose the blackout was just another stroke of luck?” Johanna commented, her voice heavy with sarcasm. “Happy coincidence?”

“There are certain advantages brought about by threatening weather,” he said. The smile faded. “Let’s get as far away from this place as possible.”

Hand in hand, they made their way past the boutiques that lined Maiden Lane. A few of the shops were still open, taking advantage of the Halloween weekend crowd.

Johanna pulled Gideon inside an all-night bookstore. An old man in tinted-green spectacles looked up momentarily as they hurried to lose themselves among the shelves. Leaning back against a wall of used books, Johanna inhaled the musty odor of old paper and worn leather. Except for the shop owner, she and Gideon seemed to be the only patrons.

“How did they find us?” Johanna whispered.

Gideon shook his head. “Who knows? They’re mages, too, and even though they use the trappings of science, what they do — and how they do it — is still magic.”

“What will they do if they catch us?” Johanna asked, trying to remember everything she had heard about the Technocracy, until tonight no more than a label for everything the Chorus opposed. In theological terms, they would be the legions of Mammon, dedicated to divesting the world of its spiritual connections. But apart from associating them with rampant technology and passionless science, she had no clear picture of these people who were pursuing Gideon so fiercely.

“I don’t really want to find out,” Gideon said.

Johanna heard a scuffling sound on the other side of the shelves. She tensed, bringing her hand to her throat and touching the gold chain to make contact with the focus medallion underneath her shirt. A quick look behind her told her that Gideon, too, was on the alert. His eyes narrowed in concentration as he pulled something from an inside pocket of his jacket — some sort of power focus, she supposed. With his other hand, he gestured for Johanna to take a look beyond the shelves that blocked their view.

As quietly as she could, Johanna began a chant that would allow her to see past the barrier of books. Her vision blurred, and then she was looking not at the shelves, which surrounded her, but through them, along the narrow, book-lined aisles.

Scuffling as he dragged his feet, the store’s owner came into view. The old man stopped in front of a row of matching leather-bound volumes and removed one of the titles, then made his way back toward the front of the room.

Johanna slumped against the wall, suddenly weak from relief as she slowly eased away from the power she had tapped. “It was just the old man,” she whispered to Gideon, who relaxed his stance as she spoke. Johanna folded her arms in front of her to hide the trembling in her hands.

“We can’t stay here,” Gideon said. “If I were trying to track us down, I’d check all the places that stayed open ‘round the clock. We need to keep moving.”

“I know,” Johanna agreed. “I just needed a few minutes to think.”

“That won’t be necessary,” a low-pitched voice rasped harshly as a pair of figures in black coats suddenly rounded the corner and came toward them down the aisle of books. Johanna saw the flash of metal as their arms reached underneath their coats. Instinctively, she reached once more for her medallion, wondering if there were seconds enough for her to transport herself and Gideon away from their attackers.

“Don’t bother, Jo,” Gideon said from behind her, his voice dull and without hope. “It’s all over.”

Before she could answer him, he grabbed her by the arm and pulled her backward, placing himself between her and the black-coated men.

Johanna fell, slamming her head sharply against a wall of books. She had time to see Gideon leap forward, arms outstretched to grab both men. She heard a dull boom as all three men vanished. The words “air displacement” swam into her mind as she lost consciousness.

The stinging aroma of something acrid and unpleasant woke her. She lay amid a pile of toppled books. The old man from the bookstore knelt over her, waving a dark glass

bottle under her nose. She coughed once and tried to sit up, then gasped as the movement precipitated a stabbing pain in her head.

“Take it easy, missy,” the old man said. “You had a nasty fall there.”

More cautiously, Johanna tried once again to raise herself to a sitting position. This time, she succeeded.

The old man hovered over her. “Should I call 911?” he asked.

“No!” Johanna said sharply. “No, I just lost my balance for a moment.”

The old man nodded. “I thought I felt the place shake a little. I guess the quake last night still hasn’t settled down.”

Johanna looked at him carefully. Apart from the obvious concern on his face, he looked unperturbed. She accepted his offer of a hand and carefully pulled herself to her feet.

“You didn’t see anything — unusual — did you?” she asked.

“I saw you come in,” he said. “And I noticed it was a mite foggy outside — but that’s not what I’d call unusual.”

“And the young man who was with me?”

“What young man?” The old man looked puzzled. “Are you sure you don’t want me to call someone — your doctor?”

“No, please,” Johanna said forcefully. “I’ll be all right.”

“Can I get you anything? I have some tea in the back.”

Johanna started to refuse his offer, then realized that she was no longer in any hurry. The hopelessness in Gideon’s voice had made it abundantly clear that he did not expect her to pursue the matter. She let the old man lead her to a cluttered office at the rear of the shop. She perched on a rickety wooden chair while the store owner retrieved a tea bag from a desk drawer, filled a styrofoam cup with hot water from a pot that rested on a portable electric burner, and finally offered her a cup of spicy herbal tea.

Once he had done so, he left her alone and began to retrieve the books she had dislodged in her fall. Johanna sipped the hot liquid slowly and tried to collect her thoughts. In the short time she had been in San Francisco, she had had little contact with the other mages in the city. Once or twice someone she thought might be one of the self-taught mages known as Orphans had drifted into the shelter, seeking a free meal, but Johanna had never had the courage to attempt an approach. She knew that there was probably a sizable contingent of Cult of Ecstasy mages, but she suspected that those devotees of magic-as-hedonism would want little to do with someone from the Celestial Chorus. She had been truthful when she told Gideon that all she knew of the Order of Hermes was that it existed. Gideon’s entry into her life had been the first real connection she had made with mages outside her own Tradition. His sudden absence left her feeling curiously empty.

The shop’s clock chimed the hour. Johanna held her breath and counted. Ten o’clock. Under normal circumstances, she would be on her way home from the shelter. Tonight, with her plans to leave early, she should have already been ensconced in her apartment, alone with her meditations. But this was not a normal night.

“Would you like another cup of tea?” The old man was back, and Johanna realized that whatever she decided to do, she needed to do it somewhere else.

“No, thanks,” she said. “If I could impose long enough to call a cab, I’ll be on my way.” She gave the man the sort of smile that she usually reserved for the shelter’s clients, a smile carefully constructed to cover unwanted emotion.

As she wandered impatiently through the shop waiting for her ride, Johanna spied a book of poems by Francis Thompson. She brought it up to the counter and reached in her jacket pocket for her change purse.

“Don’t feel like you have to buy something,” the old man remarked as she handed him a combination of bills and loose change.

“I want to,” she said, remembering how the poet’s tortured search for spiritual meaning had given her comfort during her early struggle to come to terms with the reality of her own Awakened power.

“Not many people read his stuff anymore,” the old man volunteered as Johanna began to flip through the slender volume, searching for “The Hound of Heaven,” Thompson’s best — and most famous — poem.

Johanna nodded her agreement. She stationed herself near the door and let her eyes drift over the pages of poems. *I fled Him, down the nights and down the days; she read. I fled Him, down the arches of the years; I fled Him through the labyrinthine ways of my own mind...* Between verses, she watched the traffic pass by outside.

The storm that had been threatening all evening finally emptied itself in sheets of rain as the cab pulled up in front of the shop. Johanna called out her thanks to the bookstore owner as she dashed across the sidewalk for the taxi’s open door.

On the way to her apartment, she allowed her thoughts to roam, watching the city slip by through the cab’s rain-spattered windows. She had blurted out her address to the cabbie instinctively, without consciously realizing that she was planning on going home, and then realized that her tiny walk-up was, in fact, the only real haven she had at the moment. Once she was safe, she concluded, she would again take stock of the evening’s events and decide if there was anything she could do for Gideon.

In the privacy of her own apartment, away from outside observation, she could begin to search for him. She sifted through her memories of the last few hours, calling to mind everything she could remember about Gideon, building within herself an image of him which would serve as a focus for her divinations. If she could discover where he had been taken, she would have some idea of how to help him — or if he could be helped.

A feeling of remorse washed through her. If she had not been so reluctant to take him home with her, if she had simply shifted the two them to her apartment from within the convenient darkness of the club, they might both be safe. Instead, he had given himself up to his pursuers, sacrificing himself to protect her. He had placed his trust in her, and she had failed him. Even though she had only known him for a few hours, Johanna knew she had to do something to make up for what must have seemed to him to be a betrayal of that trust.

The taxi stopped in front of an aging Victorian house on the edge of San Francisco’s once-infamous Tenderloin district. She located her keys, paid the cab driver, and quickly made her way to the back of the house, where an external staircase led to her attic apartment. Nearly blinded by the pouring rain, she fumbled with the door key. Wishing she had remembered to leave the outer light on, she finally felt the lock give way.

As she reached for the light switch, the realization hit her. The light had been on when she left the apartment this afternoon. She turned, still halfway in the door, and felt a hand grab her wrist. Johanna tried to scream, but panic froze the sounds that rose in her throat. She tried to jerk her arm away, but she was caught in a vise-like grip that pulled her inside the darkened kitchen. Still struggling to free herself and fighting to find the breath to scream, she heard the door slam shut behind her.

“I told you it was all over, Johanna,” a familiar voice said, as another hand moved past her in the dark and flicked on the light.

Gideon was seated comfortably in one of her two kitchen chairs, an empty coffee cup on the table beside him. In his hand, he held a gun. One of the black-coated men stood with his back to the apartment door, his hand still poised near the light switch. The other man held her by the arm.

Gideon kicked the second chair away from the table and motioned for Johanna to sit. Stunned into complacency, Johanna allowed herself to be guided into the chair.

“First things first,” Gideon said. He leaned toward Johanna, carefully keeping his gun hand away from her and, with his free hand, lifted her pendant from her neck and dropped it into the empty cup. “I suppose I don’t have to warn you not to start singing or chanting or whatever it is you do.” His voice was gently soothing, deliberately so. “I’d hate to have to gag you, since that would make conversation difficult.”

Gideon nodded to the man holding her arm, who released his grip and stepped backward to stand against the wall with his companion.

“How did you know to come here?” Johanna asked, making her voice as flat and uninflected as possible.

“It wasn’t difficult,” Gideon said, a trace of amusement in his voice. “Clarence assured me that you had nowhere else to go. I was prepared to wait all night for you to come home.”

“Clarence?” Johanna felt a surge of panic rise. “What have you done to him?”

Gideon laughed. “Clarence is fine. He’s been working for us for some time now. We’re not as heartless as you make us out to be, Johanna. It’s in our interest to care for the masses, too, you know.”

Johanna closed her eyes as the truth resounded in her head like a bell. She opened her eyes again and chose her next words carefully.

“You’re not what you said you were,” she said.

“I never said,” Gideon replied. “You guessed that I was Order of Hermes. I simply neglected to otherwise inform you.”

“So this whole evening has been a ruse? You weren’t running from the Men in Black?”

Gideon shook his head. “No, I wasn’t running, Johanna. You were. It was you we wanted.”

“Me?” she asked, still not comprehending. “But why?”

“Because you’re new to the city,” Gideon said. “Clarence has been watching you for us since you showed up at the shelter. He didn’t think you’d had time to make any connections, and your actions tonight confirmed his assessment.”

“I’m alone here,” Johanna said. “I can’t lead you to anyone, if that’s what you want.” The thought of Clarence’s betrayal stung.

“It’s not that at all,” Gideon said quietly. “I’m glad you haven’t had the chance to talk to any of the Tradition folks here. They would have gotten you involved in one of their conspiracies against us. As you said, the Technocracy owns San Francisco. We don’t intend for that to change. We can’t afford to.” Gideon stared thoughtfully at his pistol for a few seconds, then tucked it out of sight inside his jacket. He moved forward in his chair until his knees almost touched Johanna’s.

“You need to know the truth about this city,” he said. “You need to know in case you’ve come here thinking you can bring about changes we don’t want.”

“I won’t be a Judas.” Johanna’s voice sounded strident in the small kitchen. Remembering Gideon’s warning, she tried to dampen the indignation that colored her words. “I didn’t come here to fight anybody,” she said softly, “but I won’t betray anyone to you.” Thinking of her own admission of isolation, she added, “I can’t.”

“No one’s asking for that,” Gideon said. “I don’t expect you to betray anybody.” He let the words hang in the air and watched Johanna’s face intently.

Johanna felt the blood rush to her cheeks. Less than an hour ago she had berated herself for not acting to prevent Gideon’s capture.

Johanna looked around the room, then back at Gideon. He regarded her calmly.

“What’s next?” she asked.

Gideon’s eyes took on a distant look. His face was a mask of seriousness.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to submit to what I hope will be the only unpleasantness of the evening.”

Johanna’s temples throbbed as a current of fear coursed through her. “What do you mean?” she asked, suspecting that she already knew the answer.

“I removed your obvious power focus,” he said, tapping the coffee cup that now contained her gold medallion. “I need to be certain that you aren’t concealing anything else you might use to harness your powers.”

“Please don’t do this,” Johanna said, her lips barely forming the words.

“It has to be done,” Gideon said. “We can do it here, if you’d like, in front of these very unmatronly gentlemen,” he remarked, allowing his mouth to soften, “or we can go into another room so you won’t feel quite so...”

“Quite so naked?” Johanna said bitterly. “What do you think you’ll find, some sort of sub-dermal implant? A symbol tattooed on my chest?” Her voice rose despite her efforts to control her tone. “You’ve already taken my focus. I have nothing else that could be of any use to me,” she said.

Gideon shrugged. “I have to make sure. I promise I won’t compromise you.”

Johanna nearly laughed in spite of herself. “It’s a little late for that promise. You’ve already compromised me just by being here. I’m sure you’ve already conducted a thorough search of my home.”

The look on Gideon’s face confirmed her statement. “I’m afraid you have little choice in the matter,” he said. “Your options are limited to your choice of location. I can search you here or in your room.”

Johanna felt the walls close in around her. Abruptly, she rose from the table. One of the guards moved toward her, then halted as Gideon motioned him back with his hand. He looked up at Johanna expectantly.

“Can we just get this over with?” Her voice was dull, each syllable an effort of will. “You probably know where my bedroom is,” she said. “That’s as good a place as any.”

Gideon trailed behind her as she made her way through the apartment and into her bedroom. Once inside the room, he closed the door behind them and stood silently as she removed her clothes. Johanna felt a surge of anger as she noticed that someone — Gideon probably — had already laid a change of clothing out on the bed. Neither the denim skirt nor the lightweight blouse he had selected for her had pockets. A pair of sandals rested on the floor at the foot of the bed. He was obviously taking no chances that she would be able to secrete anything about her person after his search was completed.

Gideon’s inspection was thorough and professional. Johanna found that if she closed her eyes, she could almost imagine that she was undergoing a routine physical. She steeled herself as his hands made contact with her flesh. The coolness of his hands surprised her a little, and she opened her eyes. Gideon’s face registered no emotion; his eyes focused impersonally on her body as if he were examining a piece of machinery for flaws in its construction. She forced herself to remain aware, fighting the urge to disassociate herself from what was happening to her. As his fingers continued their inexorable probing, she sought within herself for a means of quelling the anger and humiliation that continued to build inside her.

“I am light clothed in flesh, incorruptible spirit encased in corruptible matter,” she recited to herself, remembering a fragment from a book of meditations she had studied during her first year at the convent. She took some comfort from the words, finally understanding their full import. Her body became a protective barrier, shielding her true self from invasion. Instead of feeling violated by Gideon’s intimacies, she experienced an odd sensation of pride. The power that dwelt within her rested in a place he could not reach. Despite his attempts to impress upon her the helplessness of her position, she was, ultimately, inviolate. The realization overwhelmed her, and she caught her breath.

Gideon finally stepped back from her and broke the silence. “You can get dressed,” he said, turning his back to her and giving her back her privacy.

Afterward, when she finished dressing, he opened the door and escorted her into the small living room, where a tray of cold cuts and a bottle of soda rested on the coffee table.

“I thought you might not have eaten anything,” Gideon said.

Johanna realized that she was, in fact, hungry. She sat in the chair he held out for her and began to nibble at the food.

“I hope you can forgive me,” he said.

Johanna steadied her voice and said, “For what? Deceiving me when I trusted you? Subjecting me to a search that you knew would turn up nothing?” A shadow of what might have been guilt passed across Gideon’s face. “There’s nothing to forgive,” she said dismissively.

Gideon crossed the living room and disappeared into Johanna’s kitchen. She heard muffled voices, followed by the opening and shutting of the outside door. A few seconds later, Gideon re-entered the room and took a seat on the sofa across from her chair.

“I sent the others outside. They’ve done their part,” he said. “They won’t be far, but you won’t have to worry about them hanging around like a pair of guard dogs.”

Gideon helped himself to a slice of rolled turkey. “I think it’s time for us to talk — for you to tell me why the Celestial Chorus has sent an agent to San Francisco.”

“There’s nothing I can tell you,” Johanna said quietly. “I live in this apartment and I work at the shelter — and I go to mass sometimes. I’m not here in any official capacity.”

“You came here for a reason,” Gideon persisted. “I want to know what that reason is — what your agenda in the city is.”

“I have no agenda,” Johanna replied.

“Why San Francisco?” She was elated at the thought of visiting the city on the bay, of seeing the Golden Gate Bridge and wandering through the picturesque neighborhoods.

“I was born there, too many years ago,” the Mother Superior said. “I will always have a certain fondness for the city for that reason alone.” Her keen eyes studied Johanna’s face. She smiled. “But I can see that you aren’t satisfied with the thought of indulging an old woman’s vicarious pleasure.”

Johanna looked stricken for a moment, then relaxed as she saw the crinkles at the corner of her mentor’s thin lips. The Mother Superior allowed herself the ghost of a laugh before she once again grew serious.

“I had a dream — or a vision, if you like. Call it a message from within. Sending you to San Francisco has to do with that dream.”

“But why?” Johanna persisted. “Is there something I need to do there?”

There is always something to do wherever you are, Johanna,” the Mother Superior said. “The opportunities for good works are boundless in a city like San Francisco. I’m sure you’ll have no trouble finding a worthy cause to devote your energies to.”

Johanna stopped herself before she blurted out, “But I meant something important!” Once before, she had made the mistake of devaluing the Chorus’s efforts to care for the material needs of the Sleepers in their midst. Her knees ached for weeks afterward from the time she spent scrubbing floors in the soup kitchen operated by the convent. She kept silent.

“I don’t know what awaits you in San Francisco,” the old nun said. “But whatever it is, it will find you.”

“Are there others I should seek out when I get there?” Johanna asked.

The Mother Superior shook her head.

“There are a few members of the Celestial Chorus in the city,” she said, “and a few other Traditions have a presence there, but I don’t think your destiny lies with any of them. You expressed a desire to test your vocation, to see if the life of a community is what you want. I think you will find a singular path to follow during your stay in San Francisco. I suppose you could think of this as a mandate for a solo performance.” The Mother Superior chuckled dryly.

The opening words of the Latin mass sprung to Johanna’s mind and she spoke them without thinking.

“Introibo ad altare Dei,” she murmured, quoting from the Introit which began the almost-extinct Latin mass.

“I will go to the altar of God,” the Mother Superior repeated, nodding. “Perhaps San Francisco is your altar, the place where you will perform a miracle....”

“Johanna? Are you all right?” There was a note of concern in Gideon’s voice.

“Yes,” Johanna said. “I was just thinking.”

“I would appreciate it if you would share your thoughts with me.” Though couched in courtesy, Johanna could hear the implicit command in Gideon’s words.

“I came here to make myself useful,” she said.

He raised an eyebrow.

“You wanted to know what my agenda was,” she continued. “If you’re looking for a conspiracy of some sort, you won’t find it in me.”

Gideon sighed.

“I was hoping you would give me a place to start based on your intended purpose here. Since you claim not to have one, I’ll just plunge into the heart of the matter.”

“I’m listening,” Johanna said.

“Earlier tonight, in the club, you told me that the Technocracy controls San Francisco. Obviously, I’m already aware of that.” Gideon permitted himself a deprecating smile. “What you may not be aware of, however, is why we consider this place so important, what we’re doing here.” He paused.

“I hadn’t given it much thought,” Johanna replied. She toyed halfheartedly with the food in front of her. Her thoughts were racing. All the old signals were becoming confused. She was, in a manner of speaking, in the hands of the Technocracy. She had been violated, her privacy invaded. She should be feeling afraid, but fear had no part in her current emotional stew. She was still angry — at Gideon, at Clarence, and at herself. But she was also curious.

“You told him you were listening.” Her Avatar, more active tonight than since she had first Awakened, filled her mind. *“Do so.”*

“I assumed this was just another stronghold for you, like so many other places are.”

Gideon looked pained.

“Regardless of what you’ve been taught, we’re not monsters.” He leaned forward, coming as close to her as he could without leaving his seat. “We have a mission in this city — several missions, actually — but our primary purpose here is to keep this place from falling apart, literally. If we fail, thousands of helpless people will die. This is something you Tradition mages can’t seem to understand. The more you try to meddle with reality — particularly in a city like this one, which needs our framework to maintain its solidity — the more you threaten to unleash forces which your weird sciences or mystical unities or entropic balances can’t hope to control. It’s more than luck that keeps San Francisco from being ripped apart by earthquakes. The Technocracy is all that holds this city together.”

Johanna felt an almost physical force powering his words. As he spoke, Johanna observed him carefully, trying to pick up some clues from the subtle movements of his body, the sound of his voice, the expression on his face. She recognized the passion that surrounded him, and saw in him a devotion that was akin to her own. It was a revelation, and the beginning of a purpose made itself known within her.

“We have a vision,” Gideon continued, “and it has nothing to do with some distant Awakening of humanity. We see the achievable creation of a better world — through concrete advances in knowledge. For the first time in history, we stand a chance of meeting the universe on our own terms, not bowing before it and praying for survival. We can’t allow that opportunity to go to waste.”

He paused, momentarily exhausted.

Outside, the rain continued to fall steadily, its lulling rhythm reminding Johanna of the lateness of the hour. She felt suddenly tired.

“What’s going to happen now?” she asked.

“That’s entirely up to you,” Gideon replied. “Tonight we gave you a small demonstration of how easily we can control your experience of reality. You reacted quite predictably to the stimuli we provided.”

Johanna felt her face grow hot.

“I really thought you were in trouble,” she said. “I don’t like being played with just to prove a point.”

“No one does,” Gideon said. “But there are some things you will just have to accept, if you choose to remain here.”

“Do I *have* a choice?” Johanna asked, and this time she could not keep the bitterness from welling up inside her.

“You have many choices.” Gideon stood and walked over to the window, where he parted the curtains and peered outside before once again turning his attention toward Johanna. “You can leave the city and go back to your convent — or to some other city, where you’ll be someone else’s problem. Or you can stay here — and behave yourself.”

“What do you mean?” Johanna raised her head to meet Gideon’s gaze as she spoke, realizing as she did so that by standing and distancing himself from her, he had cast her in the role of supplicant.

“You can remain at the shelter, continue your charitable works there under Clarence’s watchful eye, and stay away from anyone who wants to enlist you in the battle against the ‘evil forces’ that control the city.”

“That’s all?” she said.

Gideon nodded. “For now, that’s all I ask. I wouldn’t consider trying to hide from us,” he added. “I have your pattern now and I can locate you whenever I want. Besides, you might have trouble finding another apartment as nice as this — or any apartment, for that matter. It would be best if you were to remain accessible.”

Johanna shook her head. “I won’t become a traitor to my cause,” she said. “I have a vision, too, and I can’t deny it any more than you can yours. I didn’t come here to fight the Technocracy. I came here to make myself useful, to serve the greater good.”

“Then work with us, Johanna, and you will be serving that good far better than you are at the moment.”

“You told me I could stay or leave,” Johanna said. “What if I stay and don’t cooperate with you? What then?”

Gideon’s face became a mask of hard lines. “Then we will do what is necessary to see that you don’t get in our way.” He left the window and resumed his seat on the sofa. “We

don't have to be enemies, Johanna," he said, more gently. "When I leave here tonight, you can retrieve your focus, your holy symbol — that is what you call it?"

"Yes," Johanna said.

"It will be almost as if none of this had ever happened," he said. "But I do need an answer from you — tonight."

The finality of his words resounded in the silence that followed. Johanna closed her eyes to focus more clearly on the inner vision that was beginning to form in her thoughts. The moment of decision had come, she realized, and there was no one to help her make it.

"No one?" her Avatar whispered. *"Think again. Even alone, you are part of the One."*

So are we all, Johanna thought, even the Technocracy, even Gideon. Her vision clarified. The image of a bridge filled her mind, a vast span linking two alien countries to one another. She was the bridge, a miracle of architecture and faith. She knew that she would not be the first one to try to heal the gap between magic and science, Tradition and Technocracy. Others had tried and, she suspected, failed. There would be some that would see her coming actions as treason, and herself as a betrayer. If so, and if she could be the one to succeed where others had faltered, the sacrifice would be worth it.

"I will go to the altar of God," Johanna murmured, her decision made.

"What was that?" Gideon asked.

"I'll do what you want," she said. Deliberately, she stood up and crossed the room to sit next to Gideon. Only a little space now separated them, a few inches of emptiness that contained both her destiny and his.

Gideon let his arms drop to his side. His fingertips brushed her skirt, closing the gap between them. His face relaxed into a smile.

"Then we have an understanding," he said.

"Yes," she replied. Careful to maintain the tentative physical connection between herself and Gideon, Johanna wrapped her mind around the image of her pendant, coiled inside the cup on the table in the next room. His hands, which had recently become so familiar to her, had touched the chain. Johanna fought to establish a link between the symbol of her power and the agent of her powerlessness. Warmth flooded through her as she felt the circle close. Quickly, before Gideon could respond, Johanna slipped inside his mind. The changes she wanted to make were subtle ones, intended to prepare the way for the vision that had awakened inside her. The beginnings of receptivity were already there, she realized, waiting for the touch which would quicken them, the touch she now provided. As softly as she had entered his thoughts, Johanna withdrew.

"I thought you'd see reason." Gideon said, looking at his watch. "It's late, though, and, unless you want me to stay here, I'll leave you alone for now."

Johanna shook her head. "I need some time to myself," she said quietly.

Gideon rose from his seat and smiled down at Johanna. She studied his face for a moment, searching for signs of her handiwork. Then she returned his smile, satisfied with what she saw.

Johanna walked with him into the kitchen and watched silently as he retrieved her pendant from the table and handed it back to her.

“A gesture of good faith?” she asked, bringing the medallion to her lips before replacing the chain around her neck. She left it hanging outside her blouse.

He shrugged. “I don’t think you can harm me,” he said. He paused at the door. “I’ll look in on you from time to time. I think it’s important that we keep in touch.”

“You know where I live,” Johanna said, “and where I work. The shelter can always use volunteers — especially tomorrow night. Holidays always bring a crowd.”

Gideon hesitated for a moment, as if surprised by her sudden forwardness. Then he smiled, accepting her invitation as a natural outcome of their new understanding.

“Tomorrow night, then,” he said.

Johanna waited until he had gone before she returned to her bedroom. She retrieved her watch from the pile of discarded clothing that still littered the floor. It was past midnight. Tomorrow, she would have to remember to bring the Halloween treats she had bought to the shelter. She looked forward to seeing Clarence, wondering if he would be able to sense a difference about her. Along with Gideon, Clarence was also a part of the purpose she had created for herself. She was not certain if she could walk the perilous path she had chosen without stumbling, but she felt a glimmer of approval from the portion of the One that dwelt within her.

“Is this what you would have me do?” she asked her Avatar. Instead of an answer, she felt within her a raging tumult of sounds warring for prominence, an orchestra of clashing timbres without form or direction. As her soul listened, the fragmented pieces of noise resolved themselves into a glorious cacophony of dissonant harmony, a chorus of light and dark that lacked only a melody to give substance and form to the whole — a soloist’s voice. It was the music of the city she heard, the brittle song of the Technocracy waiting for the infusion of spirit she intended to offer it.

She would remain in San Francisco, in this city of the adversary, where technology threatened to bleed away the magic that struggled to survive here. Gideon thought he had won her cooperation, her agreement not to try to undermine the technomantic power structure that, in his words, held the city together. He was not yet aware of what she had won from him. He would provide the cornerstone for the bridge of her vision.

“Long ago, all magic — including the magic of science — was one,” she heard from deep within herself. *“It can be so again.”*

Outside, the rain had stopped. Johanna walked to the window of her bedroom and peered past her reflection into the rain-streaked darkness beyond. The convent, which had sheltered and guided her magic was behind her now, in a past that would forever remain part of her but would no longer serve as refuge. She was striking out into unknown territory, with only her inner voice to guide her. There was terror in that knowledge, and beauty in the terror.

Chanting softly to herself, Johanna marveled at the mystery her future had become.

THE SEVEN SAGES ⊕ OF THE
BAITBOO ⊕ GROVE



JOHN H. STEELE

*The wild geese fly across the long sky above.
Their image is reflected upon the chilly water below.
The geese do not mean to cast their image on the water;
Nor does the water mean to hold the image of the geese.*

—Anonymous

The present. Wednesday, November 3.

There was a fine mist falling from the gray sky. Unusual for this time of year, thought Lieutenant Robert Angler as he walked up the sloped driveway to the house at 1442 Granite Street. Generally, the sun burned off whatever morning cloud cover there was by this late in the afternoon, but this day had been dark and cool and wet from the start. With the mist, Angler wasn't really aware of constantly being rained on, but he was aware of being damp — his hands, his face, the pages of his note pad.

The houses in this neighborhood were all clean and looked freshly painted; the shrubbery was trimmed, the lawns neatly manicured. A washed and waxed, blue Nissan Sentra sat in the driveway at 1442. After knocking on the door, Angler noticed the doorbell on the frame. *Oh well.* He heard movement, footsteps, from inside. He saw the curtain moving slightly in the window to his right, someone looking to see who was at the front door.

More footsteps. "Who is it?" came the muffled female voice from behind the door.

Angler held up his badge, since neither his jacket and tie nor his Ford LTD identified him as a police officer. "Detective Angler, SFPD."

After only a moment's delay, a dead bolt clicked, and the heavy red door opened just a couple inches. A vertical strip of a face examined the badge, then the door closed. Angler heard the chain being unhooked. He thought briefly about his childhood, when people didn't need to lock themselves in their houses during the day, but he could understand, better than most, perhaps, why people did today.

A small woman opened the door halfway. She had graying hair, glasses, and she was beginning to lose the battle against middle-aged spread. She was probably in her mid-forties. "May I help you?" she asked. She seemed slightly puzzled — no one in this kind of neighborhood expected the police to knock on his or her door — but willing to be helpful.

"Mrs. Loring?" asked Angler.

"Yes?"

"Is Albert home?"

"Why, yes, he is. Is something wrong?"

Angler wondered if she were afraid her son was involved in some sort of mischief — stealing a road sign, underage drinking, smoking pot — or did she automatically assume that there must be some misunderstanding? "I just need to ask him some questions, ma'am. He's not in any kind of trouble." Angler gave her a slight smile.

Mrs. Loring, visibly relieved, let out a deep breath. She opened the door wider. "Please come in. I'll get him for you." She showed Angler to the living room, the room without a TV that probably no one used unless there was company. Mrs. Loring turned on a lamp. "It certainly is chilly out there today."

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And wet.” She wrung her hands.

“Yes, ma’am.”

She stood facing him as Angler looked around the room. She gestured toward one of the nicely upholstered chairs. “Please, have a seat. I’ll get Al for you.”

Angler sat. “Thank you, ma’am.”

Mrs. Loring turned and left the room. Angler could hear her going up the stairs. He glanced around the room again — thick white carpet, brass candlesticks, antique clock on the mantle — tastefully furnished, not ostentatious, but expensive. After a moment, Mrs. Loring returned with her son following her. Angler stood as they entered the room. “Detective...”

“Angler.”

“Angler. I’m sorry.” She held the boy’s shoulders. “This is my son, Al.”

“Thank you.” Angler sat.

Mrs. Loring and her son sat on the couch. Al was a taller, thinner version of his mother. They both had angular faces and chins that stuck out just a bit. His hair was straight and mop-like on top, shaved in ridges around his ears and the back of his head. His eyes were wary.

“Al,” Angler began. “I’m just here to ask you some questions. I was telling your mother before, there’s no need for you to worry or be nervous.”

Al nodded. His mother patted his knee.

Angler thought it was amusing that, despite the bravado most middle-class kids emoted when talking about the police, when confronted with a real live police officer, most kids clammed up. “I need to find out about a friend of yours, Al. Randy Alvinson. When was the last time you saw him?”

Al thought for a minute. His expression was all too familiar to Angler — reluctant to cooperate because he thought he might get his friend in trouble. “A couple weeks ago, maybe.”

“He hasn’t been around much lately,” added Mrs. Loring. “He and Al aren’t that close. He just comes by once in a while to take a shower or get a free meal. I’ve always thought that child was in for trouble.”

“Mom...” Al was clearly annoyed. “He is not.” Al turned to Angler. “Randy’s not in trouble, is he?”

Angler looked down at his hands. *God, I hate this.* He would have liked to have been able to avoid this part of his job more than any other. “Randy’s body was found two days ago.”

Al’s mouth dropped open. Both he and his mother stared in disbelief. There was no sound except the ticking of the clock on the mantle.

“My goodness,” whispered Mrs. Loring.

“What happened?” asked Al, barely able to speak.

“I can’t go into details,” said Angler. “At this point I’m just trying to establish who might have seen Randy last, trace his recent whereabouts, then go from there.” Al and

Mrs. Loring sat silently, stunned by the news. Angler figured it would be a while before they were very talkative on the subject. He could see Al's reluctance to cooperate crumble, but trauma could be just as effective a barrier to gathering information. He had hoped to ask a few more questions before revealing what had happened. "So, it's been roughly two weeks since you saw him?" Al nodded. "Perhaps you can confirm a few things for me, then."

"Okay." Al nodded again. Mrs. Loring was still silent.

"Randy was eighteen. How old are you, Al?"

"Nineteen," said Al.

"Al is just taking a year off before he goes to college," said Mrs. Loring. "Randy had dropped out of high school."

"Okay," said Angler. "Randy's parents told me that he had moved out of their house last year, but they didn't know where he was staying. They said he didn't really keep in touch with them. Do you know where he was staying?"

"Yeah. He was living out of his van, all over the city," said Al.

"Brown Ford van?" asked Angler.

"Yeah."

"And he just stopped by here once in a while for a shower, or food, or something like that?"

"That's right," said Mrs. Loring.

Angler scribbled on his note pad. "Are you positive you didn't see him more recently than two weeks ago, Al?"

Al thought, then shook his head. "I haven't seen him since then."

"Are you sure?" asked his mother.

"Yes. I'm sure." Exasperation with his mother lined his voice.

"Okay," said Angler. "One last question for now. Do you have any idea if Randy was involved with drugs at all? Using, selling?"

Al squirmed a bit on the couch. He looked at his mother and then back at Angler. "I think he might have smoked pot once in a while, but I think that's all. He wasn't a dealer or anything."

Angler nodded and scribbled. He didn't think he would get much else out of these people, so he gave them his card and asked them to call him if they remembered anything that might be of help. Mrs. Loring showed him to the door. As she painstakingly straightened and flattened her skirt, she was full of platitudes on the evils of drug use. She didn't mention anything specifically about her son, but Angler imagined that Al would, at the very least, get asked some pointed questions about marijuana, and probably would get a lecture to boot. As Angler ventured back out into the mist, Mrs. Loring retreated into her safe world and closed the door.



*He who has the least scrap of sense,
once he has got started on the great highway
has nothing to fear so long as he avoids turnings.
For great highways are safe and easy.
But men love by-paths.*

—Lao Tzu

Eight days ago. Tuesday, October 26.

Randy ran his hand through his spiked, blond hair. “You want me to *what?*” He had taken off his flannel shirt. His T-shirt was enough with the warm afternoon sun in this quiet grove in the Japanese Tea Garden where he and Tun Tzu had spent most of the day. Strangely enough, even though the gardens were fairly thick with tourists, no one had strolled into this particular area all day.

Tun Tzu sat on a large rock at the edge of the frog pond. The old man’s dingy white robe and dark blue vest seemed just as natural as Randy’s jeans and combat boots in this serene setting. Tun Tzu stroked his short, white goatee. His hair, hanging down his back from his balding head, almost glistened in the sunlight. “I want you to touch the mind of that flower at your feet.”

Randy stood with his hands on his hips. At first, he had thought Tun Tzu was crazy. Then he had come to see some of the benefits of humoring the man — expanding mental faculties, extensive memory training, insights into his own thought processes. It was more interesting than Scientology, at least. Now, once again, as several times over the past week, he knew the old geezer was crazy. “You gotta be kidding me.” He stared at Tun Tzu, who did not respond. “You want me to touch the flower’s mind. You may not be up on your botany, but flowers don’t have brains. They just have leaves and petals and pistons and stamens and chlorophyll and crap. You know, they just sit there and photosynthesize, make oxygen and stuff.” Tun Tzu was intently watching one of the small fish in the pond. He gave no indication of having heard Randy. “You’re crazy, man.”

Without looking up from the pond, Tun Tzu said, “Is there no difference between a mind and a brain? You should know this by now.”

“It’s a plant, man,” said Randy. “Why do you want me to do stupid stuff like this? You said I was going to be powerful. So far I’ve only memorized crap.”

The speckled yellow fish swam lazily toward Tun Tzu. “Did I speak of power, or were those your own thoughts?”

“This is stupid.”

“If you cannot understand the simple, how can you understand the complex?” asked Tun Tzu.

“Aw, screw you, man,” Randy said as he turned away in disgust and frustration.

Tun Tzu looked up, finally, but not at Randy. “If you wish to learn no more, then leave me. I will force nothing upon you. You will go no further. The path is too difficult and the danger to my home too great to waste time upon you.” He returned his attention to the pond.

A slight breeze rippled the water and rustled the leaves of the trees. The large orange flower at Randy's feet swayed gently. He looked at it with disgust. *I could leave*, he thought, *but what else do I have to do? What the hell.* He had already sharpened his mind incredibly under Tun Tzu's tutelage. He had learned worlds more in the past week than he had in the speed-reading and memory strategy classes his mother had made him take when he was still in school. "Do you want me to figure out what kind of flower it is or something?"

"I do not care for the names that men may give it," Tun Tzu said quietly. "Look into it. Touch its mind."

Randy shook his head. *This is crazy.*

He sat down next to the flower and attempted to clear his mind, to be free from his annoyance at Tun Tzu, his irritation and impatience. He stared at the flower and memorized its features until he could see it with his eyes closed — the large, curved leaves; the bright orange petals forming a tube, then opening; the faint tinges of red and yellow around the edges of the petals. *Nothing. Just a flower.* Randy thought of how he had learned to look inward, to examine the intricacies of his own mind. He looked inward now at his own energies, at the patterns of his own thoughts, ever shifting, yet structured in their flow. He tried to attune what he knew of his own mind to his perception of the flower, to experience its patterns from within rather than just looking at its surface.

On that bright, sunny day in the garden, Randy almost missed the faint glimmer of that for which he was searching. While the sun moved westward across the sky, Randy was absorbed by his study, lost within himself, within his comparisons, within his examination of the inherent structure of the flower. It was true that the plant had no brain, and little mind, one could argue, compared to a human; but even with its lack of self-awareness, there was still a primitive consciousness, a realized — if not articulated — experience of life which Randy stumbled upon. It was a small speck of light upon a huge, dark canvas of being, the proverbial needle. Once Randy found the speck, he focused all his energies on it. Through the mind of the flower, as it were, he could feel the warmth of the sun, and the cool moisture of the soil below him. In some strange way that he had never experienced before, he *was* the flower. He was touching its mind, discovering it rather than only seeing that which he expected to see. He could not have accomplished this without the meditative techniques and mental probing that Tun Tzu had taught him, the repetitious exercises and ritualistic activities which had seemed so tedious and pointless before. His concentration broke and the empathetic experience faded away as Randy realized that he had succeeded.

"I did it!" Randy exclaimed, jumping to his feet, his exhaustion and cramped muscles forgotten as adrenaline coursed through his body. "I did it! I touched its friggin' mind! It does have a mind, sort of."

From his perch on the rock, Tun Tzu nodded.

"I could feel it," Randy explained. "I could feel... everything. Everything it felt!" Randy jumped about in his excitement.

"What does this mean, butterfly?" Tun Tzu asked quietly.

Randy's jubilation, his euphoria, abruptly collapsed. "What?"

"What does this mean?" Tun Tzu repeated. "Is there some other significance, or do you merely wish to arrange flowers the rest of your days?"

Randy stood still, momentarily speechless, so quickly had his victory evaporated. The flower stared up at him, mocking him. He blinked at the brightness of the sun. This old bastard wasn't going to get the best of him. He thought about what he had done. "I had to look in." He re-created the experience in his mind. "I couldn't just look at it, or into it. It's not like x-ray vision or something." He felt an idea forming in his mind, coming into focus. "I had to look in myself, to my mind, and relate to its, to identify with its. Does that make sense?"

"You tell me when it makes sense," said Tun Tzu. "And then you may look into that bush, and that tree, and then this fish. There are many steps taken and many more to take yet. And always remember," Tun Tzu's usually mild voice took on a sharper edge, "concentration is that which must be maintained in success as well as in failure. You succeed, and your success crumbles before you. This can cause great harm. Here." From the folds of his robe, Tun Tzu tossed a small object toward Randy, who caught it. It was a smooth, gray stone. "This will help you. Use it to anchor your thoughts, to center your mind." Tun Tzu turned back to the pond.

Randy sat studying the stone, caressing it. What wonders did it hold? Was this where he got past mind games and parlor tricks? Was the old man finally going to teach him something worthwhile? He tried to let the agitation wash out of his mind. He focused on the stone and once again began to study the flower.



In the deep bamboo forest I sit alone.

Loudly I sing and tune my lute.

The forest is so thick that no one knows about it.

Only the bright moon comes to shine upon me.

—Wang Wei

Before.

The *laira* wood burned slowly under the cauldron. The thin, dark liquid inside steamed and began to boil. Around the cauldron, in the clearing with two rickety, bamboo lean-tos, sat three men, wrinkled and white-haired. Occasionally Tun Tzu rose to his knees and stirred the bubbling concoction with a four-foot branch. Li P'o sat cross-legged and stared into the fire. The flames licked the blackened pot and danced joyous jigs in the approaching dusk. Ch'eng Hao sat, also cross-legged, and slept. Every few minutes, he would lean dangerously to one side before flinching violently, righting himself, and then dozing once again.

Li P'o glanced over expectantly as Tun Tzu dipped a wooden spoon into the cauldron. He blew on the liquid several times and then finally, as Li P'o leaned forward with raised eyebrows to see, tasted the brew. Tun Tzu swished the liquid around in his mouth and then swallowed. He pursed his lips, then licked them. A smile crept across his face. Li P'o broke into a grin and then a fit of hiccuppy laughter. He stood and slapped Ch'eng Hao on the back. "Wake up, you old fool," said Li P'o.

Ch'eng Hao was startled to life. He almost fell forward into the fire. Li P'o laughed even harder as he walked toward the edge of the grove. He raised his cupped hands

to his mouth. "Wang Wei! Yang Kwang! The wine is ready!" He walked back to Tun Tzu by the cauldron. "Now we will see how quickly old men can run." The setting sun reflected in Li P'o's eyes.

"There will be drink for a while," said Tun Tzu. "They needn't hurry."

"There will be drink for always," called Ch'eng Hao as he rubbed his eyes, "or else there would be no purpose in living."

The three men moved closer to the pot, as close as they could without setting their long robes on fire. Li P'o kicked dirt at some of the scattered coals with his bare feet. The quietness of the evening was shattered by the distressing squeal of a young pig. There was a rustling in the underbrush at the southern end of the grove, and then the pig broke through. It was running full-tilt at the three sages and was almost upon them before it managed to change directions, nearly bowling over Tun Tzu. Several steps behind the pig, Meng Hao-jan stumbled into the grove. His foot caught on a stalk of bamboo, and he went sprawling to the ground, landing near the fire. The pig was through the clearing and into the underbrush before any of the old men could react. As the resulting cloud of dust cleared, Meng Hao-jan stood and brushed himself off. Tun Tzu offered a ladle full of wine to his fallen comrade.

"Here comes Meng Hao-jan for his wine now," laughed Li P'o. "Running more quickly than his feet can carry him."

"I will drink," said Meng Hao-jan angrily, "after I have dined, and I shall greatly cherish both the wine and that pig's misfortune."

"Surely you should quench your thirst before continuing such a hazardous undertaking," said Li P'o.

"My thirst can wait until my vengeance is quenched," answered Meng Hao-jan as he pulled thistles from his robe and began to stalk the pig.

Ch'eng Hao sat and shook his head slowly from side to side. "What a sad day," he said, "when a sage of the bamboo grove would rather chase swine than drink *muliana* wine."

"Why not leave the creature be?" agreed Tun Tzu. "The villagers bring us what food we need. Why trouble yourself?"

Meng Hao-jan stopped and turned to the other three men. "There is a distinct chain in the forest of that which eats and that which is eaten. I plan to take full advantage of having achieved one of the top links on that chain. So eat your grain and rice and berries, if you will. I, for one, will roast pig this night." And with that, he was gone.

Ch'eng Hao stood and picked up a wooden cup to fill with wine. "Perhaps a ham bone to chew on would do my old gums good," he reflected. "But I see no reason to not take my wine with me." He shuffled out of the grove in the general direction Meng Hao-jan had gone, a full cup in his hand.

Tun Tzu and Li P'o shook their heads, clicked their cups together, and drank deeply.



*Near the middle of the day, when clouds are thin
and the breeze is light,
I stroll along the river, passing the willows
and the blooming trees.
People of the day do not understand my joy;
They will say that I am loafing like an idle young man.*
—Ch'eng Hao

Seventeen days ago. Sunday, October 17.

The van was dead. There were no two ways about it. No turnover, no click, no nothing. Randy sat in his van on the edge of JFK Drive in Golden Gate Park. His hands and face, and now his steering wheel, were smeared with grease from puttering around in the engine. He knew a fair bit about cars, but this problem had eluded him for several hours now. He had no idea what was wrong, much less how to fix it.

The park had been a great place to hang out since Randy had moved out from his folks' place. When he wasn't working one of the seven part-time jobs he had gone through in the past year, or parked at a friend's house, this was where he usually spent his time. There were always interesting (to put it mildly) people to watch, and often babes to pick up — he could usually get some girl who may or may not have been eighteen into the back of the van with the promise of a bowl or two. But although the park was a great place to hang out, it was not a great place to be stranded, and as the sun sank closer to the horizon, Randy did not relish the idea of spending the night there in his van. There were many safer locales in the city.

"I can help you," said the old man who was suddenly next to the van.

Randy jumped a bit. He was usually pretty observant and somewhat wary of weirdoes in the park, but he had not seen anyone approaching. "No thanks, gramps. I've got it under control." Randy didn't like the way the old man, who had tan, leathery skin and was wearing long Jesus robes, smiled — like he knew what was going on; like he knew Randy couldn't really go anywhere. Except for the bald top of the man's head, he had long, white hair that hung down his back and a short goatee. "Aren't you supposed to shave your head or something?" said Randy. "You know, give peace a chance."

The man's dark brown eyes bore into Randy's as if they were x-rays, as if the old codger could see right into him. Randy wanted to look away but could not force himself to do so.

"You want to go somewhere," said the man. "I can help."

Randy's stomach churned. The way the man peered into him, the way Randy felt defenseless, exposed — this guy was not talking about the van. Randy felt again that he was being effortlessly pried open, that the old man was looking into his soul. The idea and the feeling scared Randy, angered him. "No thanks. Piss off, man."

The old man smiled and remained calm. "You strike out at that which you do not understand, and that is much," he said. "There are many worlds to learn of rather than to fight off."

“Look. I just want to start my van and get out of here.” Randy gripped the steering wheel tightly. “I don’t want any trouble, and I don’t want to hurt you, so take off.”

The old man still smiled. “I can start your vehicle.” With these words, Randy felt his anxiety wash away as if obliterated by the force of a torrential river. He could not explain his own calmness; his sudden deep-felt belief that this man was not armed and meant him no harm. Before he realized what had happened, Randy had slid over to the passenger’s seat, and the old man was seated behind the wheel. “I can start your vehicle, and then we can talk,” said the old man. “And then you can go somewhere.”

Randy nodded. Words escaped him. He felt as if he were merely a spectator to his own life, viewing his emotions from a distance. He marveled at the sense of inner peace overwhelming him. He felt vaguely that he should be afraid, that some great new undertaking was beginning, but mostly he was drawn by the sense of possibility and adventure, the sense that this man might show him potential within himself which he might never otherwise fulfill.

The old man turned the key and the van roared to life, probably more smoothly than it had when it was new. Randy, from his emotional distance, knew that he should be amazed, but it all seemed normal. They pulled away from the curb and headed out of the park and into the city.



What is of all things most yielding

Can overwhelm that which is of all things most hard.

Being substanceless it can enter even when there is no space.

—Lao Tzu

Nineteen days ago. Friday, October 15.

The fog hung low, as if it did not want to let go of the wet, early-morning grass in Golden Gate Park. The sun had not yet ascended above the hills to the east. The trees and bushes and sidewalks remained in shadow. There was no one present to hear the electric snap in the air; no one to smell the faintly sulfurous odor of the smoke; no one to see the old man materialize out of nothing several feet above the ground.

Tun Tzu landed hard on his chest and face. He lay still, facedown in the grass, barely breathing. His mind was swimming. First the human chaos — shouts, screams, blood on his face — breaking in on the link that he and the others had established with the presence to the north — the Zorn. Then the even more disconcerting flashes of pain, or was it ecstasy? The feeling of being completely disconnected, of floating, of being elsewhere but nowhere overwhelming the senses; structureless, devoid of thought and meaning, as if reality of any type no longer existed. It went on and on but did not occupy time, for that concept, as well, had no meaning there (if it were a place, an actual location). And then the searing pain, this time only pain. He did not even notice the physical jolt, the fall, although his body was exhausted, battered.

Tun Tzu lay still, facedown in the grass, barely breathing.

Temporal order was returning. Spatial and rational order was returning. That had been the worst part — the absolutely complete structurelessness of his mind. His body would adjust, would recover.

While he lay there, the sun crept above the peaks to the east. The morning fog began slowly to dissipate. Finally, with a Herculean effort, Tun Tzu raised himself with his arms and rolled over onto his back. His old body cried out against him. Muscles that felt as if they had not been used in years spasmed. Joints grated and only reluctantly allowed movement.

Eventually Tun Tzu was able to sit up. He picked the grass from his short beard, brushed the moist earth from his face and robe. He was surprised to find that there was no blood on him, even though he had felt it. He had consciously noted the sensation of it splattering on him. Some vestiges of his old world had not made the journey, apparently. The journey to where? *Where was he?* The land far to the north of the grove had been strange and different, but this place was not Tun Tzu's world, not the reality which he had known.

Several people had passed by over the course of the last few hours. Tun Tzu noted that those now within sight made concerted efforts not to notice him. He sensed apprehension in some, guarded hostility in others, even concern on occasion, but always coupled with fear.

He made the effort to stand. He didn't seem to be in any danger. The sun was high in the sky now. The trees here were different in form from the bamboo and *laira* which he knew, but their inner structures were much the same. The people, too, who jogged past were similar in mind, if not in appearance. They were taller, and wore strange clothes — short, shimmering leggings, oddly padded shoes, finely woven shirts, mechanical devices of some sort in their ears.

There was certainly much to learn in this new world, but Tun Tzu remembered, relatively little time in which to learn it.



You ask me why should I stay in this blue mountain.

I smile but do not answer: O, my mind is at ease!

Peach blossoms and flowing streams pass away without trace.

How different from the mundane world!

—Li P'o

Elsewhen.

"Why do you call us together?" asked Yang Kwang. "I do not doubt that you have good reason, but I am curious."

"I would think a man of your years would have learned patience, my friend," Tun Tzu gently chastised him.

"A man of my years may not have time for patience," answered Yang Kwang. He and Li P'o chuckled.

Tun Tzu glanced around the grove. Li P'o, Yang Kwang, Meng Hao-jan, and he were present. "Li Chuan is fetching Wang Wei. Where is Ch'eng Hao?"

"He is communing in the hut," said Yang Kwang.

"He is sleeping," Meng Hao-jan corrected him, as he stomped toward one of the huts. "He has been sampling the wine again this morning."

"So what is so important to rouse an old man from his sleep, and to bring Wang Wei from his luting in the forest?" asked Yang Kwang.

"If only matters of importance brought Ch'eng Hao from sleep," said Tun Tzu, "he would rise only for new kettles of wine and would starve."

"But he would be happy," said Li P'o.

"When all are here, I will explain," said Tun Tzu.

At that very moment, Li Chuan and Wang Wei came striding into the clearing. Wang Wei beamed like the morning sun and plucked notes on his lute.

There was a commotion from the hut as Meng Hao-jan half-helped, half-dragged Ch'eng Hao to the others. "My own feet can carry me!" cried Ch'eng Hao testily. Meng Hao-jan released him, and the less-stable man fell to the dusty ground. "When they choose to do so," he added. Meng Hao-jan helped him up, and then the seven sages of the bamboo grove were together.

"Let us sit so that Tun Tzu may explain," said Li P'o.

"A fair suggestion," said Ch'eng Hao. "Shall we pass around wine to ease our minds and bodies?"

"Your mind is completely at ease, unless it is forced to think," snapped Meng Hao-jan.

"Please." Tun Tzu raised his hand. The men sat in a circle around the cauldron and quieted. He drew a deep breath, and a powerful calmness descended upon the grove. "There are strange happenings in the land," he began. "We all know of the strangers, the new teachers in the villages. Li P'o and I, and Meng Hao-jan, and Li Chuan have spoken of this." The other men nodded. "They teach disdain for the old ways, against reverence for the sages. They bring their wily science, and this is their right. The people may believe what they will. It is sad that they lose sight of the life of the land, of the rocks and the water, of the trees, but what befalls us will befall us."

"Already the villagers bring less food," Meng Hao-jan broke in. "They seek us out for help and advice less often. Soon we will be only memories."

"Then memories we shall be," said Yang Kwang, "if that is what is meant to be. We are not here to serve the villagers, or for the villagers to serve us. We are here because it is right that we be here."

"It is of concern to me," said Li Chuan, "that the people of the villages are not only less-pleasant. Many are openly hostile. I have been hit with rocks thrown by children, and taunted by their parents. I fear that it is more than our beliefs which the teachers with their pernicious contrivances preach against."

The sages muttered agreement. Many of them felt distinctly separated from the villages which had originally produced them, cast out and held in contempt, sometimes even hatred.

Tun Tzu spoke again. "There is that which is good, and there is that which is bad, but they are both natural. Then there is that which is unnatural."

"Which is also natural," said Yang Kwang.

"Perhaps," said Tun Tzu, "but I feel that at some point, though it may be against our nature, we must intervene." There was a concerned silence in the circle.

"Please continue," said Li P'o.

"I have sensed a presence far to the north," said Tun Tzu. "A man, yes, but one so attuned to the creation that he shines upon the dreamscape more brightly than the sun in the sky. His purity, I think, he is unaware of. It is not sought after."

"And thus only is it found," inserted Yang Kwang.

"Yes," agreed Tun Tzu. "But I perceive that he approaches a cusp, that he will engage in that which will determine the course not only of his existence, but also of this... this blight which looms over us. He battles stagnation, unknowingly perhaps, but it is the same stagnation which we now see threatening our lands, threatening this very grove. It may be that if we are able to aid him, he may be of help to us, or that the stagnation will be reversed if defeated in even one part of this world."

"But are not famine and drought and blight and death a part of the order?" asked Wang Wei. "Is not this stagnation but a part of the natural order?"

Meng Hao-jan could listen calmly no longer. "What good are wisdom and knowledge if they are kept closed in a box?"

"Perhaps it is wise to stay closed in a box," suggested Yang Kwang.

"Perhaps it would be wise," said Meng Hao-jan, "to keep *you* closed in a box, you starry-eyed dung beetle, and Ch'eng Hao with you."

"Some boxes are nice," said Ch'eng Hao with a smile.

"Tun Tzu, what do you suggest?" asked Li P'o.

The other argument died down. "I suggest," said Tun Tzu, "that we aid this man to the north, this pure child, as we may. The cusp approaches, and perhaps we shall ourselves create counterforces through our own actions, but I think we must help him. Although stagnation is of the Nameless, as Wang Wei suggests, it now seeks to overwhelm all else, to destroy the balance of which we partake."

The sages around the cauldron were silent, each occupied with one's own thoughts. Words spoken would have been redundant. Wang Wei strummed lightly on his lute. Smooth, soothing notes trickled into the air. To enter into this conflict was to cast aside *wu wei*, actionless action, that which achieved without striving, without setting in motion the counterbalancing forces which were created by any purposeful action.

Meng Hao-jan spoke first. "I will help you, Tun Tzu."

Tun Tzu nodded acknowledgment.

"As will I," said Li P'o.

"And I," echoed Ch'eng Hao and Li Chuan.

There was silence for a moment, except for Wang Wei's music. He set his lute on the ground beside him. "I will help."

Several of the six concurring sages looked at Yang Kwang. The others stared at the ground in front of them. He began to nod his head slowly. "I know not of wisdom," he said. "But I do know of loyalty." He nodded toward Tun Tzu. "If this thing is to be done, for good or for ill, let it be done well."

"Then let it begin," said Li P'o.

The seven sages of the bamboo grove joined hands, and the ancient ritual was under way.



*In Spring when all the flowers are in bloom,
The evening river appears smooth and motionless.
Suddenly the tidewater comes
with the reflection of glittering stars;
The ebbing waves carry away the image of the moon.*
—Yang Kwang

Three days ago. Sunday, October 31.

Randy and Tun Tzu stood under the full moon. The unusually thick fog and the park spread out all around them. Randy could feel his skin tingling, but he didn't know why. Tun Tzu had been quiet all day, answering briefly, and only when Randy had asked him a direct question.

The two had stayed in a cheap motel, The Starlight Lounge and Motor Lodge, the past week. Tun Tzu didn't seem to have trouble coming up with money. It was as if he just reached into a pocket in his robe and the cash materialized. Randy had enjoyed being able to get a hot shower on a regular basis. Tun Tzu had been fascinated by the Magic Fingers box attached to the bed — how many quarters had he stuffed in that thing? — and the cable TV. The little time that they had not spent training, Tun Tzu had been glued to the Weather Channel, and ESPN, and QVC. He had also acquired quite a taste for McDonald's, so Randy had made many late-night trips for fries and Big Macs. *You would think the guy had never had a hamburger before. Everybody in the world has to know who Ronald McDonald is by now,* thought Randy.

“What do I learn tonight?” Randy asked. He had begun, after his flower and tree and fish experiences, to probe the minds of humans, to pick up feelings, and sometimes even fragments of distinct thoughts, but Tun Tzu's mind remained completely closed to him. *The old man may be crazy, but he knows his stuff.*

Tun Tzu did not turn to face Randy. Instead, he looked off into the night. “Tonight my teaching ends, and your real learning begins, butterfly.”

“Sounds good to me.” Randy was ready for more power, more knowledge. “Why so glum, then? Sounds like your hard work is over.”

For a moment Tun Tzu did not respond. When he did, his voice was quiet and full of sadness. “There is so little time,” he said, half to himself. “So little time.” He turned toward Randy. “This is not a game we play. If you do not realize this, then I have failed you. I may have failed you already by pushing you too quickly. If you succeed tonight, there are more-treacherous times ahead. Do you understand?”

Randy nodded. Tun Tzu was often serious and intense, but Randy had never, in the two weeks they had constantly been together, seen him this mournful, this full of doubt. Randy held tightly the gray stone through which he focused his concentration, the object that had changed Tun Tzu's lessons from impressive mind games into much deeper spiritual experiences. What type of power was held in that small rock? “I know, and I'm ready for whatever happens.”

“I hope this is true.” Tun Tzu pressed his hands together in front of him and lowered his head. “Then let us begin.”

With Tun Tzu's words, everything began to darken around Randy. The world, except for the bright moon, slowly faded to black. There was no sky, no grass, no ground, no park, no Tun Tzu; only the moon and the darkness. Randy felt a great pressure upon his shoulders, forcing him to his knees. His body trembled uncontrollably until it, too, was gone, and there was only the moon.

Randy tried to call out, but he couldn't. He couldn't conceive the words; his tongue could not form them. *I am here*, he heard Tun Tzu, but not his voice, say. *But you must look inward. You must search alone.* And then the comforting non-voice was gone.

The moon was growing larger. Was it coming closer? It was blindingly bright. There were no blemishes, no craters or formations marring its surface. There was only a magnificent sphere of light. As Randy gazed inward, he and the light became one. Comfort and warmth permeated his being.

At his core, the warmth remained constant, while the fringes cooled and became brittle. He could see himself, his short life being winnowed away, peeled back and apart bit by bit. The early years — mother, father, carefree, indulgences upon indulgences. But the joy and the wonder had shriveled. The light around him now, that which shone forth from him, was still bright and warm, making what he saw that much darker by contrast. The parents who had given so much and asked so much became the ogres of his life. He could not find what he needed through them, and they could not see that. They held him tightly, but not how he needed them to hold him. They tried to reach out to him in his desperation, but they pushed him away instead. He forced them to push him away; he would not respond to their embraces. They and he had all been so wrong. There was no blame, only guilt. The brightness began to burn him. He felt so dark, and the light was intense, pure.

Randy clutched the stone. It centered him; it anchored him. He could feel the gray smoothness in his hand. The power. It was his shield. With it, he knew he could hold anything at bay.

The stone is but a stone, he heard Tun Tzu's non-voice say.

Randy's certainty wavered. It was his center. It was his focus.

A stone from the frog pond, said Tun Tzu. *Nothing more. It is what it is, as you are what you are.*

Randy felt the walls of his inner being shaking violently, rattling apart. Why must that upon which he seized always be unstable? *Only a stone!* The light swept him along.

He was always searching — for purpose, for direction, for meaning. He had always demanded, yet cast aside, help; needed others, yet been unable to admit weakness. Others could not understand; he could not permit them to understand, and he could see now, through this clarifying illumination, that this had crippled him, had held him back and forced others away. Even now, the light, in all its glory, was not enough. Somehow, he could not fully embrace it. With it, he could transcend his failings, but because of his failings, he could not claim it. It was not a conscious decision to be made now; it had been decided by every instant of his life.

The light was altering itself. The sphere was swelling, contracting, changing. It became thinner, longer. It began to take on a human shape, and Randy (even the name seemed distant now, had little connection to his identity) knew before the features formed that this avatar was him. He looked upon his figure of light, and tried to reach

out to it. His fingers touched, but the heat was unbearable, the intensity of a star on his fingers. In that moment, he felt all the failures (of intent, not of deed) and missed opportunities of his life rushing in upon him, from his fingers up his arm to his heart, and he could not shake them loose. He knew pain, infinite pain, and fear. The limbs of the figure began to twist and to become gnarled, and he was the disfigured. His psyche burned with all the torment and torture of a lifetime concentrated into an instant. Had he maintained a scrap of his previous humanity, he would have screamed, but he was far removed from such trivialities. The figure writhed and twisted until, finally, it was quenched, burned out, consumed like a wooden match. The light faded, and once again the moon was an orb in the night sky.

Tun Tzu stood under the full moon. The unusually thick fog and the park spread out all around him. At his feet lay a mangled, burnt body, a small gray stone clutched in its charred hand.

Head bent and eyes cloudy, Tun Tzu walked away.



*In Spring I was soundly asleep;
Hardly did I notice the break of day.
Everywhere I heard the birds singing.
Last night there was the noise of storm and rain;
I wonder how many blossoms have blown away.*

—Meng Hao-jan

Then.

The six sages had lent their power to Tun Tzu. He was their guide through the Umbra, and their psychic energies his locomotion. When the archaic words were spoken, and the connection achieved, Tun Tzu turned his attention north. The sages did not maintain any semblance of their physical bodies on this journey, only an astral mass with a great silver cord of seven strands that connected them to their starting point. There were not miles to be traveled, per se, but the distance was nonetheless great. The farther they went, the more energy was needed from the sages. They placed their lives and their Quintessence in Tun Tzu's care.

They sped through the Umbra, aware at times of other shimmering minds around them, but they were intent only upon their objective. Very soon, as their perception of distance fell behind, marked only by the great silver cord, the light of which Tun Tzu had spoken, the pure one, came into view. It was intense and piercing. It was a mind, but much more than a mind. *Tzu-jan*, Tun Tzu communicated to the others. The creative property of the Tao, of the One. The mind partook of *tzu-jan*. It was attuned to the Unnamable.

There was, however, a barrier of some sort around the light, against which the light pulsed and struggled. Tun Tzu could see clearly that the light, if it were to unleash its full fury, if it realized even a portion of its potential, could break free easily. But it was restrained somehow. There was a great power in the concentrated effort of the sages, but even so, as they approached the barrier, Tun Tzu felt resistance, and it was powerful also. The barrier was of the landscape itself, projected by some oppressive force, what-

ever power held sway here in the northern lands, which were incredibly static, much more unyielding than the area of the bamboo grove. This was what the new teachers in the villages were doing, Tun Tzu realized. Their teachings, their discounting of the mystic and the esoteric, were making reality more brittle in the south as well, less yielding. Unchecked, life at the grove could eventually become as stagnant and uncreative as these lands to the north.

To break through the barrier and help the light realize its potential, or at least to allow it to break free on its own so that the pure one might help the sages counter the metaphysical rigidity which threatened them — that was what was necessary.

The sages pressed against the barrier. Their own motion slowed almost to a stop. The light pulsed more brightly, but was still restrained by its lack of self-knowledge. This was the cusp which Tun Tzu had foreseen. The light must either become free or be lost forever.

The barrier was not an active presence, or if it was, its encroachment upon reality, its usurpation of what was natural, was so gradual that it could only be perceived over a much-broader period of time, like glaciers creeping over a continent — not necessarily visible motion, but cataclysmic nonetheless.

It was soon apparent to the sages that they could not hope to destroy the barrier. It was barely budged by the extent of their psychic energy, and they could not maintain this journey indefinitely, even pooling their powers. They penetrated the barrier, but could not displace it. They could, however, by entering the barrier's sphere, contact the light, the pure inner mind.

Tun Tzu, as well as the others, was struck forcefully by a psychic shockwave as his astral form came into contact with the light. The connection was like holding a paradox in one's hand — such bridled power; the essence of *tzu-jan* unrealized; nearly limitless potential, but bound in this oppressive, static realm. The *tzu-jan*, the power of the creative essence, was dizzyingly palpable. The sages grasped the light, pulling it back toward the boundary of the barrier. *Let it taste the freedom, let it feel dynamic reality, and that may be enough!* The light was paradox through and through. It welcomed the sages' help, but it held itself back as well, as if it were sure of its own limitations, even though with that kind of power the limitations were of its own making; imposed by others, perhaps, but enforced by itself.

The sages were making progress in this astral tug-of-war. Soon the light would be close enough to the boundary that it could break free, if it would. Tun Tzu was able to form one word out of his contact with the light: *Zorn*. A title? A name? A command? He didn't know. *Zorn*, the light, the pure one.

Suddenly, however, the great silver cord was jerked violently, and there were only six strands. Ch'eng Hao was no longer present. There was another violent tug, and Li Chuan was gone. The combined consciousness of the other five sages was hurtling back toward the grove, somehow maintaining the connection with the light, the *Zorn*, which was so close to freedom. If it could only add its own power! Tun Tzu felt stretched beyond his limit. As he concentrated on the *Zorn* still, Meng Hao-jan's and Wang Wei's strands unraveled from the great silver cord, now only three strands thick. But these last two astral essences to be removed were not torn asunder as the first two had been. Tun Tzu's astral being fell back toward his body, only maintaining the connection with the *Zorn* through the continued aid of Li P'o and Yang Kwang. It was so close to escaping the barrier!

Then Tun Tzu could see the grove. He was not back to his body completely, but he was close enough to perceive what was happening. *Unthinkable!* The villagers, incited and led by strangers, by the insidious teachers, and fueled by newfound hatred and fear, were attacking the grove! None of the sages had realized the degree of animosity that the strangers had kindled. The once-benign villagers wielded clubs and spears and axes, crude but effective weapons against the defenseless sages. How had the villagers known that this was a good time to attack?

The sages' physical circle was broken. Li Chuan lay on his side, his head smashed in by a club. Ch'eng Hao, pierced through by a spear, sat and stared ahead blankly, blood flowing from both the wound and his mouth. Wang Wei and Meng Hao-jan had apparently reacted more quickly than Tun Tzu. They had returned to their bodies and now defended the sages. Wang Wei played his lute, harsh chords that called down wind and lightning from the sky against the villagers. By the cauldron, Meng Hao-jan stirred the wine, which took animated form, spirits that rent the attackers limb from limb. They had pushed back the attack, but for how long? The two sages were hard-pressed and were slowly losing ground.

Tun Tzu wanted to help them, but that would mean abandoning the increasingly tenuous connection with the Zorn, which would undoubtedly be sucked back into the static barrier. Should he help save his friends and abandon the task which had already claimed two of their lives, or finish that which might save his land from eventual magical emasculation?

We are with you. It was Li P'o. Finish that which has been started, but quickly. Yang Kwang and I will aid you as we can.

Tun Tzu could feel the strain even in Li P'o's calm thoughts. The three of them could not maintain the connection much longer.

As the three sages turned back to the Zorn, the great silver cord was jolted once again, and Li P'o was present no longer. Tun Tzu imagined that he could feel the blood splattered onto his physical form as Li P'o slumped to the ground. Tun Tzu and Yang Kwang raced to the Zorn. It was on the edge, practically free but unable or unwilling to make the last push. They tried to help it with every ounce of excess astral force they could summon, and then Yang Kwang was gone.

The strain was beyond enduring. Tun Tzu, alone and so far beyond that of which he should be capable, added his personal, finite Quintessence into the effort, choosing to siphon off his continued existence rather than abandon the Zorn. Inches more, if distance could be measured in this plane, and the Zorn could break free. Tun Tzu felt his energy draining away as the connection became weaker and weaker. He approached the point of no return, the moment when he could not reclaim himself from these actions, and passed beyond it. Everything was fading now, his personal energies in this plane exhausted. There was only numbness. *This was not supposed to happen.* His friends lay dead and battered, and Tun Tzu himself was spent, rapidly burning out of this reality. He dimly saw the Zorn break free of the barrier, and then slip back inside it. *But why?* Did it not realize it could be free? Did it not desire to be untethered? It mattered little anymore as everything faded beyond his view.



*In Tao the only motion is returning.
The only useful quality, weakness.
For though all creatures under heaven are the product of Being,
Being itself is the product of Not-being.*

—Lao Tzu

The present. Wednesday, November 3.

Tun Tzu had seen the man go into the Bayside First Mutual Bank on Steuart Street that morning, and now that the sun was dropping in the evening sky, he watched the man leave the building, walk to the Transbay station, and crawl into the belly of one of those mechanical beasts. *What odd forms of transportation — trains and vans.* And then he thought of Randy, of course. There had been so much death and so much failure already, but he could not give up.

This static world must be much like the northern lands under the static barrier that Tun Tzu and the others had seen. It made sense that an agent from this realm could go there to aid the Zorn, because the Zorn was somehow connected to this world by the *tzu-jan*. The essence of being flowed from this world. Tun Tzu's world was dead to him now. He could never go back. The path of the *tzu-jan* had brought Tun Tzu here to this strange world of San Francisco, although he should no longer exist at all, as far as he knew.

An Awakened being from this world could help free the Zorn. Perhaps Randy's failure had been in the intensity of his desire to escape. He was not a true agent of stasis, for he yearned for nothing but to leave it. This banker, however, was a slave to the static laws of this world. Perhaps he, being more deeply versed in such a system, would be the proper catalyst to free the Zorn. He could be taught to transcend, yet still comprehend, the static world. Maybe where the rebel had failed, the indentured servant could succeed. Or perhaps the failure was in the task itself, and Tun Tzu would be condemning another innocent to death, or worse. A wise man's words came to mind:

*Heaven and Earth are ruthless;
To them the ten thousand things are but as straw dogs.
The Sage too is ruthless;
To him the people are but straw dogs.*
It was a chance that would have to be taken.

• • •

*Those who know do not speak;
Those who speak do not know.*
—Lao Tzu

Four days ago. Saturday, October 30.

The earthquake the night before had shaken the Starlight Lounge and Motor Lodge quite severely. The picture above one of the beds had fallen, and the Magic Fingers box

had bounced off the bedside table and was no longer functional. There were numerous fresh cracks in the walls and ceiling to go with the numerous old cracks that predated this particular quake.

Now, Randy and Tun Tzu lay on the grass, basking in the sun in the small grove at the Japanese Tea Garden. Randy understood better now why tourists did not interrupt their days in the grove. “Cool! Just like the Shadow!” he had commented upon learning more of the powers that Tun Tzu possessed, and that he would soon possess, to “cloud men’s minds.” Randy felt a bond with the crazy old man that he had not felt before, not with his parents, not with friends, not with girls — a common view of the basic nature of reality, or that was the bond Randy was beginning to feel. The ground here in the grove felt warm and safe, never mind last night’s tectonic excitement.

Randy looked over at Tun Tzu, whose eyes were closed. He never could tell if the old man was asleep, or off somewhere doing something, whatever he did. Surely he didn’t look into the minds of trees and frogs anymore.

“Yes?” said Tun Tzu, startling Randy in spite of himself.

“How the hell do you do that?” asked Randy.

“You wanted to ask me a question?”

“Yeah,” said Randy. “Now that you mention it. You said yesterday that you wanted me to go to your home because you couldn’t go back. Why can’t you go back? Are the cops after you or something?”

Tun Tzu smiled. “There will be plenty of time for explanations later, if they are required.” There was silence again, except for the sounds of the birds in the trees and the frogs in the pond. “What do you search for, butterfly?” asked Tun Tzu after a few moments. “Why do you stay with me and do what I ask?”

Randy was caught off-guard by this question. Tun Tzu’s queries were usually abstract, or metaphysical, or just plain weird, but not personal. “I don’t know.” *I just like being with you*, he wanted to say, but could not bring himself to it. “To learn, I guess. I always felt there was something more than what they told us was important in school. And power. I thought you could teach me things, and you have.” Randy thought about the past two weeks — the memory tasks and the rational strategies; looking inward to himself; the empathetic connections with plants, animals, and people; the mind links he had briefly crafted with random passers-by, cut off quickly to avoid detection of his awkward skills. There was some deeper meaning that Tun Tzu was building toward. There must be some culmination. Randy looked at the old man again. His tanned skin and white hair shone vibrantly in the light. “Tun Tzu.”

“Yes?”

“May I touch your mind?”

Tun Tzu did not open his eyes or change expression, but he did draw in a quick breath and hold it ever so briefly. “Perhaps tomorrow, butterfly. Perhaps tomorrow.”

SILVER NUTTIEG,
GOLDEN PEAR



KEVIN ADREW MURPHY WITH
JAMES A. MOORE

“Friday’s child is loving and giving,” and while I wasn’t born on a Friday (Monday here, “Fair of Face,” for whatever that’s worth), I love my friends and was about to give something up for them, so I guess the omen for the day was working out pretty well.

What I had in my lunch pail was a little too much of a hot potato to keep around anyway. Sure, it looked nice on my dresser, elegant in fact, but people do talk, and I was sick of having to cover it up like some sort of parrot before anyone came into the room. Anyway, I just had to show it off to someone, and if there was anyone who would appreciate it, it was Grimm. Not that he’d let it show.

You can’t be a Goth without knowing how to read people, not that there aren’t those who try.

By the way, my name’s Penny, for anyone who’s wondering. Penny Dreadful. There’s *noms de plume* and *noms de punk*, and now there’s *noms de goth*. Penny Dreadful or Penny D—, that’s me. Lot better than Penelope Drizkowski. Dreadful name, huh? Well, that’s where I got my inspiration.

Grimm lives in the Haight, same as me, so I didn’t need to catch a bus or crank up the car (and I do mean crank; as you can probably guess from the way I dress, I like old things, and when I say old, I don’t mean Fifties). My hat was pinned in place, my widow’s weeds were just so, and my high buttons were done up just right over my black and white Pippi Longstockings. A lady doesn’t go calling on a gentleman unless she’s dressed to the nines. Of course, she’s also supposed to have an escort, but this is the 1990s, not the 1890s, so you don’t have to get anal and be period about everything. Anyway, if you know anything about the Victorian Age, widows were considered experienced women and so could do just about whatever they pleased.

Not surprising that poisoning husbands was all the rage.

Grimm has his shop doubled-down two side streets off Haight. Great camouflage, by the way. The window has more psychic crystals and sun catchers and Shirley Maclaine books than you would think the world could possess, and any serious practitioner just rolls her eyes and walks on by when she comes to Grimm’s Occult Specialty Shoppe.

Which is a mistake, of course, ‘cause it’s got some really cool stuff once you get past the façade, and I don’t mean the Crowley Tarot deck. Honestly, Strength is not Lust, no matter how much you want it to be, and in my humble opinion, Evil Old Uncle Al should have gotten together with Siggy Freud. They had a lot in common. Then again, who knows? They probably did.

Grimm is a lot better than either Dr. Siggy or Uncle Al, though he’s got the same sort of condescending, constipated looks, the “I am above all this! Look upon me, mortals, and despair! I am Ozymandias!”- type look that so many Goths try to cultivate and fail miserably at. There are girls back at the Waydown who would just die if Grimm gave them his “grim look.” But then, I’m not them, I’m Penny D—, and I knew Grimm already. Real sweetheart once you got past the Ozymandias look and the hawk nose and the Fu Manchu moustache.

I came in and browsed through the Susan Sedon Boulet postcards (while she may be trendy, she does know something about metaphysics) and waited while Edith Blanton went on with her latest mystical rant: “So I says to my son, ‘Norman, she’s no good for you!’ My spirit guides say it, my OUIJA board says it! For goodness’ sake, Martha down at the bakery says it! But does he listen? No, he just goes on defending that shrew he took

for a wife, and here I am, my heart breaking, and how can I expect him to listen to my spirit guides or even Martha at the bakery when he won't even listen to his own mother?"

Grimm nodded, glassy-eyed, looking every bit the patient Lord Ozymandias listening to the peasants' complaints.

But Granny Edith was entertaining all the same, and behind the stereotypical Jewish grandmother exterior was a heart of gold and a lot of mystic trivia, even if she did change her belief system as often as she changed her socks.

"I'm going to try voodoo," Edith said, thumping down a can onto the counter. "If 'Devil Be Gone' powder and 'Uncrossing Oil' don't get rid of that woman, I don't know what will. Which loa do you pray to to get rid of awful second wives?"

Still impassive, Grimm went to his shelf of Catholic paraphernalia and came back with a large votive candle in a brown glass holder. "St. Jude." He set it down amid the rest of Granny Edith's purchases.

I nearly choked to keep from laughing. For those of you who don't know, St. Jude is the patron saint of really big miracles, and he's the one Catholics (and Voudoun and Santeria types) pray to when they don't know what else to do. Either Granny Edith had a really big problem, or else Grimm was having a joke at her expense and had decided to give the Patron Saint of Lost Causes a chuckle amid his more serious requests for cancer cures and miraculous rescues.

Granny Edith just smiled as Grimm rang up and wrapped up her purchases and gave her a simplified Voudoun ritual suitable for octogenarian Jewish grandmothers who wished to be rid of obnoxious second daughter-in-laws. I waited, continuing to look through postcards even after Edith had left the shop, until Grimm finally took the bait. "All right, Penny. What do you have for me?"

I glided over to the counter — no mean feat, 'cause what I had in my lunch pail was not only hot, it was heavy — and set the pail on the counter with a clank like the cask in 'The Castle of Otranto.' (Goth classic; read it when you have a chance.)

I looked around, making sure that Edith had been the last of the Shirley Maclaine groupies and crystal-hunters, then looked off at the rack of metaphysical refrigerator magnets. "Light the candle, draw the curtain, put the lock upon the door..."

It was a line from some Seventies pop song I'd heard when I was a kid, but it was one of the most potent charms I knew, and Grimm took the hint, going and locking the front door and turning out the 'Back in Ten Minutes' sign. "Back room stuff?"

"Definitely back room."

I picked up my lunch pail and let Grimm usher me through the velvet curtain into the back of the shop. That's where he keeps all the worthwhile stuff, aside from the Boulet postcards. Treasures there to die for, and I'm pretty certain that's happened with a few of the things he's got, at least the Borgia poison ring and the Knights of the Golden Circle ceremonial sword. (The Knights, by the bye, were this splinter group of the KKK who were into all sorts of weird metaphysics and were trying to outdo both the Masons and the Golden Dawn — a neat trick if you can pull it off, and they almost did.)

Grimm let the curtain fall down, then lit the candle in the skull-shaped holder (which, tacky as it looks, is more than it seems). He'd done the charm in reverse from what I'd sang, but it was close enough for most magic, and anyway, it was his shop.

“And lo, the seal was broken,” I quoted and undid the catch of my lunch pail.

“And Greenpeace appeared, and lo, his face was wrath,” said Grimm. “What are you doing to that seal? Fie and for shame!”

I rolled my eyes. He had me there. A true Goth can appreciate wit, and I’ll admit, we do set ourselves up when we get our most pretentious.

However, I had my trump card as I took out the reason for my errand, wrapped in finest Ice White silk (from an antique Chinese funeral robe — you can find them in Chinatown if you know where to look). I carefully unwrapped the silk, which, if you know anything about metaphysics, is good for insulating things other than Tarot cards, and looks really classy on top of it.

It fell away, and there sat the Golden Pear.

I gestured to it, giving my best magician’s assistant/Vanna White gesture, and quoted the old rhyme: “I had a little nut-tree/ Nothing would it bear/ But a silver nutmeg/ And a golden pear.”

Grimm looked at it, dumbfounded, and I continued the verse: “The King of Spain’s daughter/ She came to see me/ And all because of my little nut tree.” He reached out and touched it in wonder. I smiled. “I skipped over water/ I danced over sea/ And all the birds in the air couldn’t catch me.”

I should probably describe the Pear. It’s eighteenth century Prussian goldsmithing and clockwork, which, if you know anything about jeweled doohickeys, is the type of thing Faberge only wished he did. A gold pear on a gold base with a little keyhole to start up the music box, which, if the books have it right, will also make the four quarters of the Pear fall open and show all sorts of neat things while it plays a little tune. Of course, the Key’s been lost for almost as long as the Pear’s been around, so all you can see is the outside, where there’s diamonds polished *en cabochon* to make four little windows that show things like “King Gets Eaten by Wolves” and “Mercury has his Feet Chopped Off” and “Snake Ladies Do The Nasty With Skeletons.” Weird alchemical symbolism, and I’ll admit that it’s completely out of my league.

Grimm stood so motionless that I think you could have stuck a “For Sale” sticker on his forehead and he wouldn’t have noticed. But it’s moments like this that I live for. There’s no point in finding pretty-shinies if you can’t show them off to someone, and this was something that Grimm definitely appreciated.

We probably stood there posed like mannequins for close to ten minutes before Grimm let out his breath. “Where did you find this?”

I struck an attitude, grieving innocence, which I know showed off the lace on my cuffs to best advantage. “A wall safe. It was disguised as part of a mantel.” Grimm blinked. “Well, honestly, it’s the most obvious place to put them, and I swear, it practically popped open at me. And the thing was hot to begin with.”

Grimm smiled, going back to his Ozymandias look. “All right, Penny. Out with it.”

“Well,” I said, getting into the tale, “about two months ago, I went to the estate sale of Aries Michaels. Remember him? The Wizard of Nob Hill?”

“O of H,” Grimm said and nodded. “Go on.”

I didn’t quite follow what he meant by the initials, but you can’t have an attitude without knowing how to hide ignorance, and anyway, it was my moment and my tale.

“Anyway, he died, and I went to his estate sale. Most of the good stuff had been cleared out already — though I did get a couple lots of miscellaneous knickknacks at the auction — but then I said to myself, ‘Penny, there’s got to be something interesting in this old house,’ and since the auctioneers had cleared everything into the front room, and the realtors didn’t mind if potential buyers wandered around the place — not that I could ever afford a mansion on Nob Hill, mind you — I went up into his private study where he had the pentacles set in the floor and everything, and when I stuck a screwdriver into a crack in the mantle, the door just popped right open. And I found the Pear.”

“So it’s hot,” Grimm said.

I nodded. “Really hot. You don’t know what it is, do you?”

Grimm didn’t like admitting ignorance any more than a Goth, but he didn’t say anything, so I took that for a yes.

I reached into the bottom of my lunch pail and took out the museum pamphlet and the newspaper clippings. I put the pamphlet in his hands and flipped it open to the section with the color photograph of the Golden Pear. “1979. The Splendor of Dresden exhibit went through the De Young. See here —,” I pointed to the paragraph below. “‘The Pear of B’ttger. Commissioned by the Elector of Saxony in 1719 on the death of his alchemist, B’ttger, as a repository for the last of B’ttger’s transmuting powder and a set of illustrations describing the secrets of the Philosophers’ Stone.

“Except,” I said, “the key has been lost since the death of the Elector of Saxony, and the Pear has been lost since its theft in 1979.” I put the newspaper clippings into his hands. “Big scandal. The De Young still hasn’t lived it down.”

“So who does the Pear belong to?”

I shrugged. “The East German government? Except that’s now part of the German government. I don’t know. Aries Michaels stole the Pear, or else he was a real ditz and not much of a wizard if he bought it and didn’t know it was hot. But I thought, well, why should the heirs of an old thief get the reward for something he stole, when I can get it myself? Except I don’t really like publicity. So I thought, gee, my good friend Grimm has a shop that sells all sorts of valuable things, he could probably sell this too. I mean, turn it in for the reward. And he’s so respectable, he’d have no trouble having people believe him when he says a bag lady came in and traded it for the latest Shirley Maclaine.”

Okay, I’ll admit it, I was pushing the envelope, but Grimm wanted the thing so bad he could taste it, so what the hey.

“How much do you want?” The mask of Ozymandias was cracking, or at least there was drool at the corner of the mouth.

“Well, the East German government offered ten thousand, but that was 1979, and the East Germans were cheap. The West Germans have a lot more money, or at least they did until they took in the East Germans and became just plain Germany. And the De Young offered fifty thousand, but that was for the arrest and conviction of the thief, and Aries Michaels is dead, and part of why I took the Pear was that I thought that the heirs would be happier without it being revealed that their dear, departed, eccentric great-uncle was an international jewel, art and antiquities thief.”

Grimm was looking at the Pear again, checking out the little vignettes and acting almost like he was in a grocery store, inspecting it for blemishes. Except with something

that old, nicks and scratches aren't blemishes — they're history. "What do you need the money for?"

That was my business, but I didn't mind telling Grimm. "The Waydown is having a party this weekend, the Necrotic Neurotic Halloween Ball. Norna was treasurer, 'cause she's got a trust fund and rich parents, so everyone thought the money would be safe with her. General principle — rich people don't steal, or at least if she did, she could always snake the money back from her parents if she needed to, so it seemed a safe bet. Except Norna's dad keeled over about six months ago, her mom walked out in the street and got run over by a bus about a week later, and somewhere in between, Norna just up and disappeared. No Norna, no money, no party, and all the little Goths cried. But, in for a penny, in for a pound, and I say to myself, 'Penny, you've got this alchemist's Pear just gathering dust on your dresser. Hock it, and earn the eternal gratitude of your friends, and save Halloween.' And so here I am."

I was really pleased with myself. I had managed to turn fencing one of the world's hottest jewels into a tragic sacrifice for the good of my friends. Which was the case, but then again, the Waydown Ball was not going to cost sixty thousand dollars, at least not if I did the shopping.

Grimm looked at the Pear, stalking round it and struggling to keep from jumping up and down with glee like I had to when I first found it. "I..."

I closed up my lunch pail. "Listen, Grimm. I'd really love to haggle, except I have to go shopping for the Ball. Tell you what — Why don't you give me what you have in the cash drawer as deposit, then sell it on commission? We can do the haggling later."

Grimm put out his hand. "Deal."

I took it and shook it formally. "A pleasure doing business with you, sir."

"And a pleasure doing business with you, my lady."

Luckily, as I knew, Grimm keeps a large supply of cash on hand, so Halloween was saved.



Now, you've probably heard that the Waydown is dead. Don't you believe it. It wasn't buried, it just went underground. For a Goth club, that's pretty much the same thing. Nothing really lives till it dies, and something can't really be Goth till it lives in the shadows.

The Waydown is like that. The police closed it down about the same time that Norna disappeared, but, I have to admit, we didn't have permits, a liquor license, or even the deed to the place where the Waydown went down, so the Boys in Blue were perfectly within their rights to chase out the Persons in Black.

Of course, if you know anything about the Matrix program, chasing people out isn't the same thing as getting rid of them, and the Goths are still around. Even at the old burnt-out shell of the St. Francis Church in the Haight, which is where the Waydown went down with regularity. Now, the Waydown goes down under the façade of other clubs, the House of Usher at Thunder Bay in Berkeley, or the Temple at The Oasis here in The City. Sometimes in other places too. The St. Francis is saved for special occasions now. Like Halloween, or All Hollow's Eve, as we Goths like calling it. The crew of people who make up the Waydown call themselves the Hollow Ones, a la T.S. Eliot: "We are the

Hollow Men/We are the stuffed men/Leaning together/Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
‘A penny for the Old Guy’” and all that.

Anyway, we Hollowers had dealt with the police before, and if there was one night when we wouldn't really have to worry about Big Brother, it was Halloween. Between the nude conga lines down in the Castro, and the rednecks lining up do to a little fag-bashing, the police were going to have their hands full, and a bunch of teenagers smoking clove cigarettes in an abandoned church was not a priority.

The St. Francis is actually in the Ashbury Heights, so I cranked up the car and got going. My car's a Stutz Bearcat, and if that isn't class, I don't know what is. Found it under a tarp in a junkyard in Petaluma, and with a bit of spit and polish and a whole lot of TLC, I had it purring like a kitten. Singing “Chitty-Chitty Bang-Bang” to it probably had something to do with it too, but while it didn't actually fly, it certainly flew up the hills of San Francisco, and I got to the St. Francis in a flash.

Neville was there, where I expected him. Neville's this tall, skinny PIB who has trouble getting the dye to take in his hair, cause he's real blond and his eyebrows fade in about an hour. He had his Gashlycrumb Tinies shirt on, the one with “N is for NEVILLE who died of ennui.” The shirt fit in more ways than one, and Neville even has this cool deck of Tarot cards he's made out of the Tinies (for predicting the manner of a person's death, of course).

“Penny.” He might have been talking to the air for all the expression he gave.

I opened my lunch pail. “Halloween is saved.” I put two thousand dollars in his hands. “Why don't you get the beer?”

He stared at the money and may have had just the faintest bit of expression. He looked up. “What did you have to do to get this?”

“Nothing much. Just hocked the family jewels.” He looked askance. “No, don't worry. Very discreet. Nothing the police should ever find out about or trace here.”

Neville nodded. “We're in your debt, Penny.”

I shrugged. “Leave me in your will, and give me what shows up in the collection box. No big deal.”

Neville folded up the money and slipped it in his pocket, putting a finger to his lips and murmuring his thoughts, “Bargetto's, Blackthorne's, Jaegermeister, Frangelico...” He wandered off, continuing to list his wishes and dreams which the Alchemist's Pear had just made possible. From anyone else, it would have sounded like a shopping list, but he managed to make it sound like an invocation to the spirits, which, come to think of, it was.

Blackrose unfolded herself from her perch in one of the niches, where I suppose she thought she looked like Our Lady of Coolness, though she actually looked more like one of the huddled urchins from the Five of Pentacles. “Well done, Penny.”

“You're welcome,” I said.

Blackrose shrugged it off by spinning in a dance step, which, I must admit, was rather pretty. She came to rest beside me, leaning on the baptismal font. “Quite a shame about Norna, isn't it? Who ever would have thought...”

“Thought what?”

Blackrose brushed back her bangs, which was hard because of all the hairspray. She has this look like “Dress by Morticia Addams, Hair by Tina Turner” which does not work,

but there's no telling her that. "Oh," she said, wrist to forehead, "Norna just disappearing like that. Strange. I called her school. They said she dropped out. Her parents died within a week of each other. And she just ... disappears. Strange. Odd. Downright mysterious."

She lit up a clove kretek with one of those cheap plastic lighters (I don't smoke, but if I did, I'd use something with a lot more class) and took a drag, trying to look cine noire, but only coming off as needing a hit of cloves. No class, as I said. In the court of Louis XIV they carried around their cloves in these pomader oranges, and you could do all sorts of interesting gestures with them without ruining the effect with cheap plastic lighters.

I'd thought she was going to accuse Norna of skipping out with all the money, which was stupid, because the reason we'd entrusted it to Norna in the first place was that she had a trust fund and a rich mommy and daddy and wouldn't be tempted by what to her was petty cash. But there was no telling people like Blackrose that. She liked to think she was a mistress of intrigue, when all she could really pull off was petty gossip.

"Maybe she's dead," Blackrose said. "Perhaps we should hold a séance tonight and find out."

"You're fucking nuts," said a voice from the shadows, and Peter stepped out. Spooky Pete we call him behind his back, 'cause he stalks around in this grey pea coat muttering dark prophecies (which usually come true), and if you've ever heard of haunted eyes, well, think of Peter. Most of us Hollowers were green with envy, at least the guys, because while lots of Goths aspire to being dark, brooding figures, Peter came by it naturally.

He stalked over and looked down at Blackrose. "You don't go fucking messing with the dead. The best you can expect is a waste of your time. The worst..." He glowered, then plucked the cigarette from Blackrose's fingers. "And don't smoke these things. They'll fucking kill you. And trust me, the last thing you want to be is dead." He snapped the clove cigarette in two and dropped it to the floor, stepping on it with one of his industrial boots.

Usually, you couldn't get away with being that rude, but Peter was an exception to lots of rules. He'd managed to bridge the gap between Goth and Punk quite nicely, with his hair shaved round the back and the little nose ring, then the creepy, macabre dialogue on top of it.

There was a fight brewing, even so, so I decided to shut it up with money. I opened my lunch pail. "Peter, why don't you do the chips and pretzels? You've got a car, and I think you said you had a Price Club membership."

He wrinkled his nose in assent, making the nose ring flip up for a moment.

I gave him some cash, then handed a substantially smaller wad to Blackrose. "You're good at paste-up, Rose. Could you do the fliers and use the rest for crepe paper or something?"

"Blackrose," she corrected.

Tit for tat, snub for snub, but everyone was glad for the money anyway. I scattered the largess to the masses and let Neville delegate the rest of the tasks, leaving for myself what I liked and what I did best: bargain hunting and taking care of oversights.

After all, somebody had to do it.



I have to give it to Blackrose. For all that she comes off like a poseur during the day, she can be very Goth by night.

She'd set up the parson's table in the sacristy as the perfect séance table, which is no mean trick, 'cause parson's tables are tall and long and narrow, and seance tables are supposed to be short and round and wide. But with the lace shawls and roses and the 1920s OUIJA board that looked like it had come out of the Ray Bradbury Theater, she'd made something wonderfully macabre. The black, red and white beeswax tapers helped with the effect too and filled the air with a nice perfume. I'd have to ask where she got them.

Blackrose was there, as I said, along with Neville and Rex. Rex as in Oedipus, or at least that was the reference I think he was going for. Short, stocky PIB wannabe, and I think he was no more than sixteen.

Peter, as might be expected, was conspicuously absent, which I think was all for the best. Like as not, he'd just look at the table as if he were wondering what a cutting board was doing with an upside-down brandy snifter on top of it, then start up a conversation with a patch of air. I'd seen him do it before, and I wouldn't be surprised if he did it again.

Anyway, Blackrose gestured grandly to all of us, and we took our places at the bench opposite her. "You may be seated."

We were, and Rex began singing, "Ouija board, ouija board, ouija board..."

Blackrose glared at him until he looked sheepish and stopped.

"Place your hands upon the planchette," Blackrose intoned, perfect Gypsy, "and let the glass fill with the warmth of life." We did, and Rex giggled. Blackrose had the good sense to ignore him. "Oh spirits, we are gathered tonight in this place of death and burial, this place of life and resurrection, to ask questions of one whom we fear is among your number." Give the girl credit; she knew how to do an invocation. "Let no base spirit, or false spirit, or foul spirit enter this room. By the Powers of Light, I bind and implore you. Let only the spirit of Norna Weaver, who we number among our fellows, come to this place of power. Norna, the Waydown has risen again and has need of you!"

The candle flames flickered and danced, and the glass began to move under our fingers, the cushion of warmed air levitating it ever so slightly. "Norna, are you here?" asked Blackrose, and the glass moved until the bell rested firmly on the letter M.

"M," said Blackrose. "We have the beginning of our message!"

The planchette moved to another letter, L.

"M-L!" Blackrose cried.

R the glass spelled out plainly. Q, then K.

Then the table began to shake, and the candles toppled over. The glass flew from our fingers and off the table. A shattering sound came from the floor, and the door flew open and a cold wind blew in, plunging the room into darkness.

And the table continued to shake.

"The spirits!" cried Blackrose. "The spirits are angry!"

"Aighghgh!" screamed Rex.

"It's an earthquake," Neville said, clearly and plainly. "Get to the doorways, you idiots!"

He did not have to tell this girl. I was already there, doorframe in one hand, skirts which I'd hitched up for running in the other. I remembered the '89 quake, and while I had not been anywhere quite so precarious as a blacked-out, abandoned, condemned church (with fire damage), it hadn't been pleasant. Then again, the old St. Francis had survived the "Pretty Big One," and I'll say, with the authority of a Californian, born and raised, that this one was not quite as strong. Not that that seemed to matter much when one was standing in the aforementioned blacked-out, abandoned church. With fire damage.

I heard a few things crash down in the background, then I managed to produce one of those little key chain flashlights from somewhere and shine it around.

"Everyone okay?"

Rex and Blackrose looked pretty badly shaken (no pun intended — there is a time and place for everything, and this was not one of them), but Blackrose managed to gather her composure enough to take out her cheap cigarette lighter and relight the candles. She followed this with a cigarette and took a long drag. "Well," she said, wreathed in a nimbus of clove smoke, "that was a trip, wasn't it?"

We all exchanged glances and surveyed the wreckage of the séance table, with wax pooled in the webbing of the shawl and the planchette (or brandy snifter) shattered on the floor.

"We have our message," Neville said, deadpan. "MLRQK."

"Mlrqk!" echoed Rex, laughing nervously, and Blackrose looked decidedly putout.

I slipped the flashlight back in my pocket. "It was a lovely séance, really, Blackrose. But obviously the spirits were busy elsewhere tonight." Rex chuckled. I shrugged. "Let's just take it as a good omen. Norna's still alive. Somewhere."

"What about Mr. and Mrs. Weaver?" Blackrose asked, hopeful. "We know they're dead."

I wanted to put an end to this before someone could make a joke about crying over spilt "Mlrqk!" "Oh, honestly, Blackrose. Norna's parents never knew where she was when she was alive. How do you think they can keep better tabs on her now that they're dead?" I gestured to our surroundings. "Anyway, we better check to see how much damage the St. Francis has taken. Cops or no cops, there's no way we're going to be holding All Hollow's Eve here if the place is about to fall down on our heads."

Neville looked pensive. "There is a certain moribund charm to it."

I gave him a plain look. "Do you want to be in the choir loft when the subwoofers kick in on 'This Corrosion?'" Neville moved his head to a different angle. "Thought not. Listen, we're doing the Necrotic Neurotic Halloween Ball, not the Fall of the House of Usher. Anyway, House of Usher is on Tuesdays in Berkeley, so it's been done."

Blackrose had the good grace to admit defeat. "Spirits! Thank you for your ... attention. Return to the realms where you belong! And Norna, if you can hear us ... send us a message when you have a chance."

"Amen," said Neville, with what for him was dry humor.

We each took one of the candles and wandered out into the old St. Francis. The damage, as I had hoped, was minimal. The church had remained standing since the fire seventy years before, and would probably still be standing seventy years from now.

I stripped off my lace gloves, and Neville and I made ourselves feel better by pounding a few nails and odd bits of lumber around to shore up the choir loft. It still looked dangerous, but did a good bit to set my mind at ease.

Blackrose stayed at the St. Francis, and so did Neville, and I think Rex was a recent addition to the crash pad set. I, however, wanted to see what had happened to my apartment. I bid them adieu and went out to my car. There was still another day of preparations and shopping ahead of me as well, not to mention picking out exactly what I would wear for the ball two nights later.

The moon was a day from full, and I caught its light from a penny in the gutter. One can't be a Goth without holding with superstition, at least the cool ones, and I was particularly fond of my namesake. I stooped to pick it up.

As I looked up, I saw that a tiny spider had built her web in the spokes of my car since last I parked. But caught on the strands were beads of mist, and they spelled out, as clear as clear, two words: GOOD WORK

I stared at the Charlotte's Web message for a full minute before a small breeze came up and scattered the water droplets and webbing.

I stood up, shaking, and it was about twenty minutes before I could put the penny in my pocket and drive home.

Some days it doesn't pay to get out of bed. Like the day Penny Dreadful came by my shop to sell me a Golden Pear. It's not that I have a problem with Penny — far from it, she's one of my better suppliers. It's just that on that particular day, I couldn't manage to get anything to go right.

Fridays are normally pretty busy at Grimm's Occult Specialty Shoppe. I can almost always count on a good number of mundane sales by noon. That Friday, two days before Halloween, I couldn't have sold a can of Spam to a starving mongrel. I managed to sell a few trinkets to Edith Blanton, but those didn't count. She always bought something; it was just her way. I woke up with a fearsome headache, one that simply would not give me a moment's peace. In addition, another moron had tried breaking in the night before and had managed to do a good number on the glass door of the shop, even through the wire mesh that keeps everything locked up properly. Before I opened for the day, I was out almost three hundred dollars for a new window. It's amazing how much they'll milk you for when it comes to a rush job.

So I was pleased to see Penny when she came in; a friendly face at that point was a huge bonus. I figured on a little chitchat and polite conversation, not a quick purchase for an item that I wasn't even certain I wanted. Don't misunderstand me, the Golden Pear of B'ttger is a true find, and more than worth what I paid up front. It's just that I prefer not dealing in items with a publicly known history. Public histories can tend to cause troubles, especially when the Technocracy is already sticking their damned noses where they don't belong. I'd had Men In Black casing my store off and on for a couple of weeks, and frankly I was starting to think about moving on, and that was before a certain bad Penny turned up.

But I made the sale anyway, and Penny said just the thing to brighten my day. She said she'd come back later, and we could barter about the price. Penny knows my weak-

nesses, and near the top of the list is a good, hard sale. I think there are too many people who miss out on golden opportunities and a roaring good time simply because they would rather look at a price tag than actually haggle over the value of whatever item they are interested in purchasing. There are no price tags on any item in my store, from the cheap postcards to the antique wine goblets. If you want to buy, you have to tell me what you're willing to part with.

I'll give this to Penny. Despite a penchant for dressing like a widow in her mother's hand-me-downs, despite being far younger than most of my suppliers, she had the good sense to scope the area out and wait for the right time before trying to fence her stolen goods. She picked a good day; the goons in dark trench coats had not bothered to show themselves. For almost anyone else, I would have never made a deal with only a partial payment in advance, especially when it comes to a hot item that is incomplete. The Golden Pear, the one that allegedly held the secrets of the Philosopher's Stone, was absolutely useless without the key that opened its delicate mechanisms. Any attempt to open the Pear without the key would simply open a false front, and the infernal machine was too well designed to allow any peek at its true treasures without destroying the patterns. I know this, because Aries Michaels tried his damndest to open the Golden Pear on several occasions and confided the whole nasty mess to me during one of his infrequent jags of drunken stupidity.

Aries Michaels was a sharp man, and he certainly would have been a formidable enemy, but he was also a man who loved his alcohol a bit too much. Whenever he got into his drink, he called on me and told me his woes. Normally a visit from Aries started with him trying to convince me to go back to the Order of Hermes and ended with him crying on my shoulder. That was okay; he'd been my teacher once, and he'd certainly taught me plenty about the ways of the Order, but he'd also been my friend for a long time, and he had definitely pulled my fat out of the fire when I was too young and stupid to know better. We had a mutual respect for each other, and he knew I would keep his secrets just as I knew he'd keep mine. I think I may have been the only person he ever told about stealing the Golden Pear.

I miss Aries, and one of these days I think I might have to break down and avenge his murder. But I don't know if I'm ready for that quite yet.

Anyway, I bought the damned Pear from Penny, more for the promise of a good haggling session than for any other reason, save possibly the look of desperation she tried so hard to hide. I guess I should explain a little something here, I'm just slightly less well off than God when it comes to my finances. Both of my parents were rich, and the use of a little coincidental magic had insured that my investments went well after I inherited their wealth. I don't need to run a shop, and I certainly don't need to dabble in selling items of power. If I never worked a day in my life, I'd still die a wealthy man. I run a store and deal in specialty items because I like the people I meet, and because I'd go crazy if I spent all of my time looking in musty old books for the secrets of Ascension.

I bought the Pear, and I watched Penny head out the door, and I knew then and there that I had made a hideous mistake. I stowed the lovely and potentially powerful trinket back in my specialties room and tried not to think about it. In fact, I did a fine job of not thinking about it for the next several hours while I dusted shelves, popped aspirin like candy, and dealt with customers who will never know how close they are to what they are looking for or how far away from that same goal.

I'd just finished lunch when a mage I'd never seen before came into the shop. Most mages can hide what they're capable of (have to in fact, if they wish to continue breathing) but I'm very good at seeing what others normally miss, and I couldn't have missed this one if I were blind. The woman that entered my store was stunning. I mean that, she was physically stunning, the kind of woman who makes men forget what they were going to say and makes women who are used to attention suddenly feel ignored. She was wearing designer jeans and a soft cashmere sweater over a body that promised sensual delights with every little move, and she stepped into the place like she owned it. I think for a smile I would have given the store over to her too, and she knew it, you could tell by the tiny upward curve at the corners of her full lips. She had a mane of black hair that surrounded her head like a cloud, and her hair was truly black, not colored that shade like Penny's or any of her little pseudo-intellectual friends. Unfortunately, the reflective sunglasses she was sporting kept me from seeing the color of her eyes, but I'm certain they were mesmerizing, whatever the shade.

I stared at her when as she walked over; I simply couldn't help myself. To my credit, I stared at her face instead of her body, and believe me, that was no easy task. Her voice was pleasant and sent shivers through me with the promises her tone made. "Hello. I'm looking for Mr. Grimm."

"You found me. How can I help you?" I'm very good with a poker face; you have to be when you do the sort of work I do. I was very grateful for that particular talent right then — I'm almost certain my voice would have squeaked like a boy in the throes of puberty otherwise. I mean what I said, she was an overwhelming presence.

"Hello, Mr. Grimm. I understand you sell specialty items."

That was a hell of a lot more blatant than I like my customers to be, and the effect was like a splash of cold water on my face. Despite her intoxicating perfume and magnetic appearance, I sobered up very quickly. "I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about, Miss...?"

"Blake. Jodi Blake. I'm sorry, Mr. Grimm, I got ahead of myself. I just assumed with no customers in the store...." Her look was apologetic, and I eased up on the stony face I'd put on.

"No harm done, Ms. Blake, but please, use discretion."

She smiled brightly, and I swear the entire room grew warmer by a good twenty degrees right then and there. "Call me Jodi."

"Call me Bryce." I smiled back and extended my hand. She returned the gesture and shook my hand with a firm grip. I decided that I liked that, liked everything about her. "Now then," I said when I could speak again, "how can I help you?"

"An old friend of mine recently passed away. His name was Aries Michaels." I nodded solemnly, letting her know that I had heard about his death and expressing my condolences simultaneously. "Aries spoke fondly of you, Bryce, and told me that I should pay you a visit sometime if ever I was looking for any items in particular." She paused for a moment, and my eyes were drawn to her tongue as it passed quickly over her upper lip. It took me a second to remember how to breathe. "I'm looking now."

I resisted the urge to loosen my collar. Frankly, I was wearing a T-shirt, and what collar there was was plenty loose enough, but that didn't stop the constriction of my throat

or the sensation that I just couldn't get a good lungful of air. I was very conscious of my own pulse in my ears.

"Why don't you step into the other room with me?" I asked as I locked the front door and placed the "Back In Ten Minutes" sign facing out towards the street. Jodi gave me that little smile again, the one that sent crazy signals running through my brain. I resisted the urge to kiss her, but just barely. I have never met a woman before that so affected me, and I hope never to meet another. "Can you tell me what it is you're looking for, Jodi?"

"There is a black onyx chalice, intricately carved, the bowl in the form of a skull placed on a stem and base of silver in the shape of the severed wrist of an open hand. I want that chalice, Bryce. I want it very much."

I knew the cup she was speaking of, it was one of only twenty in the world. The Tears of Kali are very rare and allegedly filled with the powers of Entropy. I have two of them. One is not for sale. Maybe someday I'll tell you how I got them, but not today.

Jodi looked at the chalice when I presented it to her and actually shook with pleasure when she held it in her hands. Either she was a member of the Euthanatos Tradition, very well versed in her spheres, or she was cold. I suspected the former; the little moan that escaped her lips was all the hint I really needed.

I'd like to say that the haggling was satisfactory, and that I got a fair market value for the Tear of Kali. But I'd be lying. It's fair to say I've never been as thoroughly seduced as I was in that room, and likely I never will again. For all the world I was like a lamb being led to the slaughter. She paid me very well for the chalice, but only partially with cash.

Sometime later, I led Jodi out of the store, much more composed than I had been earlier and with absolutely no headache to speak of. I don't think the aspirin made much of a difference. Even as she was leaving, another person came into the store, a portly old woman with a mink stole and an attitude problem. She spent twenty minutes trying to make me buy back a deck of Oriental Tarot cards, explaining shrilly and firmly that she didn't like the future they kept presenting to her. I was in a good mood, and I explained myself three times before finally telling her where she could stick her cards. Once the cards have been attuned to someone, they shouldn't be used by anyone else, and I refuse to purchase shoddy merchandise or to give a refund on something that cannot be re-sold in usable condition. Besides, the cards don't lie unless you make them. Whatever her future holds is her problem, not mine.

Around seven that night, I closed shop for a few hours. I needed a break. The other big advantage to not needing the money is that I can set my own hours without worrying too much about making the rent.

I took a long shower to remove the tension that was creeping into my shoulders, and then I made a light dinner. Afterwards, I went down to my specialties room and did a little light dusting while making certain that everything was in order. Then I opened my doors and prepared for any late night business that might come my way. Across the narrow street, I noticed a man with pale skin and an expressionless face looking everywhere but at my store. I've met enough Men In Black to know one when I see one. I looked away from him and pretended he wasn't there, hoping that he would just go away.

When I was finally convinced that he wasn't looking for me (you tend to know when they are looking for you; the handgun and badge are normally pretty good indications), I checked in my specialties room again, because something was bothering me, and I

couldn't quite place what it was. I started mentally ticking off the items in the room, and after about five I realized what the problem was.

The Golden Pear was missing.

I stayed calm, but it wasn't easy. I double-checked every nook and cranny, then I checked again just to be certain. There was no mistake. Angry doesn't begin to express my feelings on the subject of someone stealing from me. Monumentally pissed off doesn't even begin to come close. My whole world went red for a few seconds, and I was fully prepared to go charging into the night, ready to hunt down the thief at any cost, when I noticed my friend in the black trench coat standing in the same spot as before, at the entrance of a shop across the street. I was starting to get worried. He'd been there for an awfully long time for a man that wasn't investigating something.

I decided I should play it cool, and instead of trying to leave myself, I just picked up the phone. I like Penny Dreadful, I really do. But the deal was that she'd make additional monies aside from the advance I'd given her off of what I managed to receive from a sale on the Golden Pear, and I couldn't very well sell what I no longer had. Penny was honest, and Penny was almost painfully lucky at "finding pretties." I imagined she could locate the Pear a second time. With some of my suppliers, I would have been out of luck. They would have just moved on to another city, found another shop like mine and sold the item again. The shops are there, not many of them, but if you know your way around, you can find them. But Penny was a decent person and also a friend. I knew she hadn't lifted the Pear, it's just not her style, but I also knew of no one else I could trust. Penny would be happy with a small reward in addition to her retainer's fee. She has no fashion sense, and some of her friends are too morbid for my tastes, to say nothing of their own good, but she's good people all around.

The phone rang four times, and then I heard a garbled static-flooded funeral dirge playing tinnily in my ear. Almost unintelligible through the music, I heard Penny's voice advising me that she was not home, but would respond to any messages if she felt like it. I waited through ten more seconds of scratchy Victorian chords and then heard a shrill beep indicating that I could now leave my message. I took the hint and started speaking.

"Hello, Penny," I started. "This is Grimm. I'm Dreadful-ly sorry to interrupt your night, my dear, but I have a little situation..."

I explained quickly and cursed Penny's name for only having a two-minute playtime for speaking. It took five calls total to give her the entire message.

There was a long pause between the third and fourth messages, caused entirely by an earthquake that literally knocked me off of my feet. I remember cursing the beep and dial tone that hit in the middle of my sentence to Penny, and even as I reached to hit the redial button on my telephone, a wave of vibrations lifted me into the air and slammed me none too gently into the ground. The bookstand at the front of my shop wobbled briefly and then toppled against the plate glass window. The window shimmered like heat waves for a second and then exploded into the street. A case of loose crystals that rested above and behind my cash register slid forward and unbalanced the glass shelf that held it in place. Both the crystals and the shelf fell to the hard wood floor, the shelf exploding on contact and the crystals bounced and skittered across the ground. I had enough sense to cover my head and duck into a fetal position, but the glass still nicked my ear and pelted off of my back like pebbles thrown from a slingshot. I remember hearing the cacophony clearly, even over the sound of extreme vulgarities pouring from my own mouth.

When it was over, and I'd managed to stand again, I doubled the flow of foul words and surveyed the damage. There was absolutely no way I could leave the shop in this state; too many items that could easily be stolen. I called Burt Calhoun, the man who'd fixed my door earlier, and told him to bring his supplies out. He explained that the quake meant he'd be busy, and I explained that I would double his usual fee for rush jobs if he got the damned windows in place before night's end. That got him moving.

Like I said before, some days it doesn't pay to get out of bed. So far, I'd lost a good twenty thousand dollars in merchandise, at least, and my parts and labor expenses had just reached an all-time high. By the time the windows were installed, and I had finally reached Penny, my mood and my surname were identical.

The apartment was a mess, that simple.

It didn't help, of course, that I had the place stacked floor to ceiling with boxes of baubles, bangles and beads, though after the earthquake, it was then waist-deep in trinkets and trade-goods.

I made my way in, doing a balancing act from couch to coffee table to wherever I could set a foot down without breaking something, and finally got to my bedroom.

That was a bit better. The bookshelves were packed so tight not even an earthquake could pry them loose, and all that had busted open was the box of miscellaneous knick-knacks I'd gotten from the Michaels' estate. It had fallen off the top shelf of my closet and scattered all over the floor, and I did not want to deal with it just now. After all, while I might have dealt with a lot of weird things as a Goth and talked about stranger ones as a Hollower, it wasn't every day you got an "Atta, girl!" from *Charlotte's Web*.

I sat down on the bed, which was clear except for a book, a card, and a bluish rock, all of them dusty with cobwebs. The card was an old "Thank You" note from Norna, and the book was — no, not *Charlotte's Web* — but *Arachne* by Lisa Mason. A large silver spider gleamed on the cover.

Some coincidences are just too weird.

I set them aside and picked up the bluish lump, brushing aside the bits of spider web. It wasn't stone, it was verdigris, or at least whatever the name is for the blue stuff you find on silver. One toothbrush and a half a can of Silvo later, I had it cleaned off. A nutmeg.

A Silver Nutmeg.

I steadied my hands, then slid it open along the seam. A last sliver of corrosion fell out, and a beautifully preserved silver key emerged, double-hinged.

The Elector of Saxony's Silver Key for the Pear of B'ttger.

I don't know how long I stared at it before the phone started ringing. I ignored it, waiting for the answering machine to kick in, but as those of you with answering machines know, they tend to go on strike after a power failure, and evidently there had been one with the earthquake, since the phone just continued to ring.

I finally picked it up, holding it in one hand and the Silver Key in the other. "Hello?"

"Hello, Penny." It was Grimm. He was attempting to sound bright and chipper, and that meant something was wrong. "Have you checked your answering machine?"

"Grimm, I can't find my answering machine, let alone check it."

He cursed briefly, then composed himself. "I'm dreadfully sorry to interrupt your night, my dear, but I have a little situation..."

I had a situation too. Namely an apartment knee-deep in Mardi Gras beads, miraculous messages appearing in spider webs, and the long-lost Key of the Elector of Saxony showing up on my pillow like some sort of bedtime chocolate from the gods.

Okay, I'll admit I usually operate on what I call Serendipity Overdrive, but there's a big jump between doing little charms and spells and having them work, and having major, mumbo-jumbo weirdness walk into your life. About the same as the difference between having small prayers answered and having the Virgin Mary show up in your living room for tea. The Key I could have dealt with, but not with the spider web on top of it and *Arachne* staring me right in the face. I take my omens seriously. If you're a Hollow One, you have to. I'd seen Spooky Pete and Neville's Gashlycrumb Deck be right too many times to start doubting now.

And now there was Grimm. "Tell me your situation, Grimm. Let's see if it beats mine."

Grimm paused. "The Pear was stolen."

"Stolen?" I twiddled the Key, rotating the Nutmeg between my thumb and forefinger.

"Stolen," Grimm said. He went on to describe the thief. Female. Tall. Attractive. Long, raven-dark hair.

"Grimm, you've just described Carmen San Diego."

No, as it turned out, her name was Jodi Blake, and as he went on to list her charms (and I don't mean the magical variety), I nearly got sick. He had it for her bad, and from the sound in his voice, well...

Something you should know. Grimm only gets laid about once a year, and then only when he's lucky and desperate. And from what I could hear between the pauses and pants, this woman had screwed him seven ways from Sunday or at least intimated that she'd like to. Not that he'd ever admit to it, mind you, and I wasn't going to call him on it. Grimm was as tight-lipped as a White House press secretary about things like that and just about as uptight.

He went on to ask me if I could do that voodoo that I do so well and find the Pear for him a second time.

"Damn straight I'm going to get the Pear back. And you're going to owe me big-time too, Grimm. And no, we're not going to haggle out the price right now." I played with the Silver Nutmeg, folding and unfolding the secret key. "Why's that? Oh, simple enough. I just found the Silver Nutmeg. That's right, the Elector of Saxony's lost Key to the Golden Pear and the Philosopher's Stone. The price has just gone up."

I hung up on him, then pulled the plug from the wall. After a moment's thought, I uncovered the answering machine and reset it, volume turned off. Let him call to his little heart's content. I'd deal with it in the morning.

A cup of tea and a book of poetry later, I was fast asleep.



Morning dawned bright, with the Silver Key on my dresser and the sound of Eek! the Cat filtering in from the kids in the next apartment. I held the pillow over my face. "Kumbaya!" was right.

I took a shower and began setting the apartment to rights. It helped me organize my thoughts, and while I was at it, I picked out an outfit for the following evening. No matter what, I was not going to let random weirdness ruin a long-anticipated night of hedonistic morbidity.

Grimm had left five messages total on the answering machine, none of them important except for his warning that Jodi was a dangerous witch. Men! Just because he'd been too busy watching her ass to see what she did with her hands, she had to be a powerful enchantress. Couldn't have been any of his own doing.

Then again, maybe this was what Evil Old Uncle Al had meant when he'd made over the enchantress from Strength into the nubile bimbo for Lust. Wasn't hard to get the Rod of Power when men would give it to just about anyone for a wiggle and wink.

Pardon me if I'm being a bit crass, but I was mightily pissed that morning and not in the mood to be either respectable or ladylike. List any number of expletives or blasphemies you like, and you'll have my mood.

And still, none of it explained Charlotte's Web or the serendipitous appearance of the Elector of Saxony's Silver Nutmeg on my pillow the night before. I didn't doubt that it had been in the box of Aries Michaels' miscellaneous junk — I had a feeling when I bought the lot that I was going to find something worthwhile — but that it had landed on my pillow when everything fell off the shelf...

Well, you don't need to read Shakespeare to understand signs and portents.

Getting the Golden Pear back from Jodi Blake, aka the Kama Sutra Carmen San Diego, was going to be the trick, and I couldn't believe that Grimm had been so stupid as to leave it sitting on a shelf in his back room, even if only for the sight of his discerning customers. I'd filched it 'cause I knew it was hot, and there was no way that Aries Michaels was blowing the whistle on me, even if he hadn't been dead. Jodi Blake, whoever she was, evidently knew the same rules to the game and knew that no matter what Grimm did, he couldn't blow the whistle on her either.

Which meant that I just had to steal it back, assuming that I could find Ms. Jodi Blake.

Broderbund it was not, but I sat down with Aries Michaels' junk anyway and carefully sorted through it, hoping to find a letter like "Dear Mr. Michaels, blah, blah, blah, I know you've got the Golden Pear, blah, blah, Would you consider selling? blah, blah, Love, Kisses and Blowjobs, Jodi Blake."

I knew the type of letter it would be. Pink, perfumy, on expensive paper, with a little heart over the i in Jodi and three invisible swords through it.

Unfortunately, it wasn't in the box. However, I'd bought the contents of Aries Michaels' junk drawer, not his correspondences, and if they'd gone anywhere (Aries Michaels being the notable San Francisco eccentric that he was), it could only be one of three places.



One of three places turned out to be Special Collections at the University of San Francisco. Don't listen to those hacker geeks when they say they can find anything they need to know with computers. A computer is only as good as its database, and if you

knew the number of things “not catalogued yet” in libraries, you’d chuck the keyboard and just go straight for the reference desk, or at least the phone.

USF’s rare books room is amazing, by the way. They don’t have a Gutenberg Bible, but they do have a copy of the *Nuremberg Chronicles* and one where the picture of Pope Joan only has a beard and glasses scribbled in, instead of having her face scratched out like they do with most copies. They also have an amazing occult and theology collection, which is only to be expected, I suppose. They’re Jesuits.

Anyway, I’d forgone my usual finery for a black turtleneck and slacks, vintage mod wear, circa Fifties London. (Okay, I’ll admit it, I will wear some things from the Fifties.) It worked well for the collegiate beatnik look and was the closest thing I owned to ninja gear short of authentic Kabuki blacks, and no matter what they say about San Francisco, some outfits are more conspicuous than others.

The rare book room not only had the Michaels’ letters, they had letters from Jodi Blake spanning a period of sixty-odd years, and the first one was obviously not written by a child of ten. And the same person wrote them all. I know my handwriting well enough to spot that, and Jodi’s was unique to the point of being unforgettable.

I was also right. She did put little hearts over her i’s.

Regardless, putting what Grimm had told me together with the content of the letters, all I could say was that somebody’s Oil of Olay was certainly working well.

Unfortunately, there were no return addresses, and the little “Be seeing you!” tag lines and the Jodi Blake envelope subheading (Bitch from Hell!) left me certain that Mr. M— and Ms. B— had not been on the most cordial terms.

Call it inspiration, but since Miss Blake had been sniffing after the Pear ever since Aries Michaels snatched it, there was one place I had a strong suspicion she would be.



The realtors’ office implied it, and the society columnist at the “Chronicle” confirmed it: Jodi Blake had set up in Aries Michaels’ old digs. Unfortunately for her, someone had already stuck a screwdriver in the mantle of the study and had also bought the contents of the junk drawer, which included the Silver Nutmeg. I was wearing it on a chain around my neck.

The mansion wasn’t dancing on chicken legs yet, but Jodi Blake had gotten ready for Halloween by putting a fence of plastic skulls with glowing red eyes round the place, and, call me superstitious, but I didn’t really want to go past them to see if Bimbo Yaga was home.

However, Domino’s delivers in half an hour, or it’s free, and I called in an order for two pepperoni, extra cheese. It seemed appropriate.

I set myself up a little bit up the street, binoculars ready, and twenty minutes later saw the Domino’s delivery boy go to the door and get greeted by a dead-ringer for Carmen San Diego, assuming that once Carmen took off her red trench coat she wore a red mini-skirt and bustierre with a matching riding crop.

The Domino’s delivery boy went in then, and I don’t know, maybe it was some weird trick of the light, or maybe he was that horny, but I swear the guy’s eyes (one of them, at least) looked blood red. Weird.

Regardless, by climbing halfway up a fence, I was able to see that, whatever the guy's eye color, Domino's does in fact deliver, and that Jodi Blake, whatever her age, was just as skilled as she'd implied in her letters to Michaels. Honestly, I've looked through *The Kama Sutra* and *The Perfumed Garden*, and while most of the positions involve persimmons, peaches and pomegranates, Jodi was doing a fine job improvising with pepperoni pizza.

Yes, children, the letter for today is P, and that includes Prostitute, Pulchritude and Passion.

However, I'd done what I intended, namely see if Bimbo Yaga was home, and if so, distract her for a little while. I'd succeeded beyond my wildest dreams, 'cause the way Miss Blake was teasing that poor boy, I was certain that she meant to earn her free pizza.

Which gave me slightly less than thirty minutes to get what I came for.

I screwdrivered the latch of the carport of the apartment next door and went on in, hopping the fence into the backyard of the Michaels' mansion, careful of my lunch pail.

I didn't bother with the back door, shinnying up the trellis to the second-floor balcony where the screen door was open into the master bedroom. And oh my, in her long life (assuming that the woman downstairs was the same one who'd written the letters), Jodi Blake had acquired a serious taste for kink. If you've ever seen a bondage parlor or The Gauntlet down in the Castro, you know the type of implements and furnishings Ms. Blake had managed to acquire. Everything but the Curious Sofa (which I bet she'd pay a bundle for), and she even had some medieval implements, notable among which was an extensive collection of choke pears.

I considered how pissed the Elector of Saxony would be if he found out that someone was planning to take his exquisite (if a trifle weird) music box, stuff it in someone's mouth, then turn the Key and let it go through its clockwork show. I was livid, if just because we Hollow Ones like to style ourselves morbid and macabre, and the thought had never occurred to me before now.

Anyway, I left the Chamber of Kink and took the stairs up to the study.

When I went in, the pentacle was still there, as I remembered it, but the room was now furnished in what I can only call Lovecraft Modern, and by Lovecraft I mean H.P., not the type that was going on downstairs. There were Aztec sacrificial bowls and masks of Tlaloc the tentacle-faced Mayan rain god, and nasty little Eskimo ivory tupilak figures, and, right over the mantle, a big, framed poster of the Beholder from DOOM, with votive candles set up before it.

And there, off to one side, in the center of a rather ordinary library research table, was the Golden Pear.

I stepped across the floor, careful of the pentacle and the various other symbols and altars set up around the room, and set my lunch pail down, softly opening the catch and taking out the Chinese funeral cloth.

"I wouldn't touch that if I were you."

I froze as I heard the voice, which was high and strange and raspy and not at all what I expected from the bitch-from-hell demon-temptress Bimbo Yaga.

A tail uncurled from what I had first taken to be a bundle of furs, then the cat put its head up and opened glowing (and I mean glowing!) green eyes. "I've been set to guard it," said the cat, and its mouth didn't move with the peanut-butter-stuck-to-roof-of-mouth effect you see in cat food commercials.

Charlotte's Web. Silver Keys. Ancient sorceresses. Talking cats.

Something snapped, and I realized that it was real. All of it. The webs and the keys and the sorceresses and the cats, and not just the little fun bits like picking up pennies for good luck and throwing salt over your shoulder. All of it.

And I'd just broken into the house of the Kama Sutra's answer to Baba Yaga and was talking with her cat.

Call me a classicist, but if all of it was true, then all of it was true, and the things they did in fairy tales should work just as well as everything else.

"What a pretty cat," I said, and it really was a very beautiful black cat, if you could ignore the talking and the glowing eyes. "I bet she doesn't feed you very well."

"Oh, no," said the cat. "Everything is wonderful. Just to the pact. Blood and milk and human hearts boiled in wine once a month."

Well, scratch that idea.

"I shall have to tell the mistress of you," the cat said and began washing one ear.

"She doesn't want to be disturbed," I said. "She's having sex."

The cat began washing the other ear. "She does that a lot."

Somehow I was not surprised. "The mistress sent me," I said.

The cat looked up. "How do I know you're not lying?"

"Because," I said, "the mistress wants the Key to the Golden Pear, and see, I have it here." I took out the Silver Nutmeg and slipped the chain over my head, twisting the halves and revealing the Key. The cat watched, fascinated. "Would you like me to wind up the pretty music box so you can watch it play?"

"Yes, mistress's friend," said the cat. "The mistress wants me to watch the Pear, but it would be much nicer if I could watch it move."

I slipped the Key into the base and turned it three times, leaving it in the lock. A pretty tune began playing as the Nutmeg turned counterclockwise, and the sections of the Pear slowly folded down, like a flower opening in stop-motion. In the center of the Pear was a tiny tree filled with jewels, with a phoenix in a nest of diamonds at the very top, twisting and glittering in the light of the altar candles as the alchemical suite played from the music box.

I was almost as fascinated as the cat, but then remembered another fairy tale and brought down the handle of the screwdriver as hard as I could on the cat's tail. According to that story, the worst I could expect was having a kid with a nose the size of a casaba melon, and I wasn't really planning on having kids anyway. If I did, they could get nose jobs.

The cat opened its mouth to screech, but I was ready and stuffed in a handful of the Chinese funeral silk, grabbing the cat and wrapping it and swaddling it. Silk is strong stuff, strong enough even to stop a bullet, and it was thick enough and I was fast enough that I managed to bundle the cat up and stuff it in my lunch pail without getting a scratch. "Oh, I love little pussy/ Her fur is so warm/ And if I don't hurt her/ She'll do me no harm," I sang, slamming shut the lunch pail and snapping the catch, throwing a small padlock on for good measure. The Golden Pear played its minuet in ridiculous counterpoint.

I held the lunch pail down with one hand and took the Nutmeg Key out with the other, stopping the tune and the self-immolating phoenix and causing the quarters of the Pear to snap shut. I held my breath for a long moment, then let it out.

Then a voice came over the intercom, sultry, seductive and very, very satisfied: “Grimalkin, is that you?”

I said nothing, and the real Grimalkin was nicely bound and gagged by the silk and the lunch pail.

“Grimalkin,” said the intercom, “are you doing anything you’re not supposed to be doing?”

I froze, realizing that if there was not an answer forthcoming, Bimbo Yaga was going to come up the stairs and find me not only with her cat in a lunch pail, but the Silver Nutmeg too.

I pitched my voice as high as I could (The raspy part wasn’t hard), “No, mistress.” It also wasn’t hard to sound scared and guilty and caught-in-the-act.

“Grimalkin,” said the intercom, “what are you doing?”

My voice sounded smaller as I squeaked, “Playing with a little mouse.” It was the classic line from Baba Yaga, and I hoped it would work.

“Grimalkin, you’ll spoil your supper.” The voice from the intercom sounded disappointed and indulgent, like a mother with a favorite child. “I have a human heart stewing in wine, and it will be done soon. And fresh blood.”

I held down my stomach. “And milk?” I asked.

There was a brief spurt of cursing in a language I didn’t understand, and the candles burnt blue. “No, Grimalkin. It’s all curdled, I’m afraid. But I do have some pepperoni pizza, extra cheese.”

“I want milk!” I said in my best cat-voice. “The pact says I get milk!”

There was more brief cursing, and the candles flickered blue. “Yes, precious,” said the voice, no longer quite so indulgent. “I’ll go to the store immediately. You’re quite right. The pact requires you have your milk, and have it you shall.” There was another word, very nasty sounding, and the candles flared, lighting up the room like a blue-light special at K-mart. Then there was the sound of slamming doors from downstairs, and a minute later the sound of a car starting up and screeching out of the garage.

There wasn’t much time to lose. I put the Silver Nutmeg back around my neck and bundled the Golden Pear up in what I took to be an altar cloth, stuffing it into a makeshift sack I made out of Bimbo Yaga’s ritual robe. For good measure, I grabbed the tacky chalice Grimm had said was one of the Tears of Kali, then went hog-wild and ran around the room, grabbing everything that gave my sixth sense even the slightest tingle, gathering up a “Nightmare Before Christmas” sackful of grisly trinkets and curios.

Then I stuck my screwdriver in the crack in the mantel. I know. You’re probably expecting that something really gross and scary popped out, like the clawed ducky from *Alien* or my Aunt Ethel’s head on a spring. No, the safe was empty. Completely bare, except for a spider spinning her web.

Except, if you know anything about omens, seeing a spider spin her web is one of the worst ones possible. At best, it means that people are saying bad things about you, and at worst, well, I won’t go into that, but I pinched my left earlobe with my right hand to make Blackrose bite her tongue (if she was the one talking behind my back) and watched as the spider pulled and adjusted a spare strand from the center of her web, which was otherwise

neat and perfect and geometric as a clock face. In fact, it was a clock face, with twelve quadrants and the spider and her line the minute hand, nearing twelve o'clock.

She spun about with her line like a ballerina on wires, ticking a minute closer, and on her abdomen was an hourglass, scarlet on black.

Us Hollowers know all about red hourglasses and clocks striking midnight, and you probably do too, but let me remind you of the moral of both: Don't get caught. Things would have turned out a lot different for Cinderella if she'd decided to party on and had her ball gown turn into rags right there in front of God and everyone, and Dorothy would have lost more than her slippers if she'd stayed in the witch's workroom when the last of the ruby sand fell inside the hourglass. And I know an omen when I see one, 'cause black widow webs usually look like cat's cradles on acid, not the faerie clock faces of anal-retentive orb spiders.

I slammed the door on Charlotte's latest warning, and, all right, I'll admit it, I'm irresponsible, but even us Hollowers know better than to leave votive candles unattended. All I had to do was push them back under the baroque frame of the DOOM poster and throw a handful of paper in one.

The wall went up in moments, and I grabbed my sack in one arm and my lunch pail in the other, getting the hell out of there. I stopped just one second to say a quick prayer for the butchered pizza delivery boy in the front room and grab his keys.

Once I was out the front door, I paused a bare moment to pull the extension cord that led to Bimbo Yaga's fence of glow-in-the-dark plastic skulls, 'cause I know what the originals did in the fairy tale, and believe me, it was not pretty. And praise be to fast food, there was the car with the Domino's Pizza light on top. I tossed my Robe of Grisly Items and Cat-in-the-Box in the passenger's seat, and I was out of there and back to Grimm's.

When I'd planned to spend the day bargain-hunting and taking care of oversights, this was hardly what I had in mind. But what the hey, it was a good haul.



GRITTI REINDERS



JAMES A. MOORE WITH
KEVIN ANDREW MURPHY

The situation with Penny Dreadful was unique and left a funny taste in my mouth. I think she might have surmised my what happened between Jodi Blake and I, but she had the good taste (to say nothing of the good sense) not to openly point out my seduction. She was true to her word, however, and with the Elector's Key to go with the Golden Pear, the price went up substantially. Fair is fair.

The bad news for both of us was that Jodi Blake was likely a Nephandi mage, a demon worshipper or worse. From everything that Penny told me about what Jodi had done to Aries Michaels' house, it was fairly easy to surmise that she was into dealing with things best left alone. That, or she had some unusual beliefs in what constitutes fashionable home decorations. I don't like the ideas put forth by the Nephandi, and I like their usual methods of operations (anything goes as long as it pleases the masters) even less.

I got a little something for free in the bargain, besides. I learned that the mysterious figure in front of my store was nothing more or less than a flasher. When I saw Penny approaching the store completely ignoring the Man In Black, I was prepared to step outside of my shop and assist her in defending herself against the agent of the Technocracy. I saw his form move as she was preparing to pass him and watched as he opened his coat. Penny's first reaction was to step back, her eyes wide and her mouth hanging open. Then she pointed at his crotch and said something I couldn't hear. Whatever it was, her acid wit had an instant affect on the man. He blushed and turned away, pulling closed his trench coat at the same time. I caught just enough bare flesh to realize that paranoia had done me in. I'd spent two weeks, off and on, waiting for the Technocracy to break down my door because a man in a black coat and hat was making lewd gestures with his exposed pelvis whenever anyone caught his eye. At another time I would have laughed, but not that weekend. I did, however, make a mental note to remove the man from the neighborhood if I ever saw him again.

I could tell you about the wonders found in the depths of the Golden Pear, but I won't. Why depress anyone by explaining the miracles that have passed through my hands? Suffice to say that the Pear is the genuine article, and that it will go to the highest bidder in a closed auction. I have no doubt I'll make my money back tenfold. This time, I had the good sense to place it in my hidden safe. It was worth the extra fifteen minutes to open and reseal all of the wards.

Penny left my shop with a smile in place, but her skin was paler than normal and, despite her bravado, I knew that something had happened. She still joked, and she still drove a hard bargain, God love her, but I think she finally realized just what magic is all about, and just what it can do to you if you're not careful. I'm glad of that. I don't worry quite as much anymore about finding her dead in an alley or suffering the same sort of manipulations that dear Norna must have endured.

I was ready to believe that everything was right in the world again, until I checked the lunchtime news and heard that Aries Michaels' house had burned to the ground. Bad enough the revelation that I had been with a Nephandus, one of the great mages of corruption, but far worse to discover that Penny had not only stolen back what was stolen from me, but had burned down that mansion at the same time. I didn't think Jodi Blake was going to forgive that slight. She might have acknowledged the loss of the Golden Pear of B'ttger and called it a draw, but there was a matter of pride to be considered.

I may know very little about the Nephandi in general, and certainly less about Jodi Blake, but I can say in all honesty that she is not the type to forgive an assault on her pride. To her, the burning of the house and possibly the liberation of her properties could only be considered an act of war.

I didn't know who I was more worried for, Penny or myself. I suspected we'd both regret ever hearing about the Nephandi mage before the day was over. Naturally enough, I had reason to worry.

I almost didn't see the problem when it came through my door, primarily because the revenge Jodi sent my way was a very familiar face, and certainly not one I expected trouble from. Edith Blanton had been coming into my shop since almost the day I opened for business. She was a short, frail, old woman that always had time to chat and always found some item or other that caught her eye. While we often discussed the latest books and theories being tossed around in the New Age section of the store, we never agreed on any subject. I think we both liked it that way; it was a part of our friendly banter.

I heard the jangle of the bell over my door as I was headed towards the front of the shop after pausing for lunch. It only took a second for me to realize that something was amiss. A book had fallen from one of the numerous shelves in my back room, where the tomes of actual importance are kept, and I had just recovered from the loud boom when I turned at the sound of the front door opening. At first I thought I'd just placed it poorly when I set all of the jumbled books back in place after the earthquake, only to realize that I'd never seen that particular volume before. The book lay face-open on the ground with a graphic illustration of some hideous monstrosity towering over a screaming baby lying prone on an altar festooned with odd and unsettling illustrations. The monster had one hand in the child's chest, digging into a wound that opened the full length of the infant. Surrounding both the monster and its victim was a conjuring circle, and just outside of that circle stood a naked man with a goat's head and a naked woman kneeling beside him. The picture was unpleasant at best, and the implication was that the demon in the circle was forcing its way into the child's body. I found the concept repugnant. On the opposite page, the entry in bolder print mentioned sendings and the victims of demonic possession. I set the book aside, looking at the illustration briefly and marveling at the detail some of the older woodcutters had managed to create.

In hindsight, I'd have to say that that particular book falling down from the shelves and opening to that particular page was an omen. I hate omens; they tend to come true. I set the book on the shelf, leaving it open to the page I'd found, because I wanted to examine the illustration and the article on sendings more carefully. Then I headed back towards the front room of my shop, brushing the heavy cobwebs I'd gathered from the surface of the old tome.

By the time I'd pushed past the velvet curtain that led to my special room and the adjoining library, Edith Blanton was already on her way to the back of the store. I nodded and smiled as she walked towards the New Age books to see what was new. I wiped the spider webs from my fingertips while I got back to thinking about how I would handle Jodi Blake. I was worried. The Nephandi are notoriously dangerous, more so in my eyes than even the Marauders. I was still struggling with the warring thoughts of retribution and the memories of our romantic tryst when Edith came back to the front of the store.

Edith was holding a very large and utterly useless crystal ball in her hands when I noticed her. She was wearing her normal smile, a blend of uneasy curiosity and excitement at the prospect of our normal debates, but she wasn't speaking. "Hi, Edith. Do you want me to take that for you?" I was concerned for her health. That crystal ball weighed a good thirty pounds, and I was afraid she'd hurt herself trying to carry it. I was silent while I waited for her answer, but when she just stood there, I decided I should ask another question just to break the silence. "Nothing of interest in New Age today?"

"Actually I was looking for something a little different today, Bryce." I lifted an eyebrow, waiting for her to continue. She sounded like she had a cold coming on, and I made a mental note to give her some of my special tea, held for just such occasions. For Edith the tea would always be free. "I was wondering if you might have any pears."

"Pears?" I was perplexed, and at that moment the Pear of B'ttger was the farthest thing from my mind.

"Yes." Her voice had changed so completely that I was taken aback. Her normally soft, pleasant tones had been replaced by a deep, hissing growl. "A Golden Pear, you thieving bastard!" With her words, Edith cocked back the crystal orb as if it weighed no more than a softball, and then heaved it at my head. If she hadn't spoken, if she hadn't made me notice that something was amiss, I would have never had a chance of dodging the high-speed missile. I ducked behind the counter just in time to avoid the thing and called myself lucky. The wooden wall behind me cracked and fragmented under the sudden impact, and crystal shards exploded across my back as the ball shattered.

My dear old friend, Edith, hopped over the counter like a professional hurdle runner, and landed next to my crouching form before I had a chance to stand. Her thin legs were spread wide in a battle stance, and her wrinkled hands were balled into fists. I was still recovering from the sight when she grabbed a handful of my hair.

I'm not a giant by any stretch of the imagination, but I'm still a pretty stocky man. Just the same, Edith lifted me completely off the ground and tossed me into the Tarot cards a good ten feet away. She managed both feats with the one hand that was wrapped in my shaggy tresses. While I'm the first to admit that the Akashic Brotherhood was simply not my cup of tea, I was very grateful for the time I spent training with them at that moment. I managed to twist enough to avoid a broken back in the impact, but I still suffered from the bruising force, and I believe I probably received a few broken ribs for my trouble.

Edith charged at me like a bull, and her form warped and grew as she came. Her old, thin, papery flesh changed into a grey hide, and her short-cropped grey hair fell away from her scalp. I stayed in a crouch and waited as patiently as I could. It wasn't easy, because a slice of my life had just been destroyed, and the fragments looked intent on killing me. I really liked Edith, and I miss her. By the time she reached me, Edith had grown three feet taller and a good four feet wider. Her face had stretched until the skin ruptured completely, and a bloody malformed skull complete with tusks instead of canines had replaced her kindly visage.

She hit me with the force of a runaway freight train, and I twisted my body out of the way, using her own momentum to carry her into my specialties room, away from any casual passers-by and into the privacy where I could use my magic without being seen. By the time I'd gone through the velvet curtain that separated the rooms, the Edith-thing

was back up and ready for more. I grabbed for the first item I saw and threw it at her for distraction. She slapped the sword I tossed at her and gave me enough time to reach what I was after, the Tear of Kali.

I am absolutely convinced that my Avatar has been with me through several incarnations. That alone might explain why I joined the ranks of the Awakened at the age of four. I am also convinced that in at least one of those previous incarnations I was a member of the Euthanatos Tradition. I will point out for the record that I do not like the idea of killing anyone, one of my main reasons for not joining with the Euthanatos to date, but I am not above killing if I see no other option. Since charging past the heavy curtain into my back room, the Edith-monster had continued to change and now stood a solid nine feet in height. It literally had to stoop just to stand up. Growth was the least of its changes. I summoned my will and focused through the Tear of Kali, deliberately slicing my thumb on one of the sharp talons that made the base of the chalice. I forced the blood from the wound into the skull-shaped bowl and watched as the smooth sides of the cup consumed the dark red blood. The blood boiled as it was absorbed, and then the power awakened by my actions was released. There was no flash of light, no visible stream of energy, but a wave of power left the chalice just the same.

Just as the Edith-thing was reaching for me with a ten-fingered claw, the wave hit. Whatever it really was, the creature gave way to the entropy within. A very small squeak passed its blackened gums as its claw touched my shoulder. I pulled back and watched from the edge of the curtain that separated me from the rest of the world. In less than three seconds, the thing went from powerhouse to bubbling ruin on the ground at my feet. Inside of ten seconds, there was nothing left but dust.

I set the chalice back in its place, replaced the sword on shaking knees, and even managed to sweep the ashes into a garbage bag before the serious shakes hit me. I don't like killing, and I hope I never get to like the sensation. I made it up the stairs to my private bathroom before I vomited my lunch into the toilet. Two minutes later I came back down to my shop and started cleaning. The hole in the wall could wait, and I slapped a poster over the ruins with clear tape before I set all the Tarot cards back in place. After I'd finished with the cosmetic repairs, I double-checked the rest of my special rooms, wanting to know for certain that they were still protected from interference. The first thing I noticed was the disappearance of the book I'd set aside earlier. Having given its warning, whatever had dropped the book to the ground had apparently decided to take it back to wherever it belonged. That, or I'd imagined the entire event.

I didn't know if the creature I'd liquefied had been a demon, but I suspected there was a good chance it had. I looked around my special room very briefly and grabbed the only two items I could think of that would help me in that particular case: a dream-catcher and a spirit-catcher. The dream-catcher was a large loop of wood, decorated with feathers and fur and spun with a web in its center. The craftsmanship was hardly anything spectacular, but this particular dream-catcher was authentic and powerful. The spirit-catcher was carved from the thighbone of a bear and had been fashioned with openings on each end that formed the mouths of serpents. I knew how each item worked, and I went to handling the task as effectively as I could. With the spirit-catcher, I drew forth the spirit that had possessed Edith's body, looking with senses that most Sleepers refuse to believe exist and seeing the dark, writhing cloud of pestilence that was drawn into the thighbone. Something moved within that cloud, and

I knew that my worst fears were confirmed: The soul of Edith Blanton was stuck within the spirit of a demon, like as not being consumed for energy.

I lifted the dream-catcher, blocking the way into the spirit-catcher before the demon's essence could enter. Dream-catchers work on a simple process: they capture bad spirits and only allow the good spirits through, thus assuring happy dreams to the ones who use them. Edith Blanton's soul slid past the web in the dream-catcher with ease. The demon was snared and fought like a netted shark to escape the delicate webbing. Before the thing could break from its prison, I ushered Edith's spirit away from the spirit-catcher and focused my attention on the minion of Jodi Blake. It hissed as it was drawn into the ancient bone prison.

I locked the door and closed up shop, and then I started sweeping. I did my best to avoid the burning tears in my eyes, but anger and grief make a messy mix. I was angry because a good friend had been murdered. I grieved because I was partially responsible for her death. For one second, I thought I heard the voice of Edith Blanton whispering next to me. It said, "Thank you, Bryce," and then was gone. I can't be certain; I was very shaken by that point. I hope I heard her just the same.

I noticed what the poster I'd placed over the hole in the wall said for the first time. When you run a shop like mine, you receive flyers and posters for distribution constantly. I'd grabbed the first one available when I stuck it to the wall. The sign said: COME ONE COME ALL TO THE NECROTIC NEUROTIC HALLOWEEN BALL. Beneath the dripping letters was a bad illustration of two skeletons dancing around a jack-o-lantern. The only address given was a single word: "Waydown." Penny and her friends were having a party there later the same night. The party had supplies purchased with money from the sale of the Golden Pear. Somehow, I didn't doubt that Jodi Blake would know where the money came from, and I was almost certain she'd show up there, ready to have a little party of her own. I knew in my heart that Penny'd be there too, as Jodi's guest of honor.

I knew also that I'd have to crash that little party. I'd lost one friend already, and I was damned if I'd lose another. The only answer I got at Penny's place was the start of that damned funeral dirge, and I just couldn't wait through it to leave a message. I prayed I wouldn't be too late.



I arrived at the Ball in the style only possible with a Stutz Bearcat and a Twenties coonskin coat, complete with an antique Stanford pennant in the pocket, and I checked them to reveal a Victorian bridal gown, black lace with slashes of white in the sleeves, the type of thing a girl would have worn when her entire family had died, then she decided, "To hell with it! I'm getting married anyway!"

My lunch pail, with the NIN stickers, and the padlock, did not precisely go with the whole outfit, but then I wasn't going to leave Bimbo Yaga's talking cat back at my apartment with the rest of the stuff I'd snagged (minus what portion I'd fenced to Grimm). Call me superstitious, but while "Ding, dong, bell/ Pussy's in the well" had crossed my mind, it was a talking cat with glowing eyes, and if it hadn't smothered already after being locked for a day in a lunch pail, it probably wouldn't drown either.

And the idea of it succeeding in Houdini's last trick, a la Mr. Mistoffelees, then coming after me mad as ... well, a wet cat, was frankly something I did not want to deal

with. I needed to ask Neville and Blackrose and Spooky Pete their advice before letting the cat out of the box.

Unfortunately, they were all busy tending to the party (which I had completely flaked on — though for good reason), and even more unfortunately (and as I'd half-expected) Bimbo Yaga showed up looking for her cat and me.

It hadn't occurred to me before, but when you burn down someone's house, besides torching their altar and their assorted evil bric-a-brac, you also cremate their wardrobe. And Jodi Blake looked as pissed as you might expect of a woman who has spent an entire night and day in the same leather teddy, fishnets, and stiletto heels.

And underwear.

But with that look, that face, and the riding crop still in her hand, she was the dream girl for the entire B&D and S&M and T&A contingent, and they just lined up at her feet, prostrating themselves. "Mistress!" they cried. "Mistress! Beat me! Beat me!"

It was with long experience, I suppose, that she knew that whipping them or kicking them away would only made them crowd closer and kiss her feet, and so she ignored them instead, giving the same look that the Wicked Queen in "Snow White" had when her mirror told her that her Oil of Olay was starting to give out.

I crouched back against the wall, trying to hide in the shadow of a pillar, but then Bimbo Yaga leveled her riding crop at me like it was some sort of magic wand (and for all I know it was) and the room went silent, the stereo system shorting out. "You..." she breathed. "You. Little. Bitch."

I held my lunch pail, and her cat, closer to me. "Do I know you, lady?"

She gave a withering look, surveying the crowd, and I think looking closer to her true age as she realized she couldn't exactly say, "Why yes! You burnt my house down last night, after I screwed and murdered the pizza delivery boy while you were busy upstairs looting my altar room and stuffing my cat in a lunch pail! Don't you remember?"

Her lips pressed together in a cold, hard line. "Don't you have anything you wish to say to me, child?"

I paused, looking around at the crowd. They expected some response. "Well," I said after a long moment, "as a matter of fact, yes. When you got back last night, did you find a giant pair of blackened chicken legs in the ashes?"

Jodi looked perplexed, my comment having caught her out of left field, but then she seemed to get the reference. "Just who do you think you're dealing with, child?"

"Bimbo Yaga?" I asked, and I swear, her eyes turned about the same color as her miniskirt, and she screamed. Every candle in the place burnt blue at that moment, and I suddenly realized where the phrase "swear up a blue streak" came from, because with the nasty-sounding words she said next, the flames flashed like cobalt fireworks.

Once she recovered, she pointed the riding crop at me again. "Impudent chit! I challenge you to the Duel Arcane!"

"The what?" I said, but then Neville stepped forward.

He was dressed in coachman's blacks with a top hat and tails, and he shuffled his Gashlycrumb Deck from one grey-gloved hand to the other. "The Duel Arcane," he said, with all the emotion of a BBC announcer, "an ancient magician's honor duel. She has is-

sued the challenge, Penny, and as challenged party, you have the right to dictate the terms, the time, the place, and the method of combat.”

“It shall be to the death!” said Jodi, and I shrank back against the wall.

Neville looked at her calmly. “No.” The Gashlycrumb Tinies flew from one hand to the other. “You have issued an open challenge, one that may not be refused without loss of honor. Had you wished to challenge her to the Duel Thanatos, Penny could have refused, with no loss of honor to herself, simply acknowledging you as the greater mage. Had you challenged her to mere Certamen, she could not honorably refuse, yet neither would she risk death. But that is not the case.” Whoosh! went the cards again. “Do you wish to withdraw your challenge, suffering that loss of honor, then call for the Duel Thanatos? For I must remind you, if you best Penny in this challenge, you may not honorably challenge her again until she has bested you in turn.”

Binbo Yaga snarled, and her riding crop quivered in her hand like something you’d usually need batteries for. She glared at Neville, raising the crop in slow motion towards his face. “I. Do not. Withdraw. My challenge.”

Neville inclined his head. “Then honorably Penny must accept.”

Somehow I’d moved forward to confront Jodi, the path clear between us. “I accept,” I found myself saying. “The time and place shall be here and now. The stakes will be that if I win, you will go away, never again to bother me or mine. If I lose, I will surrender the contents of this box.” I held up the lunch pail, and I know Jodi knew that the cat was inside. “That is all.”

Neville looked to Jodi. “Do you accept or refuse the terms?”

“I accept,” she ground out.

Neville smiled, for once showing a hint of emotion, pleasure even. “Then the combatants may now accept tokens and favors from those who wish them well.” With ceremony and gravity, Neville presented me with his Gashlycrumb Deck. “For you, Penny. Use it well.”

Blackrose came forward and slipped her feather boa around my shoulders and placed a kiss on my cheek. “For luck.”

Jodi stood there, looking about, realizing that no one, not even her former admirers, was going to wish her well.

I don’t know what I was doing. I really don’t. But I realized that Neville had trapped Jodi in her own error, and if I ever wanted to be free of the bitch, I’d have to run with it. “Let’s begin, shall we?”

I shuffled the Gashlycrumb Tinies till I came to one that felt right. I glanced at it, and the Gorey illustration and caption had changed from the original. I held it out for her to see: “J is for JODI who took lye by mistake.”

She paused and blanched, clutching her throat, but then opened her mouth and pointed her riding crop. ““And this figure he added eek thereto, That if gold rust, what shal iren do?”” Her voice was harsh and raspy, ruined by the lye I had somehow just made appear in her throat, and the old words of Middle English were almost incomprehensible.

But the padlock fell from the box in my arms, and my lunch pail began to fall apart at the seams.

The cat. With the cat back, she'd have back most of her power, and the last thing I wanted to deal with was both of them.

I ran, the rusting lunch pail clutched in my arms, the Gashlycrumb Deck scattering in my wake. And thank the gods, I may have been in high button granny boots, but Jodi was in five-inch stiletto heels, and I was a good bit younger than she was anyway.

Fairy tales. Fairy tales. Goddamn it, think, Penny. Think.

I gained the door, running out and turning left on instinct. "Childe Rowland," Burd Ellen, who ran widdershins round the church and entered Elfland under the Erl King's power. But her brother Rowland followed her, passing safely with Merlin's charm.

I dashed right through the Rocky Horror cast, where on the wall of church, appropriately enough, the projector had the scene where the dogs are being set after Rocky, and rounded the far corner of the church, Jodi after me, screaming and cursing and somehow managing to run in her stiletto heels while the lunch pail disintegrated in my arms.

"Open, door! Open, door, and let me come in!" I cried, and mist swirled in the shadows, and I ran through it, clutching the struggling cat that was trying to work its way through the silk and the rusted remains of my lunch pail.

Around the church again, and it looked stranger and mistier, giant spider webs hung with dewdrops the size of diamonds, and hundreds of tiny spiders everywhere with jeweled eyes, like a thousand Silver Nutmegs.

Around the church a fourth time, and I was back to the front, the doors standing wide open, a hundred times as grand as the St. Francis was before, spun with silver and diamond lights. FELICITATIONS spelled the giant web over the entrance, and I ran in, Jodi behind me, her stiletto heels clicking like the Devil's hooves.

Fairy tales. "Baba Yaga" and "The Water Nixie." *But the boy dropped a brush/ Which had magical bristles/ Which surrounded the nixie with acres of thistles...*

On instinct, I loosed Blackrose's feather boa, and I heard Jodi snarl behind me and pause, wrestling, I suppose, with a plumed serpent. Or at least I hoped so.

I ran into the church, widdershins and widdershins, up a spiral stair paved with silver and hung with webbing, higher and higher into the spiritual reality of the Waydown, tiny spiders flashing helpful messages in their webs as I ran up and up, the lunch pail falling to bits in my arms and the cat coming loose from the silk.

I reached the top of the stair and sprawled headlong onto a floor of gossamer webbing and silver mesh, the lunch pail and funeral silk flying from my arms, tumbling end over end as bits of rust and Nine-Inch-Nails stickers flew in all directions, and the Chinese funeral cloth unfurled.

The cat came to rest on its feet, back arched, hissing, and eyes glowing green.

There was a chime on the silver stairs behind me, and I looked up to see Jodi there, her riding crop in her hand, the tip sparkling with golden barbs. She smiled cruelly, "So...."

"You broke the pact!" shrieked the cat. "You broke it!"

Jodi looked to Grimalkin, her face a mask of annoyance. "Not now, precious. Mother has business to attend to —"

“You broke the pact!” the cat screamed. “Milk! Blood! A human heart stewed in wine! Each full moon! And it’s a night past!”

I had the image of a very spoiled four-year-old having a tantrum, ‘cause that’s just what the cat sounded like.

Jodi smiled with ill humor, looking at the funeral cloth. “You did have your silken bed...”

The cat did not look amused at the joke, and it was then that the bell of the Silver Cathedral, or whatever this place was, began to come down. Then I saw that it wasn’t a bell. It was the world’s largest spider, shining silver like liquid mercury given form.

Jodi watched it, her mouth hanging open, and the spider reached down to her abdomen, pulling forth a hank of webbing and holding it between her four forelegs like a gigantic cat’s cradle: WELCOME TO MY PARLOR

It folded the hammock of silver silk together, stretching it out again in a smaller size: SHOO FLY

Jodi gaped in horror, and her lips shrank away from her teeth, her face becoming skeletal, or at least looking like a corpse about four hundred years old, and I haven’t the faintest idea what she turned into. A banshee, a harpy — hell, for all I know it was a bandersnatch, the thing flew out of there so fast, screaming and shrieking and clawing aside the little spiders that tried to block its way.

I didn’t have a broomstick or magic carpet or anything else to follow with, and I just sat there, looking up at the giant silver spider.

It held up its cat’s cradle again: SALUTATIONS, PENNY. Fold and twist: GOOD WORK

“Norna?” I breathed.

The spider reached down to its abdomen and pulled forth a great deal of webbing, holding forth a message the size of a movie screen: WEAVER

“What — ?” I said. “What happened to you?”

She folded the giant sheet like origami, holding forth a cocoon with the effigy of a fat man in it and the legend: DOCTOR HIMIITSU

She hung the effigy aside like she would for her larder and added a caption over it: SOME PIG

I sat, holding my breath, and ... Weaver ... the giant spider, spun out three messages: BUSY, BYE, and BEST WISHES

The cat watched the spider ascend long after I’d finished, then turned to look at me. “You bested my old mistress. Do you have any human hearts stewed in wine?”

The hopefulness and the innocence in that voice were chilling, and at the same time very, very Goth. “Sorry, fresh out.” I brushed my hair back out of my eyes. “How about fresh cream and sushi?”

The cat cocked its head and blinked. “With raw eel?”

“And quail eggs,” I said, and the cat blinked again.

“Yes, mistress,” it said, then padded over and curled up in my lap, purring.

I realized then and there that I'd just contracted a familiar. The stories about bribing Baba Yaga's cat were right after all.

I began to stroke its fur. "So is your name really Grimalkin?"

The cat purred. "It's the name she gave me." Purr, knead. "It was all the rage four-hundred years ago."

"We'll have to find you a better one."

I leaned back and smiled. T.S. Eliot had written other things than *The Waste Land* and "The Hollow Men." *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, for one.

I stroked the fur of my new familiar. "The Naming of Cats is a difficult matter./ It isn't just one of your holiday games./ You may think at first I'm mad as a hatter/ When I tell you, a cat must have THREE DIFFERENT NAMES."

The cat purred in agreement, looking forward, I suppose, to raw eel and quail eggs and cream as a change from blood and milk and human hearts stewed in wine.

Talking cats. Witches. Giant spiders. Silver Keys.

I sighed. I suppose I could get used to this too.

I got to the Waydown too late to stop the conflict between Penny and Jodi Blake. When I arrived, most of the people in the club were busily doing their own thing, drinking, dancing, and few other activities that were patently illegal. There were a few exceptions.

Neville was picking an up his trademark Gashlycrumb Tinies cards from where they'd scattered all over the floor, and cursing under his breath. I could see why he was upset. One of them faced me briefly (B is for BRYCE, assaulted by bears). It had been bent and trampled roughly. I saw the image of myself on the card and was slightly startled. As I said before, I hate prophecies. I knew Neville, and I knew he couldn't possibly be happy about the situation. "Neville, I need to talk to you."

Neville stared back at me, eyelids half-lowered and a sneer on his thin lips. "Well, if it isn't Bryce Grimm. What brings you to the Waydown? Decide it was time to get a life?" Neville hasn't liked me for a long time and, frankly, I just couldn't care less. Whatever I might have done to him is long in the past, and if he has a problem he doesn't want to discuss with me, well, I can go on ignoring his waspish little comments.

"I have a life, Neville. What I need right now is to know where Penny Dreadful is. Have you seen her?" I took a look around the burned-out church, ignoring the garish Halloween decorations and focusing on distinguishing Penny from the multitudes of others dressed in equally old black clothes. I couldn't see her.

Neville sniffed disdainfully and deftly shuffled his cards again, whipping them between his hands with the skill of a Vegas card-shark. "She isn't here. She left with another woman in hot pursuit." He paused for a moment, arranging his face and trying hard not to look worried. "They were dueling over the contents of Penny's lunchbox or some such nonsense. The Duel Arcane no less."

"How long ago?" It took a minute to get the words past my lips; they'd gone cold and numb at the thought of Penny taking on a Nephandi mage strong enough to completely alter an old woman into a killing machine. Worse still, taking her on in an honor duel,

with no help from anyone else. Worst of all, doing so in public. The Paradox Spirits were probably in a uproar already.

“Maybe twenty minutes. A little more, a little less.” Apparently remembering he was supposed to be angry with me over whatever imagined slight, Neville pressed his lips together and stared down his nose at me. “Why do you care?”

“Because I owe Penny, and I don’t want to see her destroyed.”

“Well, not that it should matter to you, but I believe she ended up in the Umbra. She’ll be back when she’s finished her fight.” He didn’t say it, he didn’t have to, the unspoken words he left out were simple enough for any mage to understand. She’ll be back if she’s still alive.

I nodded and turned away. Neville looked like he was ready to say something, but I didn’t wait around to hear his words. I moved through the Waydown, pressing past people years younger than me and feeling decidedly out of place in my jeans and T-shirt. There were two kids dancing close together, managing to find a rhythm in the discordant crap playing on the stereo system. Both of them had some sort of reflective contact lens in one eye, the left, that made the eye appear red. I wondered what the next fashion statement would be and decided I really didn’t want to know. Several of the Goths looked at me and sneered, but most didn’t care if I was there or not. A few even recognized me and waved or nodded. I nodded in return, but didn’t even try my luck with waving; the bruises on my ribs and on my shoulders kept me from making any unnecessary gestures.

The music was too loud, and the room was all but flooded with the mixed stench of clove cigarettes, perfume, and other less identifiable substances. I had almost given up hope of seeing Penny or Jodi when Jodi stepped out of the shadows. What little she was wearing was only enough to emphasize her statuesque physique, and my mind went back only two days to the afternoon of pleasure we had shared. I pushed the thoughts away, remembering that this woman had killed Edith Blanton and could well have done the same to Penny. One way or the other, there was going to be a reckoning.

Jodi was looking away from me, and I stepped further into the shadows of the club as she started turning, surveying the depths of the old church. I bumped someone behind me, and whoever he was, he made threatening sounds in his throat until I apologized softly. When Jodi Blake was finally looking in my direction, she saw only the disgruntled boy in false Victorian clothes. I saw much more. I could read the anger on her from a hundred yards away. She was livid, but she was also looking rather worried. That suited me just fine. I took her confused anger to mean that Penny had escaped, and I hoped I wasn’t coming to the wrong conclusion.

Jodi didn’t walk so much as saunter towards the door, and I watched her from the shadows. Several times during the trek, one person or another tried to engage her in dancing or conversation, or perhaps even other activities, but she was obviously not in the mood to stop. A Hollow One I knew by face but not by name tried to confront her, but Jodi simply stared the girl down.

She walked towards the exit, and I followed a discreet distance behind her. I wanted to confront the witch, but not in a place with so many Sleepers. I’ve had a few dealings with Paradox Spirits in the past and, you may rest assured, they are not fun to mess with. When she stepped out the door, I saw her moving towards the left and waited a few seconds before following. Neville nodded to me, pointing to where she went, and I thanked him with a return nod.

I slipped out the door just as a small crowd was trying to get in, and I spotted her as she stepped around the corner of the St. Francis' desecrated remains. Damn me, but I still couldn't stop thinking about her. I don't like to sound like a starving puppy, but she was an amazing lover. I just wish things could have turned out differently. I have little doubt she messed with my mind. I think she must be amazingly adept at magic because, to this day, I'm still bewitched by the thought of her.

I waited until she was again just around the corner, and then I moved that way. I wasn't going to lose her, not if I had anything to say about the situation. I peeked around the next corner and saw her standing still, looking at me. She did not look happy.

"Hello, Bryce."

"Jodi," I managed not to stutter, but it wasn't easy. I kept wondering how I could be thinking so much about being with this woman after she had killed a friend of mine and forced myself to ignore her "come hither" look.

"Well, this is a sticky situation, isn't it?" She moved towards me as she spoke, and fool that I am, I walked towards her in return. "All over a little piece of antiquated clock-work."

"That's not what this is about at all, and you know it."

She pouted prettily, and I bit down on the inside of my mouth, using the pain to keep me coherent. I had a nervous feeling in my stomach, and my blood pressure was on the rise again. The night air was cold, but I was sweating. "Then what is it about, Bryce?"

"Deceptions. You lied to me, and you killed a good friend of mine. You stole my property. For all I know, you've killed another friend in the last half-hour."

She chuckled throatily and smiled as brightly as I've ever seen any woman smile. In that second I could have believed that she was innocence incarnate. Surely any angel this lovely could not be a demon in disguise. "I didn't kill your friend, sweet Bryce, you did. I just helped her see the world a little differently. And as for your little girlfriend... Well, let's just say that isn't finished yet." I guess that last line was all it took to make me truly angry. I could forgive a lot, but I could not condone a threat against Penny or anyone else I cared about. Worse still, I could tell by the tone of her voice that she didn't mean to hurt Penny's body, she meant to ruin Penny's soul.

I held myself in check when she wrapped her arms around me and pulled herself against my chest. My body was trembling with the desperate need to caress her, and it took all of my effort not to give in. I don't think I could have resisted her if not for the threat against Penny. "Let's just let bygones be bygones," she purred softly against my ear. Her breath was warm and sweet and smelled of springtime and happier days when I was still innocent. "Give me the Pear, and you can have me. For as long as you want me."

She placed warm lips against my neck and nuzzled there for a second, I wanted to push her away, but I just couldn't. "I need the Pear, Bryce. I'm older than I look, and my deal with the Dark Lords does not include eternal youth. I'm afraid to die, afraid of what they'll do to me. Please, help me, Bryce. I'll be yours forever, if you'll just help me.

God help me, evil wears a lovely form. I don't know if I'd have said yes or not; I may never have to worry about it. I'd almost closed my eyes for a second, they were bare-

ly open at all, when I noticed the forms in the shadows. There were several, I couldn't say the exact number if my life depended on the total. Somewhere along the way, Jodi had called for reinforcements. The image of Neville's card flashed in my mind — "B is for BRYCE, assaulted by bears." I reiterate, I hate prophecies, in any form. They have a nasty tendency to come true.

Dark forms moved among the shadows, drifting and gliding, darkness that could only be seen as a deeper black against the grey of the shadows that buried the alleyway. They made no sound, and that was maybe even worse than their shifting forms. Silent killers that were at home in the places where human eyes hate to look, at home in the shadows. I pulled back from Jodi, looking down at the water-stained street in an attempt to clear my head of her influences. If I'd looked in her eyes again, I know I'd have been lost for all time in the depths of her power. The puddles held my reflection and hers, and I looked at myself briefly, shocked by how pale I was. Then I looked at Jodi's form in the still waters and pushed her away from me, appalled by the crone that my reflection held in its arms, cracked, thin lips whispering in my reflection's ear.

I looked up at Jodi, my heart deep in my throat, my stomach doing some nasty turns as I thought about what I'd been doing with the hag reflected in the puddles, how I'd held her in my arms and kissed her, made love to her.

Jodi smiled lovingly. She was as beautiful as ever and stepped back into the shadows of the old church. Her eyes held a deep regret, and I knew that she understood what I'd seen in the water: her true form, minus the magics that made her an angel in appearance. "One last warning, Bryce: Don't make me come looking for the Pear of B'ttger. I need it, and I'll have it. I have to leave now, but I'll see you soon." Her voice was filled with a sorrow that made a lie of her smile. I almost felt sorry for her right then.

I didn't see where she went, I was too busy with the monsters around me. They moved in, and I did my best to defend myself. My eyes alone were not up to the task, and my ears were useless in tracking creatures that made no sound. The first of the shadow-things struck me before I even saw it move. Darkness clutched at my shoulder, and a cold, numbing fire seared my flesh beneath the T-shirt. Eyes burned in that shadow, but the light that blazed from the darkness was pale, poor indication of anything save the creature's foul mood.

The second one managed to sink impossibly long teeth into my leg and pulled back with a good deal of my flesh and tattered Levis hanging from its mouth, a flat shadow holding a three-dimensional section of my body in its two-dimensional jaws and chewing greedily. I won't lie, I screamed shrilly as the pain of the wound ignited on ruptured nerve endings. Right around then I decided that coincidental magic alone wouldn't help me make my escape. I turned and ran like hell away from the old St. Francis.

I've had nightmares about being chased by the Men In Black. I've suffered from those dreams ever since they captured me at the age of sixteen. This was worse. I was bleeding heavily from the wound in my leg, and I could feel a sickening cold sensation pulling at my mind, crawling up from the wound and trying to woo me with promises of sweet oblivion. At the same time, those silent freakish bastards were oozing through the darkness of the back alleys and poorly lit streets.

I hopped and ran as best I could, feeling the hairs on my neck rise and try to crawl away at the thought of the shades that pursued me. Something dark and cold ripped tatters

from the back of my shirt and drew blood that dribbled down across the small of my back and soaked through the seat of my jeans. I felt the numbness increasing as I tried to find a suitable spot for my final stand.

Finally, I came to a streetlight that was burning brightly and stood under the powerful yellow glow emanating from the sodium bulb. The dark forms gathered around the pool of light that surrounded me, uncertain what to do. They conversed among themselves, gesturing and pointing at me with long tapered claws, but whatever they were saying was not for my ears. I heard only the sound of my own ragged breathing and the pounding of my pulse slapping against my temples.

Finally one of them tried to brave the stark light, and I watched as the taloned paw of the shadow-thing reached into the circle of brightness. I saw the dark shape push into the area as if struggling to force its hand through a stonewall, and as it finally achieved this monumental effort, I watched the blackness separate and come unraveled. The seemingly solid black form jerked and tried to pull back as its shadow-flesh grew grey and ash-like. Then the limb simply faded away, leaving the withered stump to burn as the creature fell away from the light. I was right in my hopes; the shadow-creatures suffered the same weakness as true shadows, they could not stand the bright light, could not survive without the darkness that spawned them.

My joy was short-lived. I could still feel the venom from their dark claws coursing into my bloodstream. My mind wanted to give into the cold, bleak weariness that the creatures had forced into my body. I forced fresh air into my lungs and focused my will, warping the reality set around me and burning the poisons out of my system. I was still weak, but I could think again, think clearly enough to fight back against the things that waited for me beyond my island of safety.

The pain from my wounds aided in keeping me alert, and I made a mental note to clean them thoroughly when I got back to the apartment above my shop. As for the shadow-monsters, I decided to try my luck with the light around me. I once again focused my will, fueled my beliefs in the ways of the universe and supercharged the street lamp above me. The light grew brighter, and shifted from a dull yellow to a burning white. As the light grew stronger, the shadow-creatures suddenly found themselves engulfed in the luminescence. The creatures that had surrounded my area of safety suddenly found themselves in turn surrounded by the light and screamed as the fiery glow expanded, lighting the surrounding block as well as if it were high noon on a sunny day. The writhing shapes made a sound that was barely over a whisper, but the only sound they'd made at all as they burned out of existence.

The light had taken all it could, and the sodium bulb exploded in a flaming arc of released gasses, showering me for the second time that day with broken glass. One wedge of glass cut across my face, leaving a thin line of pain that started another path of blood on my body. I dropped into a crouch and covered my head with my arms in a futile attempt to avoid suffering more scrapes and cuts as the hot glass rained down around me. Then the brilliance died, and the darkness surrounded me again. I stayed perfectly still for a long time, waiting for the claws to come for me from the depths of the night.

Instead, I heard the voice of Jodi Blake as she stepped out of the darkness. She was smiling, the only nasty expression I'd seen on her face in the time I'd known her. A smile of triumph, a promise of pain. "Well, you handled that better than I would have expected, Bryce. Ready for another round, or will you give me the Pear?"

I stared at Jodi for a long while. No words came to mind that could express my bitterness, my cold rage at what she had done. I wanted nothing so much at that moment as I wanted to cause her pain. I wanted her to suffer at least a fraction of the grief she'd caused me, Penny and dear old Edith. I returned her smile, tasting the flavor of my own blood as it spilled past my upper-lip and leaked past my clenched teeth.

Aries Michaels had taught me a lovely little spell when he was my teacher. It was simple, it was easy, and best of all, I knew it would hurt Jodi as little else could. I plucked a fragment of glass from the ground, ignoring the cut I gave myself in the process, and chanted three words in a language long dead. Jodi started, expecting no resistance from me so late in the game. Then she smiled when nothing at all happened.

I held the piece of glass in front of me, and I finished the spell with words in English. "Let the truth be revealed for all to see." The shard grew hot in my hand, and a shaft of light lanced out to strike Jodi full on. She raised her hands to ward off the brilliance, and I watched as the illusions were burned away from her, revealing once more the wretched old hag that I'd seen earlier in the pool of water.

Jodi stared at the hands and arms before her, crying out as the illusions she'd crafted so carefully were destroyed. The light from the glass faded, but the false skin she'd worn did not reappear. Jodi stepped back, shaking her head and mumbling softly to herself, horrified by what she'd become. What she'd already been for some time. Few people can stand to face the truth about themselves, their weaknesses, their flaws. The spell I'd cast showed every stain on Jodi's soul, and the stains were deep and plentiful.

The hag cried out with a scream worthy of an air raid siren, and then she ran, moving faster than should have been humanly possible. I stayed where I was, waiting to have the strength to move again. Twenty minutes later, I finally stood and started the trek back to my home.

It was almost morning when I finally made it back to my shop. The sky was lit with false dawn. A few stragglers walked the streets with me, weaving their way to unknown destinations or slumping down in back alleys, ready to call it a night and fully prepared to make the wet, filthy crawl-spaces their bed until they had rested a while. None of them paid me any mind, most were too drunk to care if they were bleeding, let alone to care if a complete stranger was wounded and badly shaken.

I used magic once more that night to heal the worst of my wounds after I had cleaned them as best I could. Either I'm unbelievably lucky, or the Paradox Spirits have opted not to make me suffer for my actions... Not yet at least. They will, but they have been known to wait until you are least prepared to handle the problem.

I found a note waiting for me when I got back to my shop. It was written in a lovely flowing script, red ink fading towards brown and clotting slightly on a plain white piece of paper. No surprise, it was from Jodi. "Dear Bryce, I would love to stay and settle matters, but I have to leave for now. Think about my offer. I'll even promise to leave your friend alone if you just give the Pear of B'ttger to me. I am even willing to overlook the nasty little trick you pulled on me. I'm sure we'll talk again soon. Until then, dream of me, as I will surely dream of you. Love, Jodi."

She'd even placed a heart as the dot on her i.

I burned the letter.

I checked as soon as I entered the shop. The Golden Pear of B'ttger and the Elector of Saxony's Key were still where they belonged, and nothing else had been touched. There was a very brief message from Penny on my machine. "Grimm, I'm okay. Neville told me you checked. We'll talk later. Bye."

At least she had the decency to call. I slept soundly for several hours. I don't remember much about my dreams, but I do remember that Jodi was in them, and I remember a pile of skulls, some still hanging with meat and others old and worn almost to dust. The only part of the dream that scared me occurred after I woke up to the sound of my alarm clock screaming in my ear. I remember waking up feeling very refreshed and knowing that whatever happened in that hideous dream, I was enjoying myself whole-heartedly.

God help me, the future is a scary thing.



THE GREAT ESCAPE



EDØ VAN BELKØTI

There were more than thirty minutes until show time, and the Pantages Theater was already half-full. From his backstage dressing room, Romano Minardi could hear the buzz of people growing steadily louder, could feel the air becoming thick with expectation. The feeling had always excited him, sharpened his magic, and made him look forward to performing. Tonight, however, his excitement was tainted by a slash of worry. Mixed in with the usual anticipation, there was also a sickening feeling — a feeling of dread.

“Go see if he’s out there,” Romano said sharply from his seat in front of the makeup mirror, his ever-present cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth.

Roxanne May pulled at her rhinestone-studded red dress, making sure it hugged her figure like a second skin. “The show’s been sold-out for weeks, Roman.” She adjusted the dress one last time. “There’s no way he could have gotten a seat up front.”

Romano butted out his cigarette in the overflowing ashtray and immediately took a fresh one from the crumpled pack on the vanity. “Yeah, but with the earthquake on Friday and the fog closing off the bridge, all kinds of people won’t be showing up.”

She took a few slinky steps toward him, then bent over his shoulder and looked at him in the mirror. “Stop worrying,” she said. “He won’t be there.” She ran her fingers gently over the taut muscles of his back.

Romano tilted his head forward, allowing Roxanne’s fingers to creep up over his neck and shoulders. For a moment he started to relax, Roxy’s fingers working a magic of their own on his stiff, tense muscles. He breathed easier for a few moments, but Roxy’s efforts weren’t enough to stem the tide. The feeling of worry, perhaps even fear, rose up again from somewhere deep inside of him, washing over him in a wave.

He clenched his fist and slammed it down onto the vanity. Jars toppled. Lids bounced and rolled. “Dammit, Roxy! Just go and see if he’s there.”

Roxanne pulled her hands away from him as if he’d suddenly become scalding beneath her fingertips. “All right, all right,” she said, turning for the door.

She left the room without another word.

Romano sat back in his chair and inhaled deeply on his cigarette. He’d been on tour for the past six months performing his particular brand of magic and illusion to sold-out theaters across the country. Tonight’s show was the second in San Francisco and the second-to-last of the tour. Tomorrow the show moved to Los Angeles, where the tour had opened, for one last show. Then, with the tour completed, preparations would begin for a prime-time network television special that was scheduled for February’s sweeps week.

But first he had to get through the last two shows, starting with tonight’s. Normally, this evening’s show would be just another performance — a two and a half hour mix of pounding rock music and sex appeal that made use of sleight of hand, age-old illusions and just a touch of coincidental magic. But ever since Seattle and the appearance of the man in the dark suit, Romano had been on edge. He’d tried to tell himself that the man in the dark suit was a fan, or an illusionist in his own right trying to learn something new about the art. But after the man in the dark suit had watched four consecutive shows in four different cities, each time from a seat that was exactly front-row center, Romano knew exactly what he was.

A Technomancer come to shut him down.

Romano took a long drag on the short stub of his cigarette and pinched off the butt with the tips of his fingers. Less than ten seconds passed before he lit up another.

He had kept his use of coincidental magic to a minimum, using it only in his finale, and even then not for more than a second or two. He had hoped to get through the tour without catching the attention of the Technocracy, but Arthur Gardner, the tour's road manager, had added extra shows in Milwaukee and Toronto, extending the tour by a week and giving the Technocracy more time to become aware of his use of magic.

Still, Romano was stubbornly confident that he could finish the tour untouched by the Technomancers. Part of him knew he was being foolish, but another part of him — a stronger part — knew it couldn't be helped. He was consumed by his desire to complete the tour and the television special — two crucial steps on the way to his Ascension — and he wasn't going to let anything stand in his way, not even a dark-suited Technomancer.

The door opened a crack, then slowly swung wide on its hinges. Roxanne stepped into the room, her pale lips pressed together into a tight, white line.

"Well?" asked Romano.

She closed the door behind her, turned to face him, and nodded. "He's out there. In the middle of the front row. He's just sitting there, not moving. Not even his eyes."

"Shit!" Romano turned back around, his head coming to rest in his upturned hands.

Roxanne was silent a few moments, then rushed across the room to be by his side. "Don't do the show, Roman," she pleaded. "I don't know what that guy's doing out there, but he gives me the creeps." She folded her arms across her chest as if to stave off a chill.

"I'm still doing the show." Romano's voice was impassive.

"But you don't know what he's doing out there. He could have a gun on him. Maybe he's just waiting to shoot you during the middle of the act."

"No," said Romano. "He's not going to shoot me."

She leaned over his shoulder, squinting her eyes against the rising cigarette smoke as she looked at him in the mirror. "How can you be so sure?"

"I just am."

Roxanne stood up, one hand on Romano's shoulder, the fingers of the other raking through his hair. "All right, then. If he's not stalking you, what is he doing?"

Romano had explained the mage world to Roxanne many times, but like most acolytes, she didn't always understand it. Some things she comprehended with ease, while others were absolutely incomprehensible to her. For a moment he considered telling her that the man in the dark suit was a talent scout of some sort, or maybe a big New York agent, but lying to her now didn't seem fair. Instead, he opted for the truth.

"He's a Technomancer," he said.

Roxanne continued to stroke his hair in silence, thinking. "Is he part of that stuff you were telling me about? The Teck-naw-cra-see?"

"The Technocracy, yes."

She twirled a lock of his thick black hair for a few more seconds, then abruptly stopped. "That still means he's here to get rid of you," she said, a sharp edge of realization in her voice.

“Maybe.”

She stepped away from him and began pacing the room. “You can’t do the show,” she said matter-of-factly. “It’s too dangerous. I’ll just tell them you’ve taken ill and can’t perform.”

“No!” Romano cried, getting up from his chair. “I have to do the show. I have to complete the tour!” He paused for a moment, realizing he’d been shouting. “It’s a necessary step toward my Ascension.” He turned away from her to butt out his cigarette.

“Your Ascension?” she said. “Is this Ascension of yours worth the risk?”

“Yes.”

Roxanne just glared at him, as if she’d come up against this sort of wall before. “I can’t believe how stubborn you’re being — even when you know it might get you killed.”

“I can’t help it. I’m a fanatic, a perfectionist. I can’t leave something half-finished,” Romano said smoothly, starting to put on the charm. “Besides, there’s nothing to worry about, Roxy.” He put his hands on her shoulders and held her at arm’s length as he spoke. “There’s nothing this mage can do to hurt me, not even in the final escape.”

“Are you sure?”

“He’s been in the audience the last four shows, but there are almost a dozen coincidental variables in the final escape, plus one that I’ve never used before. That’s more than enough to see me through to the end of the tour and the TV special.”

“Why don’t you do the escape without your magic?”

Romano thought about it, going through the escape sequence in his mind. “No, it can’t be done. The escape was never designed to be accomplished without the help of some coincidental magic. Anyway, even if it could be done, it’s too late in the tour to start trying it now.”

Just then, the dressing room door opened, and a young man popped his head into the room. “Five minutes!” he said, before quickly closing the door again.

Roxanne looked at him, chewing her bottom lip.

“Don’t worry,” he said, smiling. “Everything is going to be fine.”

She attempted a smile of her own.

They came together in a tight embrace, neither of them wanting to be the first to let go.



“Ladies and gentlemen,” said the emcee. “The Pantages Theater is proud to bring you a master showman, a world-class illusionist and an escape artist who knows no rivals.” A pause. “Accompanied by his lovely assistant Roxanne... Mr. Ro-ma-no Min-nar-deeeee!”

Romano stepped onto the stage to the sound of wild applause. He gestured to Roxanne with a dramatic wave of his hand, and she posed for a moment, gave a slight bow, then extended her arm in Romano’s direction. He raised his hands above him, bowed deeply, then quickly started into the show, moving to the rhythmic, mood-setting music that would play continuously while he was onstage.

As he turned and headed downstage, he caught a glimpse of the man in the dark suit sitting in the front row, unmoving, as patient as a cat. The sight of him unsettled Romano,

causing him to miss a step and stumble. He quickly regained his composure, promising himself not to look out into the audience again.

After all, he didn't have to. The man in the dark suit would always be there.

Until the end.

With the little misstep behind him, Romano settled into the first half of his show, which was composed of several standard illusions (performed with the trademark Minardi flare) and a final daring escape — the Chinese Water Torture Cell escape made famous by renowned escapologist and conjurer Harry Houdini.

The water cell wasn't a particularly difficult escape, but it did require the escapee to be able to hold his breath for an incredibly long period of time. The trick had never given Romano trouble. For one, he had trained himself to hold his breath for well over three minutes. Second, the water inside the tank was always ice-cold, slowing his heart rate and metabolism enough to give him an extra few seconds to complete the escape. But in addition to those safeguards, his Sphere of magic was Time. If he ever did get into trouble, he could always slow down time around him, giving him as much time as he needed to escape from the tank. Fortunately, he'd never had to resort to that, but knowing the safety net was there gave him the confidence to perform the trick flawlessly every time out.

The theater was silent, the audience holding its collective breath as Romano's ankles were fastened into the two hinged stocks which would become the lid of the cell. Then he was bound in a straitjacket (an improvement on the Houdini version), given a pair of goggles and hoisted up — feet first — over the stage. Then, with a rendition of "Asleep in the Deep" playing in the background, Romano was lowered into the cell, which was ringed by stagehands armed with axes to smash the glass in case something went wrong.

Before his head went under the water, Romano glanced over at Roxanne. There was a worried look on her face, different from the overly dramatic one she usually gave him for the benefit of the audience. This one was genuine.

"I'll be all—" he began to say, but just then his words were cut off by the cold bite of the water against his skin.

Silence.

A curtain was raised around the tank.

Darkness.

Romano began his escape procedure, slipping out of the straitjacket with relative ease, as the lubricating effect of the water made the task easier to accomplish than on dry land. Then it was onto the stocks around his feet. Normally it was just a simple matter of twisting his foot and sliding his ankle through the stocks, but this time he felt there was something different about the setup, something wrong. He could feel his ankles pressing hard against the stocks, as if they were tighter than usual.

He looked up through his goggles, through the water, and saw that the lid had not been closed properly. The holes for his feet were slightly overlapped, causing them to be considerably smaller than normal and making it almost impossible for him to complete the escape as planned.

Romano twisted and pulled at his feet, feeling the first aches beginning to stab at his oxygen-starved lungs. Soon his body would start to weaken, then grow numb. Of course, he could use his magic to get himself out of this predicament, but he dared not — not this early in the show, and certainly not with a Technomancer in the audience, front-row center.

With his lungs screaming for air, he curled himself up and began pulling on his ankles in earnest. Closing his mind off to the pain, he jerked his foot roughly through the shackle, scraping it badly.

One leg free.

Blood flowed from the torn skin around his ankle and on top of his foot, clouding the water like smoke.

Ignoring the pain, he grabbed hold of his other ankle and pulled on it hard, tearing the skin from his heel.

The water grew darker, but he was free.

Quickly, he turned himself around in the cell, opened the lid and popped his head above the water.

Air had never tasted so sweet.

After a few quick gasps he crawled out of the cell, hearing the frantic calls of Roxy, who'd been timing the escape for the audience.

"Four and a half minutes!" she cried. "It's too long! Get him out!"

Romano hobbled downstage and off behind a curtain. From where he was backstage, he could hear the shrieks from the crowd as they lowered the curtain around the tank, only to discover it empty save for the bloody water.

He limped onto the stage again, waving to the crowd, doing his best to smile.

The crowd was stunned into silence, then broke into roaring applause.

"Are you all right?" Roxanne asked as she neared him on the stage.

"I'm fine," he said.

Then she noticed the blood flowing freely from the gash on his ankle.

"Draw the curtains!" she called. "Somebody help me get him to the dressing room!"

Romano felt hands on him, his body being lifted, carried away. As the curtains drew close, he caught a glimpse of the man in the dark suit in the front row.

He seemed to be smiling.

And Romano realized that the improperly closed lid had been no accident.

It had been a coincidence.



"How are they?" asked Roxanne.

Romano stopped to light another cigarette, then finished cleaning up his torn feet. The skin had been badly scraped across the top of his right foot, while the left foot had a deep, long gash around the heel. It would require stitches... after the show.

"It's a little sore, but I'll be all right."

Roxanne knelt down for a closer look. "A little sore? You need to see a doctor, Roman."

Ignoring her, Romano began wrapping his feet with gauze. "I promise I'll have it looked at by a doctor."

"When?"

“After the show.”

Roxanne just looked at him, the disappointment on her face unmistakable. “You want to finish the show, right?”

“I have to.”

“Don’t tell me, your Ascension.”

Romano nodded, binding his gauze-covered feet in tape. “I can still do all the second-half tricks, except for the metamorphosis. We’ll cut that one and do the rest.”

“What about the finale? Your ankles will be cuffed.”

“We’ll do it without the leg irons.”

“What about the man in the front row, the Technomancer?” She paused a moment, as if coming to a realization. “Maybe he had something to do with the lid closing wrong. Maybe he’s trying to kill you.... Maybe—”

“It was an accident,” Romano said calmly, almost believing the lie himself. Although the lid had never closed wrong in over 500 shows and probably never would again in 500 more, he was convinced the near-fatal gaff had been the work of the Technomancer. But no matter how sure he was of it, he’d never let Roxanne know. Her assistance was crucial for the completion of the show. If she refused to go out with him for the second half, she’d effectively be shutting down the performance and allowing the Technomancer to claim a victory. And he wasn’t about to let that happen.

“Roxy,” he said, looking at her with his piercing brown eyes, almost able to feel the shroud of fear around her melting away like wax from a flame, “do you think I wouldn’t be able to tell if another mage was trying to kill me?”

She looked at him for several long moments, her conviction draining away with each passing second. “All right, then,” she said at last. “But promise me you’ll be careful.”

“Of course I will.”

She looked at him skeptically, pointing a playfully admonishing finger at him. “You better be.”

There was a knock on the door, and a second later the theater manager came into the room, accompanied by Romano’s road manager, Arthur Gardner. “You’re five minutes late already,” said the theater manager. “The crowd’s getting restless. You going back on or what?”

“I’m going on,” said Romano. “Just give me a couple more minutes.”

“I told you he’d be back,” said the road manager. “Nothing’ll stop this kid from putting on a show. Nothing.”

“Artie!” Romano said as the two men were heading out the door. “Forget the metamorphosis, and lose the leg irons on the finale, okay?”

The road manager looked at Romano for a few seconds, no doubt realizing that he’d actually been injured doing the last escape. “You got it, pal,” he said. “Break a leg, huh?”



Romano took the stage for the second half of the show wearing a pair of black socks over his heavily bandaged feet, and with a noticeable limp added to his step. He was twenty minutes late, but the crowd nevertheless gave him an enthusiastic round of applause.

After acknowledging the crowd with a polite bow, he began the performance by pulling a rabbit out of a hat — an age-old trick, but one that is incredibly difficult to perform well.

With that first demanding trick under his belt, Romano settled into the rhythm of the act, performing the classic levitation and Queen of the Air card tricks with his usual style and flare.

When it came time to saw Roxanne in half, Romano unconsciously glanced at the man in the dark suit, hesitating a moment before bringing the whirling buzz-saw down onto her torso. There was no reason why the Technocracy would want to hurt his acolyte, he thought. He was the one they were after... right?

He slowly drew the blade through Roxanne's midsection. She screamed, as she always did, but tonight's cry seemed sharper somehow, more terror-stricken than usual. Romano pulled back the blade for a moment, doubting himself and checking to see if everything was all right. When he realized that the problem was all inside his head, he quickly finished the trick and gladly presented a whole and healthy Roxanne May, absolutely stunning in her blue-sequined gown, to the appreciative crowd.

Romano then filled in the time usually taken up by the metamorphosis by doing some tricks with the Chinese Linking Rings — tricks performed by magicians the world over, but still executed by Romano with enough innovation to make the old standards seem new and exciting.

And then it was time for the finale.

As the escape table and daggers were brought onstage, Roxanne ventured out into the audience to find a couple of willing assistants. Romano watched her walk slowly past the man in the dark suit before quickly sweeping onto the stage with three burly young men in tow.

The three men then worked to secure a pair of thumbcuffs to his thumbs and handcuffs around his wrists. That done, he walked downstage to where the wooden table awaited. Directly above the table hung a chandelier barbed with seven silver daggers, each sharpened to a needlepoint and honed to razor sharpness. The chandelier was suspended in plain view of the audience by a rope that went through an overhead pulley and down toward the stage.

For a bit of dramatic effect, and to let the audience know there was a real danger in doing the stunt, Roxanne released the chandelier, letting it fall to the table. There was an audible gasp from the crowd as the seven daggers knifed through the air and sliced into the wooden tabletop. Each one embedded an inch and a half deep into the wood.

Stagehands freed the chandelier and repositioned it above the table. While that was going on, the three men from the audience secured Romano to the table, strapping heavy leather belts around his chest, waist and ankles. Meanwhile, a baby grand piano was wheeled onstage, adorned by an elaborate candelabra with twenty-one long, white candles. When the candles were lit, the flames would eat through the rope, giving Romano roughly two minutes to get out of the cuffs and restraints and off the table. If he didn't accomplish the escape in time, he'd be impaled by the seven steel daggers.

It was this escape that had made him famous. It was also the one escape he couldn't perform without the help of coincidental magic. Two minutes wasn't really enough time to get out of all the restraints, and he often had to resort to coincidental magic to slow

down the flames, make the pulley above him stick, or make any one of the restraints be improperly secured. If none of these worked, he could always slow down time, giving him more than a comfortable safety net to work over.

With the Technomancer in the audience, Romano had a feeling he might be using the last variable for one of the few times in his career.

As a hush fell over the audience, Roxanne walked over to where Romano lay and gave him a long, soulful kiss. “I love you,” she said.

He gave her a wink and said, “Let’s do it.”

Roxanne walked over to the piano and sat down.

Romano nodded to the stagehands, and a white silk curtain rose up around him, concealing him from the audience’s view. As he began struggling against the restraints, the twenty-one candles of the candelabra were lit and the clock began ticking.

Then the stage grew dark, and Roxanne began to play the piano — the haunting title tune from Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *The Phantom of the Opera*.

He got out of the thumb and handcuffs easily enough, taking up thirty seconds to do so — just over a quarter of his allotted time. He began working himself out of the straps, contracting his muscles in wave-like patterns in order to snake himself free.

Suddenly, Romano froze as a ripple of Quintessence — the spiritual energy radiated by mages — washed over the stage. An instant later, the flames atop the candles burst into bright yellow gout, slicing at the rope like knives.

The man in the dark suit had played his card, likely using a rote that made use of some paraffin that had been trapped in the candles during the manufacturing process.

Thus, the Technomancer’s Pogrom against him had begun.

The crowd gasped at the sight of the flaring candles.

Roxanne played on, but any hint of a melody was lost.

Romano frantically began to invoke a rote on each of the straps, calling for them to be insecurely fastened by the three burly men from the audience.

Nothing happened. He could feel a tingling in the leather bands strapped across his body and realized the man in the dark suit had blocked his rotes.

Above him, the chandelier rocked slightly as the flames were no doubt licking their way up toward the pulley, chewing on the rope with fiery teeth.

At last he managed to counter the Technomancer’s rote on the strap across his chest. He began to work at the other straps with his free hands, but then he felt the strap across his chest beginning to tighten. He grabbed at it with his hands, but still it pulled tighter against him, cutting off his air, crushing his ribs.

Roxanne had stopped playing.

Continuous loud shouts were coming from the audience now, and he knew he had only seconds to escape with his life.

He invoked his rote over time, his safety net, and the vulgar little trump card that would give him all the time in the world to complete the escape.

Nothing happened.

It was as if his rote had come up against some invisible brick wall, bouncing off it like a ball in a schoolyard.

Above him, the chandelier faltered.

And fell.

Romano saw the daggers glint under the stagelights, looking for all the world like fangs in a hungry maw, and he cast one last, desperate rote.

The daggers sliced through him as if through butter, nailing him down onto the table.

Miraculously missing all of his vital organs.

He let out a shrill cry of agony as blood spurted from his wounds, streaking the white curtain surrounding him with angry red slashes.

The crowd began applauding, probably expecting to see Romano suddenly appear on the stage in one piece, but slowly their cheers died out.

The ensuing silence was replaced by a scream, then another, and another, as individuals in the crowd slowly came to realize what had happened.

Finally Romano recognized Roxy's voice above the din of confusion. "Somebody get a doctor!"

The blood-soaked curtain came down around him, and he became aware of the frantic scene on stage.

Stunned stagehands circled him, wondering how to best get him free.

He twisted his head around and gazed out into the crowd.

As people in the audience rushed forward to the foot of the stage, the man in the dark suit casually got up from his seat in the front row and walked against the flow of the crowd, making his way out of the theater.

Romano closed his eyes, somehow knowing they would meet again.

A BΛOCK ⊕ F TITTE



JANE III. LINDSK⊕LD

“Come and dance, China Doll. The day is night and the moon is right... for love.”

Even if the invitation had not been leered from a dark street in one of San Francisco’s shabbier neighborhoods, Tieh still would have been disinclined to accept. The speaker was a solidly built Anglo clad in torn jeans and an even more disreputable tuxedo shirt. His features were concealed behind a rubber caricature mask of a long forgotten politician.

Tieh glanced from the open switchblade in the man’s hand to the half-dozen similarly clad youths that backed him.

“Pardon, sir, but day can hardly be night and the fog is so heavy that one cannot see the Bridge, much less the moon.”

“Don’t like my verse, China Doll?” He paused as if searching for a rhyme.

Tieh took a step back towards the shadowed alleyway behind her, her breathing was slow and even, her eyes steady, giving away nothing.

“No, Rubberhead, I don’t mind your verse, but I don’t like *you!*” While he hunted for a clever retort to silence the mocking giggles of his band, she attacked.

Never would she have used a kick above waist high with a real fighter, but this was just a street thug. She easily struck the knife from his loose grip and if she intensified gravity just a bit so that it fell point down and plunged through his canvas sneaker, who was to know?

“My foot!” he screamed.

When all eyes flickered to him, she stepped back into the narrow alley. Reaching for the fire escape above, she swung up and crouched silently, brushing rust and particles of black paint from her palms. She waited motionless until the last of Rubberhead’s gang had stumbled off, searching for one who was right in front (and slightly above) them.

“How typical of Sleepers, ah, Tieh?” came a voice, dulcet and feminine, yet with a distinct acerbic bite.

Tieh looked about, her hands in a defensive stance. Her eyes widened as she saw that the busted window beside her had metamorphosed into an enormous grandfather clock, the gilded face benignly marking off the hour, the brass pendulum swinging with majestic regularity in the case below.

The clock’s glass door stood open and standing in it was a shapely woman with eyes of blue ice and a fall of white hair that touched all the way to her bare feet. Her robe was silken, patterned with a dizzying multiplicity of Daliesque clocks. She held a large brass key in one hand.

“Hello, Serena,” Tieh said, lowering her hands.

“Out ‘Trick or Treating’ rather late, aren’t you?”

“Nonsense. I despise Halloween. It has become a time for children, vandals and fools. What do you want, Timekeeper?”

“Would you believe that I merely sought to see if you required assistance?”

“No.”

Serena chuckled, “I had to try. Come into my studio, Butterfly. No matter how you feel about Halloween, there is power tonight and omens say that great things may be done.”

“I have no interest in great things,” Tieh replied, knowing that she was being stubborn, “Only in the Way.”

“You may not care, Tieh, but others do.” Serena’s expression hardened, “Or have you forgotten the Pogrom æ Yueh Ch’iu, Hung Po, Master Shan?”

“I have not forgotten. I will never forget, but one cannot change the Past.”

“Perhaps not, but there is the pleasure of crippling an enemy.” Serena turned as if to depart, “And those who do not learn from the Past are condemned to repeat it. Will you turn away from great things?”

“I have no interest in great things,” Tieh repeated, “but I do have an interest in revenge.”

“Follow then,” Serena said. “Mind the pendulum and the weights.”

“I learned to fight blindfolded in the Cavern of Clashing Winds,” Tieh said, lightly dodging the swinging rounds of brass. “These slow things are nothing.”

“Pride,” said a new voice among the ticking of clocks, “or merely youth which masks uncertainty with arrogance. Welcome, Butterfly.”

The speaker was a black man so knotted and gnarled that his body seemed an animated bundle of sticks topped by a husked coconut. He wore a long stripped robe of rough cotton and leaned on a staff as knotted as himself. In his free hand, he held a long pipe and the air about him was wreathed in smoke rings that kept their shape even as they wove themselves into ropes and distorted faces.

“Abraham.” Tieh folded her hands and bowed, concealing a fond smile.

“Let me see you, girl. You don’t visit as often as you might,” the shaman said.

Tieh spun slowly on one kung-fu slipped toe, aware that her dark green cotton trousers and matching watered silk, mandarin-collared shirt were lightly flecked with black paint from the fire escape. Her long hair remained neatly contained in its butterfly clasp and trailed her like ink from a writing brush.

When she stopped, she included Serena in her smile.

“I have always enjoyed visiting the Timekeeper’s studio,” she admitted. “Forgive my earlier rudeness. You surprised me.”

Serena glanced with pardonable pride at the hosts of clocks in different shapes, sizes, and styles. There were several towering grandfather clocks, each proud wooden case subtly different from the next. There were digital clocks, some with red LED displays, others with plastic flaps that clicked as they marked the minutes. There were ceramic clocks, wooden clocks, plastic clocks, cuckoo clocks, clocks with second hands, clocks with faces for every time zone, and Braille clocks. Tieh’s favorite was a black plastic cat clock liberally sprinkled with rhinestones whose eyes and tail moved back and forth to mark the passing seconds.

Remarkably, not one of these clocks was set to the same time, and so the studio was continually filled with the buzzes, chimes, whistles, and tweets that announced the hour, half-hour, and quarter hour all over-laying the continuous ticking. Tieh had once asked Serena why she didn’t set her clocks to the right time and the Timekeeper had replied, “Somewhere it is always the right time.”

Now, watching the cat’s tail switch its rhythm, Tieh wondered just how much the white-maned mage knew of that Sphere which her own teachers had claimed was but illusion, but which, illusion or not, generated the most dangerous of Paradox spirits.

“Well, I won’t flatter myself and believe that you just wanted to see how I’m growing up,” Tieh said.” Serena mentioned the Pogroms æ and revenge.”

Abraham patted the floor beside him, “Sit with me, Tieh. You know that I am a Spirit Talker æ a Dreamspeaker. I am very old and perhaps because of my age Mother Earth talks to me a bit like a friend. Lately, she’s been complaining about an ache that’s paining her. I felt sorry for her and started checking with spirit after spirit down to the early days of the city until I learned where the hurt came from. Then I came to Lady Timekeeper here and asked what we might do.”

“Time, Tieh, is fluid,” Serena explained, “like a river that flows in one direction while we ride with the current. As with a river, one may ride with the current or attempt to swim against it. In moving against it one can move into the Past.”

“Wait,” Tieh said. “Does this also mean that one can also move into the Future?”

“Well,” Serena hesitated. “Yes and no. We believe that this is possible but æ to extend my analogy to the point of clumsiness æ downstream the river breaks into a delta with many small channels. Until events deepen one channel into what will be, the water of the future is too shallow to travel upon.”

“Going into the Past is easier?” Tieh asked.

Serena grimaced, “Somewhat, but there is a problem— rather the inverse of the problem of going into the Future. In the Near Past, the channels that Time runs through are narrow and shallow. Going back through them is rather like canoeing rapids in reverse.”

“Without a paddle,” Abraham added with a contented pull on his pipe.

“Yes,” Serena continued, “so Near Past and Future are both difficult to access, but the Further Past is more accessible. I have developed a ritual by which I believe I can send someone not only to the Past, but to a precise point in the Past.”

“And you want to send someone to learn what is ‘paining’ Mother Earth,” Tieh said, “How is this revenge for the Pogroms?”

“For this, you need to know a bit of what the spirits taught me,” Abraham replied. “You ever hear of a place called the Montgomery Block?”

“Sure,” Tieh said. “It was one of the oldest buildings in the city, but didn’t it get wrecked back in the mid-sixties?”

“That’s right. They built the Transamerican Pyramid in its place,” Serena said, “and if you think that was a coincidence...”

“I never thought that the Pyramid was there by chance,” Tieh said, “Tell me, what’s so important about the old Block?”

Abraham blew a thoughtful smoke ring. “The Block was nearly as old as San Francisco; it was finished on December 23, 1853. Captain Henry Wagner Halleck was the Block’s designer, financier, and one of its first tenants. He served in the government when California was but a territory. He mined and farmed, and later would serve as a general in Lincoln’s Union Army. Spirits hint that Halleck was also in the service of the Technocracy.”

“I think he probably was originally of the Order of Hermes,” Serena added, “because one of Halleck’s reasons for building the Block was to provide a fireproof, water-proof,

earthquake proof repository for his library. He was a lawyer, too, you see, and so had justification for owning many old and rare books.”

“Lawyer!” Tieh spat, “Laws have become the chains by which the Technocracy binds reality into the shape of its choice.”

“This was even the case in Halleck’s time,” Serena agreed. “Many an Indian or Spaniard was defrauded of family holdings by interpretations of the law. But that is too vast a thing for us to change. Our goal is smaller, but still important. When Halleck built his Block, he did something to protect it from the forces of Dynamism æ the Wyld. This, not his engineering talents, is why the Block survived fire, flood, and quake without much harm. The Pyramid magnifies this stabilizing force, assisting the Technocracy in maintaining San Francisco within their version of reality.”

“Wait!” Tieh raised her hand in protest, “I’ve heard that the Montgomery Block was once a haven for artists, poets, and painters æ people like Jack London, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Ambrose Bierce. I can’t see the man who wrote *Call of the Wild* thriving in the locus of a Technocracy stronghold.”

“I asked the spirits the same question,” Abraham said, “and learned that the Wyld tried destroying the Block with water, quake, and fire, but what Halleck had done was too strong. The Dynamic force found its ally in the very redwood foundation on which the Block was built. Redwood is exceptionally prone to dry rot and the parts that were kept free of water began to deteriorate.”

Tieh clapped, “Kept from water, the wood rotted. It sounds like a Zen koan.”

“Indeed. When the foundation was weakened, enough of the Wyld found entry to make the Block hospitable to the bohemian elements you mentioned, but,” Abraham’s wrinkled face saddened, “in time the foundation’s weakness was discovered. The redwood was replaced by poured concrete, and stagnation again took hold. San Francisco never lost its reputation as a cradle of bohemian culture, but the Technocracy grows strong just the same.”

Tieh shuddered, “What do you need me for, Serena? I don’t understand what a young Akashic can do that either of you cannot.”

Abraham grunted, “Maybe, but the omens say that you are the best choice for this task.”

“What?” Tieh stared at the gnarled Dreamspeaker. “Abraham, I respect you deeply, but your riddles are no help.”

“Simply then, Tieh. Your name ‘Tieh’ means Butterfly,” the Abraham said, “and the Chinese character for your name is made up of three symbols æ a three part compound ideogram. You are ‘butterfly,’ but you are also ‘leaf’, ‘generations’, and ‘worm’. Perhaps your name is simply ‘the worm that generates a flying leaf,’ but a Dreamspeaker can see that this may also mean a force that will generate a new leaf from the Wyrms of Entropy or make the Wyrms turn over a new leaf æ make it change.”

“And no matter what the Technocracy says,” Serena added, “their efforts to keep reality in one shape has contributed to the imbalance of Entropy, Stasis, and Dynamism, leaving Gaia open to the raw corruption of those who seek to command the Wyrms and are in turn commanded by it.”

“The Nephandi,” Tieh whispered. “The Technocracy I despise. The Nephandi I fear.”

“You are wise, Butterfly,” Serena said softly, “for as the Technocracy seeks control, the Nephandi seeks decay.”

Abraham’s expression was pleading, “I believe that you are the observer we need to send back to the time when the Montgomery Block was built. Our investigations tell us that the central point for Halleck’s magic must be in the foundation. Serena will send you within a few hours of Halleck’s sorcery to observe what is done.”

“When do we start?” Tieh asked.

Serena glanced at a crystal pendulum grandfather clock as if it held the true time. “I will begin my ritual now. It is long and the night is passing quickly. Be on guard. Other Mages may sense my workings and neither the Technocracy nor the Nephandi will respect the politenesses set by the Council of Nine Traditions. The Technocracy will surely attack.”

Abraham pulled a burlap sack from behind a stately Tiffany pedestal clock and tossed Tieh a bundle.

“Clothes for the time period to which you are going. While you dress, I am going to bind a spirit to you. His name is Lung Lei and he knows the building site for the Block well. He died of malnutrition and fatigue the day before we plan to have you arrive.”

“Lung Lei, the Thunder Dragon,” Tieh translated. “I am impressed. That is a powerful name.”

“He is an interesting spirit,” Abraham replied, pulling from his burlap sack a shallow clay bowl painted in bright geometrics, several packets, and a mortar and pestle. Singing a wailing, atonal chant, he began to blend his ingredients.

Across the room, between two of the grandfather clocks, Serena spread uncut amethysts and lapis lazuli on the floor in a careful pattern. When she finished, she rose and drew from her pocket a braided silver chain with a polished chunk of hematite at the end. Swinging this over the pattern on the floor, she used her free hand to scatter tiny numerals and clock hands into the air. Her incanted “Tick-tock, tick-tock” worked a counterpoint against Abraham’s wailing and the constant soundings of her many clocks.

Tieh’s Tradition scorned many of the outer trappings of magic, but she felt her Avatar tremble in response to the power the other two were focusing. While she reached behind to braid her hair into a long queue, she focused her mind on creating a male image for herself. Starting at the feet, she gave herself a new walk, bending the knees and slouching the shoulders from bearing burdens. She reminded her eyes of the downward cast that a servant holds in the presence of his masters and edited the grace of a martial artist from her posture.

A loud pounding jolted her from her meditations.

“Uh, oh, trouble with the Technocracy’s taste!” Abraham said, hauling himself to his feet with his staff. “Serena, are you finished?”

The white-haired Timekeeper continued her ritual without reply, but the desperate expression in her ice-blue eyes was answer enough. Swinging the hematite pendant clockwise, she intensified the pace of her chant. As if in response, her long hair began to sweep in a slow counter-clockwise in odd congruence.

“The gates of Time are opening,” Tieh said, “but the door into this studio will fall first.”

“Perhaps.” Abraham gestured as if throwing something with both hands. “Lung Lei is with you. Stand ready for Serena’s command.”

“No,” Tieh protested. “You two will need my help. Neither of you are fighters!”

“Your talents are needed in the Past,” Abraham said, hurrying to where the studio’s door was buckling inward. “Lung Lei, prevent her from being foolish.”

Cool, solid hands grasped Tieh’s shoulders. She snapped back her arm in a blow that should have sent whoever was behind her gasping to the floor, but her elbow passed through nothing. Stumbling to regain her balance, she cried out warning as the door burst open.

“Abraham!”

Skeletal executives in ragged suits, all with the skulls of horses for heads, crowded outside the broken door. They swung leather briefcases and deadly sheaves of legal paper. The Dreamspeaker thumped his staff thrice on the floor.

“Douglass! Carver! Malcom X.! Booker T.! Spirits of my ancestors, build a ward for me!”

A mahogany fog immediately billowed from all sides and solidly filled the studio doorway, barring the Technocracy’s sendings from entry. The harsh clatter of their teeth rattled through the fog.

“Should have horse’s asses not heads,” Abraham muttered, glancing worriedly at Serena.

Tieh struggled against the hands that still held her, “Abraham, tell your creature to release me!”

“Your creature, your guide, your countryman,” Abraham replied without looking away from the doorway. “No one but you will see him, hear him, feel him.”

Tieh’s retort was cut off as Serena shrieked and dropped her conjuring tools. Her face was as pale as her hair and her eyes were drained of color. The pattern of amethysts and lapis lazuli the floor had become a purple-blue swirling of numbers. With apparent effort, Serena stooped, grasped the pattern by its edges, and then peeled it from the floor.

It hung limply from her hand for a moment, the magic in it so potent that the numbest Sleeper would have sensed its power. Then Serena flung the pattern at the grandfather clock with the crystal pendulum. It vanished, but the clock flared with a violet and azure light, the hands on its painted face whirling wildly backwards.

“Go, Tieh! The door to the Past is open!”

“But Abraham’s ward won’t hold!” Tieh protested, pointing to where bony hands were shredding the Dreamspeaker’s ward.

“I will help him!” Serena said weakly. “Go!”

Tieh frowned, turned, and wrenched the glass door open. The brass key fell from the lock and rattled across the floor.

“Behind the pendulum,” a male voice said in musically perfect Mandarin. “Quickly!”

Tieh dove behind the heavy crystal pendulum, braced despite herself to thud into the clock’s wooden back. There was a sensation of being wafted a great distance, then she was rolling to a stop in a dusky, crowded room, rank with the odors of human sweat, rice, and stale spices. Recumbent heaps marked sleeping bodies. Here and there some-

one hunched over a writing tablet or game board. A dull “plong-plong” sounded from a badly out-of-tune musical instrument.

“Lie still,” the male voice commanded, “and all will believe you to be asleep. Many here are strangers to each other still and too many die as I did to make seeking friends a rewarding task.”

“Lung Lei?” she whispered.

“Who else?” Tieh could almost hear the spirit’s shrug. “I sense the Dawn. Soon the bosses will come and awaken the ‘coolies.’ When they do, rise quickly and do not refuse the breakfast rice æ you will be hungry later.”

Tieh nodded, numbly aware that she was suddenly afraid. To distract herself, she peeked through her lashes and studied her guide. He was a handsome young man, not much older than herself, clad in the cap and robe of a student. He seemed calm as he gazed out over the sleeping men, but there was sorrow in the slump of his shoulders, sorrow and homesickness.

“Lung Lei,” she said softly, “Do you have any idea how I’m supposed to get back to my own time?”

“No.” He looked apologetic. “I believe that Serena would have told you had you not been interrupted by the Technocracy’s sendings.”

“Then I have to figure it out for myself or I’m stranded.”

“That is how I see it, Mage.”

A rhythmic banging on a brass gong forestalled any further conversation and jarred the laborers from their sleep. A few didn’t rise and as Tieh shuffled with the majority to where sticky rice was being ladled into cheap wooden bowls, she saw a couple of gang bosses go and shake the laggards. Two were kicked to their feet, three more pronounced genuinely ill and assigned to light duty. A final one was prodded and then gingerly dragged out.

“Dead,” Lung Lei said, his laconic manner not enough to hide his pain, “As I was yesterday. I came to San Francisco after failing my exams for mandarin. I was told I would be given a post for an educated man æ a bookkeeper or a purser æ but I was thrown in as slave labor like all the rest. The skilled jobs won’t exist until the Block is completed. Halleck’s great project will be built by Chinese labor, decorated by Chinese artists, and staffed by Chinese servants.”

Tieh mutely accepted a bowl of rice and a cup of weak green tea from an ill-looking man and then sat against a wall to force the stuff down. She ate with her fingers æ apparently chopsticks were not provided.

“The lucky ill ones are given simple jobs,” Lung Lei said. “They prepare and serve the food, sweep the barracks, and tend those who are too ill or injured to work. Some recover. Some pass on their sickness with the food and nursing. I wonder that any of us survived.”

Tieh shuddered, “I don’t dare miss whatever it is that Halleck is going to do. Do you remember anything that might be helpful?”

“I was already dead,” Lung Lei said, “and did not care. You are a Mage surely you must have ways to learn what you need.”

Tieh scowled at him. Pretending to drowse over her rice, she sent her spirit away from her body. Lung Lei’s droning voice became an anchor as she quested outside of the barracks. A group of Anglos were just arriving in carriages and on horseback.

She recognized Halleck immediately, stiff in his bearing, round-faced and already double-chinned although he was not more than thirty-five. His air of authority set him apart from the others, that and an aura of magic that surrounded him with rare force. Another in the group, a bow-legged, bristle-bearded man with coal dark eyes, also showed evidence of being Awakened. His buckskin shirt and trousers were less elegant than the outfits worn by the rest of Halleck's comrades, but he had an aura of tough self-reliance the rest lacked.

With two unknown Mages present, she dared not try anything further and withdrew into her body. Lung Lei had stopped speaking and squatted next to her, a quizzical expression on his broad features.

"Finish your rice," he hissed. "They will be sending out the work gangs any moment now."

"What do the work gangs do?" she whispered around a mouthful of cold rice.

"Dig or carry dirt away in baskets. Sometimes we carry away mud. Halleck's Folly is being built on land reclaimed from the sea."

"Does Halleck often come to the diggings?"

"Sometimes, in the afternoons, to supervise and set right things that have been done incorrectly."

"Then, if he's here already, is that odd?"

"Very."

The shouting of the gang bosses ended further conversation. Tieh hurried, imitating the rushed but not eager pace of those around her. Among these men of the Past, she was tall and in her dirty work clothes not terribly feminine. She found the observation rather depressing.

Outside, the day was already muggy. Halleck and his cronies were a distance away inspecting an already completed portion of the foundation hole. Enhancing her hearing, Tieh shamelessly eavesdropped on their conversation.

"... start laying the raft here today. The timber has been floated from across the Bay. Tell the coolie boss to get a crew of strong men over here. We don't need many for starters."

Excited, Tieh worked her way through the milling laborers until she was near the boss making the selections. It was child's play to shape a charm so that she would be certain to be chosen.

"Now," she muttered to Lung Lei as they were marched over to their work site, "I'd better hope that Serena sent me to the right time and that Halleck plans to enchant the Block's foundation today. Where has he gotten to?"

"Keep your head down!" Lung Lei scolded, "You can't risk being noticed. Let me tell you what I see."

Tieh dutifully lowered her head, dismissing the idea of conjuring magical second sight. Lung Lei was right. Being noticed would be dangerous and Halleck was certain to be jumpy on such an important day.

"Halleck and his men are walking to inspect the redwood. There are wagons laden with winches and runners and wedges and great quantities of rope."

"Guess I know what we'll be doing," Tieh said between clenched teeth.

Tieh “gloved” her hands by concentrating on toughening the skin. Kung fu didn’t exactly prepare one for hauling ropes and timbers. For the next several hours, she strained at the ropes with the rest of the Chinese, while Halleck’s group shouted instructions.

From what she could tell, as the foundation digging was completed more and more labor was diverted to setting the redwood timbers into interlocking tiers. Tired and sore as she was, she had energy enough to worry that she might find herself too far from Halleck at the key moment. Then, a few minutes before high noon, the gong sounded.

“Lunch?” she hopefully asked Lung Lei.

“Odd, again,” he replied, “They’ve never given a general break before. Usually they let people rest in shifts.”

“Halleck’s going to do it!” Tieh said. “He wants to do it at high noon— under the watchful eye of the sun and all that! I bet he is of the Order of Hermes, like Serena thought.”

Fortunately, the redwood floored pit offered ample hiding places behind gear and unset wood. Taking cover, she composed herself to resist any urge to interfere. Lung Lei hovered at her shoulder, whispering guidance as she crept after Halleck and the young man with the bristling beard and coal-dark eyes. They strode purposefully to a section of the foundation that Halleck selected with the aid of compass and sundial.

“Here we are,” Halleck said, removing from his jacket pocket a small, symbol encrusted vial. “Hold this, Ned.”

The buckskin-clad frontiersman carefully cradled the vial in his callused hands while Halleck waved his hands over it and muttered a few words. Then Halleck took the vial back and knelt to pour the liquid over a section of the redwood. After a hiss and a puff of pungent smoke, a hole about eight inches in diameter and about the same depth appeared in the wood.

While Ned suspiciously scanned the edges of the foundation hole for spies, Halleck removed a gold band about an inch thick and twisted into a circlet about six inches in diameter from his pocket. Tieh enhanced her vision and saw that the band was etched with symbols representing each of the four elements, runes for Dynamism and Stasis, and the mathematical symbol for infinity.

Halleck muttered a few Latin-sounding words over the Talisman and then set it into the hole. Ned helped him seal the hole with a “knot” swiftly carved from a scrap of redwood and another muttered ritual. While they worked, Tieh reached out with her Mage’s sense for power.

“Halleck’s power is much diminished!” she muttered to Lung Lei. “He is barely stronger than his apprentice.”

The spirit squeezed her shoulder. “Could he have invested too much of his potential in trinkets like that ring Talisman or in various incantations?”

Tieh nodded, “Even I could have sealed that hole better and I am a novice in the Sphere of Matter.”

Halleck and Ned completed their ritual a few minutes after noon and strode from the foundation pit, chatting about having lunch and a drink at the Graham House.

When they had left, Tieh and Lung Lei crept away to a storage area where the spirit said they would probably not be disturbed. Tieh slumped against a heap of bricks, her muscles protesting their morning's work, her throat dry, and her stomach rumbling with vague hunger. She banished these annoyances with practiced discipline.

"Now," she said, almost as much to herself as to the spirit, "We need to find our way back to my Present. How do we get back?"

The spirit shrugged, "I do not know, Mage. As a man buried without rites, far from the lands of my ancestors, all places are alike to me in that none will bring offerings to my spirit. You are my anchor within Time, because Abraham has bound me to you. I perceive a Present and a Past and Future relative to that Present because you are in it, not because Time has any control over me."

Tieh scowled, "I know where the Talisman is, but that won't do Serena and Abraham any good if I remain trapped here. I suppose that I could take a few decades and study, but I doubt that a Chinese woman would find much sympathy or many teachers."

"You are a Mage," Lung Lei said, "The Talisman will remain where it is until you get to another Time and remove it."

"Will it?" Tieh said, suddenly remembering what Serena and Abraham had told her. "Didn't the others say something about the foundation getting dry rot? What if it was moved then?"

"Then it won't be where you think it is when you return to your Present and all of this will have been wasted effort."

"Has anyone told you that you're a damn cheerful companion, Lung Lei?"

Tiredly, Tieh buried her face in her hands and reviewed everything that she knew about the nature of Time. After a long while an idea occurred to her. Excitedly, she began to whisper to Lung Lei.

"Serena explained Time to me as a river. She was very convincing, but earlier teachers taught me that Time was an illusion, governed by our own subjective measurements."

Lung Lei smiled, "The summer days that each last a lifetime, until the week before school when they fly past. The eternity of the hour before a beloved arrives versus the brevity of a fortnight's holiday. Yes, I remember. Continue."

"In college physics, I learned that Time is relative æ a function of velocity through space." Tieh etched a wiggly line in the brick dust on the floor, "Each of these views is convincing and I am convinced that each is right æ even when they contradict each other."

"So, Mage, continue. I admit, you've made me curious."

"So, none of it is what I need to get where I need to go," she grinned, "All I need is me and you. You said that spirits are not limited by Time as the living are, but that you lack points of reference for guidance."

"Yes, that is true æ at least in my case."

"Very well, I will fix my Mind on that section of the Block which holds the Talisman. Then you will take us through Time, while I provide us with directions."

"Rather like the blind carrying the lame," Lung Lei said doubtfully. "I don't know where to go, but I can move through Time. You know where to go, but can't get there."

“Are you willing to try?”

Lung Lei extended his hand, “Tell me what to do.”

“Just move towards the Present æ I mean away from Now into What is Then. I’ll tell when to slow down or turn if I feel my awareness of Halleck’s Talisman fading.”

“Don’t we need to go somewhere special — like that strange clock the white-haired Mage turned into a door?”

“No,” Tieh focused her mind until she could feel the Talisman and the redwood surrounding it. “No, all of that is unimportant. I have our anchor. Walk and I will follow.”

Lung Lei hesitated and Tieh realized that he was afraid of failing her. She squeezed his hand and he smiled at her.

“Very well, Tieh. I think I will find it easier to take you out of the Present and into the stream of Time if you close your eyes and keep a tight grasp of my hand.”

Tieh obeyed.

“Walk with me now, Tieh,” Lung Lei said. “We will move at a brisk pace until you tell me we have gone astray. Then we may slow while I find the path you want us to follow.”

They walked this way, hand in hand, for what seemed like hours to Tieh. Sometimes, Tieh would tell Lung Lei to adjust their course right or left. Occasionally, they backtracked and picked up the course from a new angle.

As they grew comfortable with their odd method of progress, they talked, at first about what they might find when they reached their destination, later about more personal matters. Lung Lei told Tieh about his home in China, especially about his early years in school when learning was a delight and he didn’t doubt that he would pass his examinations.

Tieh told him about her early years in her parent’s kung fu and tai chi studio, how she had excelled early and later disappointed them by turning away from solely Chinese traditions to see what other cultures held. She was just beginning to tell him about her joyful discovery of the underlying Way that connected all practices when the trace by which she had been guiding them vanished.

“Stop, Lung Lei, I’ve lost it. Let’s retrace our steps carefully. When are we?”

“I have difficulty with this barbarian calendar, especially this far beyond when I lived. I would estimate that we are sometime between 1920 and 1940.”

“Good enough,” Tieh said, resisting an impulse to open her eyes. “I think we’ve found the time period when the dry rot in the foundation was discovered. Walk back along the way we just came while I sense.”

“Very well. What do you feel?”

“Nothing... Nothing. Wait! Keep going. Yes! There it is again. I can even feel the damage in the redwood now that I’m trying.”

“Do you wish for us to step back into this moment?”

“Hold on. Tell me what you see. Are we near the Block?”

“Of course. It is quite impressive still, though the balconies and sculptures are gone and the entire structure has a slight list that is especially evident along the front.”

“Balconies and sculptures? Never mind. That tilt must be the result of the Dynamic force attacking the structure damage. Are we alone?”

“You mean would we be alone if I brought us out into this Time? No, there is a small gathering, but I cannot understand its purpose. My English is poor and, for this time period, archaic. Can you do anything, Mage?”

“Mage’ æ Is that a reminder, Lung Lei?” she smiled. “I may be able to manage something. Take us out into a place we won’t be noticed and I’ll work something. Don’t be worried if I seem to vanish or you can’t find me.”

“I will always be able to find you,” Lung Lei said, slightly haughtily. “The Dreamspeaker bound me to you.”

“Very well, whenever you are ready.”

She felt a gentle shove and found herself standing in an doorway, shielded from the street by a pile of cartons set out for the trash pick-up. Bending the light rays so she would be invisible was fairly simple; she had a bit more difficulty in composing herself enough to become the Watchful Self, passive, only observing, and thus unnoticeable, even to a telepath.

Stepping around the cartons, Lung Lei beside her, she joined the small group of people standing in front of the Block. Most carried note-pads and one or two had cards that said, “Press” stuck in their hatbands. As she was registering this, a man in his late forties emerged from the Block and said, “Follow me, please.”

Confident that she was in the right place and Time, Tieh trailed along. Their guide led them directly to a musty, subterranean area. As they walked, the guide answered questions from the reporters.

“Why are there so many rooms down here?” said a man with a lilting Welsh accent, “It looks like a dungeon.”

“Well, Idwal, originally the Montgomery Block was constructed with twenty-eight basement rooms. These frequently served as vaults. During the history of the Block, wine, rare books, even gold have been stored here. Henry Halleck was a smart man. San Francisco was even more vulnerable to fire in 1853 than it is today. He promised fire-proof, earthquake proof storage and he kept his word. Even the great fire of 1906 didn’t get the Block.”

“Is it true that the Block is collapsing?” Idwal asked.

“No, but Halleck’s genius has proven to be this old building’s undoing...”

Tieh stopped listening. While the guide had been answering questions, she had been lazily scanning the group of reporters, wondering if any of them was the Mage come to relocate the Talisman. A few seemed promising, then a trim, grey-haired old man in a tidy linen suit had looked up from his clipboard to laugh at one of the guide’s quips and she had seen his eyes —dark, coal-black eyes. A thrill went through her as she recognized him as the young frontiersman who had been Halleck’s aide when the Talisman was placed.

He looked a healthy seventy or so, far younger than he should be, but many Mages learned to control the aging process. Tieh had little time to consider the implications of his presence for the guide was directing their attention to where a section of redwood was being drawn forth.

“This beam shows an example of the damage that dry rot has done to the seemingly indestructible foundation of the Block...”

Tieh tuned out the tour guide, risking detection to examine the log more closely.

Lung Lei whispered in her ear, “Certainly that is the very log in which we saw Halleck place the Talisman. This is too much of a coincidence!”

“Not where magic is concerned,” Tieh replied.

She schooled herself to exquisite passivity, remaining in the room when the guide led the reporters out. Moments later, a chic blonde reporter returned. Without even mussing her fingernails, she removed the patch from the redwood log and pulled forth the heavy Talisman. She was placing it in her bag, when a voice from the doorway halted her.

“Give the Talisman here, Mabel,” came the gravelly voice of the frontiersman, “or I’ll have to take it from you.”

“You’re a foolish old man, Ned,” Mabel remarked in a voice as crisp as her suit. “All I need to do is scream — your reputation won’t handle much more controversy and the Technocracy is tired of covering for you.”

“Scream,” Ned suggested dryly. “The Sleepers won’t hear. I’ve deadened the air between them and us. They won’t miss us either. I played on your pretty fib about a headache and said that I’d just go and see if you were fit to get home.”

“Why do you want Halleck’s Talisman? It belongs to the City. I’m going to re-set it after the repairs have been completed so that it can continue to ward the city.”

“Maybe I don’t believe anymore that the city deserves such constant guardianship. Maybe it’s been better off when the changes came more easily.”

“Ned! I thought you were in agreement with us. You were Halleck’s own student!”

Tieh stood mute, her fingers biting her palms as Mabel reached the same conclusion she already had.

“Ned, you’re not æ”

“The enemy? One of the Nephandi?” Ned’s grin was ugly. “Why not? Because of Halleck? Hell, that old coot was half gone to the Wyrms himself, always going down to his quicksilver mine and listening to the mutterings while growing rich off of the poison they mined there for explosives. Some have been telling me that he did go over in his later years. Lots of folk blamed him for the screw-ups in Union tactics, y’know, and he changed an awful lot after his return from D.C. He didn’t visit nearly so much with the old crowd then, but you wouldn’t remember that. You’re just a young tool, a young fool, like I was then.”

Mabel did scream then and lashed out with raw blue lightning that spoke as much of her panic as it did the strength of her Avatar. Ned retaliated with a shower of silver raindrops that scattered the lightning into stone fireflies.

With Halleck’s Talisman hanging from her wrist, Mabel shaped myriad forces against Ned. The frontiersman was less adept at manipulating raw energies, but he was hung with discretely concealed charms that diverted most of Mabel’s attacks.

Ever aware of the threat of paradox, Tieh could only watch as the Mages dueled. At last, the exchange of attacks came to a halt. Ned dipped his hand into his coat pocket and came out with a revolver.

“I didn’t want to resort to this, Mabel,” he said, “but I can’t let you walk out of here æ not with that and not with what you know about me.”

Mabel’s vaguely triumphant expression changed to one of fear as she realized that her skill as a Mage had condemned her to death. Ned’s coal-dark eyes narrowed to a feral glitter and his finger began to tighten on the trigger.

As she had with the switchblade on that far to come Halloween night, Tieh altered gravity, centering her area of influence on the revolver so that it became of fifty pound weight in the old man’s hand.

The gun tore from his fingers and Mabel sprang forward, swinging the arm wearing the heavy gold Talisman into Ned’s gut. He doubled forward and collapsed. With much enthusiasm but little finesse, Mabel knocked him unconscious. Then, panting, she stepped to the doorway and listened. Satisfied that no one was likely to interrupt her, she waved her hands over Ned. His breathing slowed and regularized. After another listen at the doorway, Mabel quickly studied the room.

Tieh could almost hear her internal monologue. The foundation would not be secure until the concrete was poured, but with the Nephandi seeking the Talisman, she could not delay reinstalling it.

Moving decisively, Mabel loosened the mortar around a brick a few rows from the floor and then dug a shallow wall safe. The gold Talisman went into its new hiding place followed by a muttered rote of concealment. Once the brick was back in place, Mabel shaped mortar and sealed Halleck’s Talisman into its new resting-place. A quick rote and a handful of dirt made the new mortar match the old.

Shaking her outfit into place, Mabel took off her jacket and bent over the recumbent Ned.

“It’s a shame that you dropped your gun that way, but old boys shouldn’t play with guns,” her expression was analytical. “You shouldn’t have interfered with me.”

She laid her folded jacket over Ned’s mouth and nose. Gradually, his breathing slowed, then stopped. Mabel rose, inspected her jacket for damages, and without a backward look departed the basement room.

Tieh spared no concern on Ned, moving instead to inspect the Talisman’s new cache. The concealment spell nearly masked its signature, but she had not trailed it through Time to lose it now.

“I’ve got it,” she told Lung Lei, “Can you get me to the Present?”

Lung Lei bowed, “But you interfered, Tieh. You took a terrible risk.”

“There were no Sleepers present,” she said, “and I was very, very careful.”

“So I saw,” he replied. “I believe that I can take you directly to Abraham. I borrowed your trick and I believe that I have found his signature.”

“That would be wonderful,” Tieh said, holding out her hand to him. “Lead on.”

Serena’s studio bore little resemblance to the tranquil shrine to Time that they had departed. Although apparently only minutes had passed, the crystal pendulum grandfather clock had been thrown on its side, its glass shattered. Other clocks had been flung to the floor or hung crooked on the walls.

Abraham and Serena stood side by side in the center of the room, encircled by the Technocracy's horse-skulled servitors. The battle was much less flamboyant than the one Tieh had just observed in the Block's cellar, the Mages hobbled by their desire to avoid attracting Sleepers and thus create paradox.

From the ruins of the grandfather clock, Lung Lei pushed Tieh into the Present. After the forced non-interference of her quest through Time she felt delightfully free at the prospect of an honest brawl. Noting that at least one of the servitors had a shattered arm æ probably from a Abraham's staff she concluded that the Technocracy had constructed them to resist magical rather than physical force.

Testing her theory with a well-place kick, she was satisfied to feel the brittle bones shatter. She had destroyed two of the servitors by the time Serena and Abraham followed her example. Only a few moments after her re-emergence into the Present, Tieh spun to a halt beside the last crumpling servitor. She couldn't resist a saucy bow at the expressions of amused astonishment on the elder's faces.

"Tieh! We told you to go!" Abraham scolded. "Now Serena's studio is ruined for nothing!" "I've been," she said.

"But how did you find your way back?" Serena asked, "I didn't have a chance to show you the way or give you the amulet that I had prepared."

Tieh straightened, remembering Lung Lei's jibes.

"I am a Mage," she said, unable to give the words the frosty tone that she had intended, "and Abraham found me a fine guide. Together we found our way."

"And did you find what Halleck had done?" Serena said eagerly.

"Yes, you were right. He was Technocracy æ and maybe Nephandi. He had planted a stasis Talisman," Tieh said, "It was moved when the foundation rotted, but we traced it to its new resting place. It's still in the Block æ that is, in the basement of the Pyramid."

Serena looked around her ruined studio, "The Technocracy may send other forces here. Tieh, I know you must be tired, but can you go and retrieve the Talisman? Abraham and I will remain to guard your back and distract any attention you might draw."

"I'll go," Tieh said, glancing at Lung Lei who stood beside her his hand still holding her own. "Both of us can go."

Abraham looked puzzled, but Serena immediately began sketching the shape of a doorway on the wall against which the grandfather clock had stood.

"As Time and Space are merely aspects of each other, I will create a short-term portal to take you directly to the basement of the Block. This way you do not need to risk being intercepted on the streets," she frowned thoughtfully. "Focus on the Talisman's signature and the portal will carry you to it."

"Ready, Lung Lei?" Tieh asked, when Serena's portal glowed pink and gold.

"Of course," the spirit said, squeezing her hand, "Let us be gone."

As they emerged in a small storage room, Tieh felt the Talisman's presence at once.

"It's right over there," she said, "I can feel the old brick behind the plaster."

The plaster broke away easily. Mabel's mortar was a bit more of a challenge, but Tieh manipulated Matter until it crumbled. She had just drawn the Talisman from its concealment when Lung Lei cried warning.

“Tieh, someone is coming!”

She had barely a moment to realize that the room had no other exit when a husky Hispanic woman in a police officer’s uniform flung the door open.

“Hold it right there, thief! Police!”

The woman strode in, leveling her police special. Two male officers followed her in, a powerfully built African-American and a blond straight from a Nazi recruiting poster. All three of them had their guns leveled at her and Tieh felt sure that even if she went invisible that they would shoot.

“We’ve got her, Detective,” the woman called.

“Very good, now just keep her from going anywhere,” said a familiar, gravelly voice.

A shriveled old man entered the chamber. Despite what nearly half a century more had done to him, Tieh knew Ned at once. The coal-black eyes had not lost their spark, nor had he lost any of his force of personality.

“So there it is,” Ned rasped, his attention for the Talisman as much as for Tieh. “That bitch Mabel hid it while I was out cold. Then she thought she’d murdered me. I’d some tricks she didn’t know, but by the time I’d recovered and come back to search it had vanished. I guessed that she’d left it here, but I could never discover where she’d put it. But I felt it when you brought it forth. I don’t know how you found it, missy, but I’m much obliged.”

The police officers listened unblinking to this incredible speech and Tieh realized that either Ned or the Technocracy had bound their minds that they would only notice what would be of use to their masters.

“I rather suspect you won’t much like the reward I have in mind for you,” Ned continued, “but another vandal shot by the police on Halloween night won’t raise a stir.”

“Officers...” he was beginning when the air in the small room became clotted with insubstantial forms.

They seeped in through the floors, through the walls, and dripped from the ceilings, each solidifying into form recognizable as Chinese laborers in the garb of over a century before, garb similar to that which Tieh still wore. Other figures were better dressed: servants, waiters, launderers. One even bore a pyrotechnics kit.

Not all of the spirits were Chinese. Some were Anglo or Hispanic. Tieh thought that she recognized a few — artists and authors who in life had been significantly associated with the Block.

The spirits ranked themselves between Ned and Tieh and at their head was Lung Lei.

“When I saw the Ancient returning,” Lung Lei said, “I took a leaf from Abraham’s book and aroused some of the spirits who were tied to the Block. They are eager for revenge against those who used them so cruelly in the past.”

Tieh smiled, “Well, Ancient, your three living against my many dead. Will you at least negotiate for my freedom?”

Ned made a quick gesture and the three police officers dropped off to sleep, still standing with their guns pointed at Tieh.

“Well, missy...” Ned began.

Lung Lei interrupted, “Tieh, a spirit I did not plan to bring forth demands to speak with Ned.”

Tieh gasped as Halleck’s spirit stepped to the fore. He glanced arrogantly at her.

“I will have business with you in a moment, Akashic, but first...” he turned to Ned, “You have delayed settling accounts with your masters for long enough. Nor can you convince me that you wished to acquire my Talisman for the good of any but yourself.”

“No, Henry, you have me all wrong,” Ned babbled, his confidence shattered.

Halleck tossed open his hands, “Entropy take you.”

With a thin wail, Ned grasped his temples and crumpled to the floor. As his spirit separated from his shriveled body, Halleck stopped him from departing.

“Wait, Ned,” Halleck turned his cold gaze on Tieh, “Those law officers will shoot you if Ned commands them. If you surrender the Talisman to me, I will have him order them to depart and forget all they have seen. If not, you will die and another tool will hand it over.”

“Why do you want it?” Tieh said, aware that the restless milling of spirits around her would have little power over Halleck.

“When I made it, I desired the preservation of San Francisco. Now I serve another cause. I wrought too well, however, and the Pyramid has enhanced my creation so that it blocks Entropy as well as the Dynamic force I sought to contain. I will take it away and destroy it so that its powers may be rechanneled more appropriately.”

Tieh looked from Halleck to the quivering Ned to the dead-eyed police officers then finally to Lung Lei.

The spirit looked at her intently, “Remember, you are a Mage, but you are also Tieh æ Butterfly.”

The emphasis of Lung Lei’s words reminded her of Abraham’s prophesy that she was the butterfly who would force the Wyrms to turn over a new leaf. Perhaps Halleck would destroy the Talisman, perhaps he would not, but if the Dreamspeaker was to be believed, her actions would force the Wyrms to change. Certainly, any change at all would be for the better. Heartened, she showed the Talisman to Halleck.

“Tell Ned to call off his police officers and then I’ll let you have this thing, for all the good it may do you.”

Halleck did not pause, “Ned, do as she says.”

When the three officers had departed, Tieh extended the Talisman to Halleck. She felt a shock of cold as their hands met across the golden ring. Then Halleck, the Talisman, and all of the spirits —except one— were gone.

Tieh threw her arms around Lung Lei and hugged him.

“Thank you! I didn’t know that spirits could summon other spirits like that.”

“Most cannot. I never did get to tell you why I failed my exams. I had other distractions. You see,” he smiled down at her and stroked her hair, “I am also a Mage. Farewell, Tieh. Do not forget me.”

“Never,” she promised, feeling her eyes grow hot with tears, “I will bring your spirit offerings on all the feast days and set a cenotaph in your honor.”

“Death, like Time, may be just an illusion,” Lung Lei replied. “Perhaps we shall meet again.”

He faded, leaving her holding the empty air. Wiping away a tear, she was glad that there was no one left to see, Tieh found her way out of the Pyramid, hurrying away from the Block which echoed after her with all the voices of its Past.



MAKE 'EM LAUGH



JAMES LOWDER

The leading man danced across the screen. Singing self-reflectively about the joys of song, he twirled his umbrella and splashed through a puddle on a back lot street slick with machine-blown rain. The camera danced along with him, swooping in to frame his face. The captured smile illuminated the dark theater like a sun bolt. His song resumed a moment later, synchronized sound tailored to soothe a troubled soul, Prozac in stereo.

In the projection booth overlooking the empty Oasis Theater, Miranda Peake felt her spirits lift for the first time since being tossed out of Professor Summerlee's lecture two nights ago. The official notification of censure had arrived from the Sons of Ether earlier that afternoon. It should have reached her sooner, but the earthquake had made it difficult for even Doctor Armstrong's cleverly disguised cybernaut courier to be timely in its appointed rounds.

She had carried the note about with her for the past three hours, neurotically reading and rereading it. Now, finally, Miranda tossed the letter onto the mountain of paper atop her desk. The pile shifted, then avalanched onto the floor. Sheaves of bills stamped *Past Due*, the pages of an unpublished article, and assorted movie stills from B-pictures too obscure even for late-night cable slid across the floor with a disgusted sigh, as if they shared the annoyance of Miranda's creditors at her slovenly bookkeeping.

Miranda didn't notice. She was busy soaking in the film's message: true love fulfilled and perseverance rewarded. *Cheer up*, the movie seemed to say. *Sure, the Oasis's box office is dwindling with each passing week and your membership in the Sons is threatened, but you can dance through those grim raindrops. Let me show you how...*

Miranda heeded that advice and shrugged off the cloak of despair, at least a little. *People are still interested in happy films*, she decided, her gaze transfixed by the dancer on the screen. *The Sleepers are staying away because of the neighborhood.*

She couldn't really fault anyone for avoiding her squalid little corner of San Francisco, especially the Sleepers. They were blind to the presence of magic, so the Oasis was just another theater to them, one with a bleak and dangerous location. The pot-holed and glass-strewn streets, the crack heads and the hookers, the ever-present possibility of errant gang gunfire bursting through your windshield or blasting open your date's chest — why brave all that for a double feature when you could stop at the local strip mall and stroll through an orderly, aseptic, mega-chain video store? For a couple of bucks and a flash of a laminated membership card, the acne-scarred clerks would give anyone the ability to conjure Pickford or Bogart or Karloff right into her own living room for a two-evening command performance.

Of course that conjuring was only technological sleight-of-hand, not the sort of True Magic Miranda attempted at the Oasis. The most advanced home theater speakers and a bowl of low-fat microwave popcorn could never weave the same spell as the ancient, hissing sound system of an inner-city movie palace or the cholesterol bombs masquerading as popcorn in the lobby. They were part of the incantation, right along with the torn seats and the sticky floors and the overloaded trashcan vomiting up crumpled candy wrappers by the exit.

"Someday the Sleepers will understand," Miranda said forcefully, defiantly. "I'll open their eyes to the possibility of magic, audience by audience, one packed house after another. Then those doddering old skeptics at the Sons Chantry will have to make me a full Fellow of the cabal."

She gave the etheric movie projector humming at her side a light-fingered caress. The contraption resembled something from the set of *Frankenstein*, all blinking lights and arcing Jacob's ladders, a mass of old tubes and thick black cabling. Like the other mages who identified themselves as Sons of Ether, Miranda wrought magic through a weird combination of science and arcane rite. In recent months, she'd transformed the theater's clattering old projector into a Talisman, an object of no small worth that could utilize the magical Quintessence holding the universe together. But that success paled beside her greater goal.

With the twist of a dial, the unique and potent projector went to work. Through sorcery and technology, the Talisman strengthened the images that flickered across the screen. Suddenly the silver-white sheet became a window, a gate between two worlds. The leading man danced right through the two-story-tall casement. He stepped gracefully from the dream realm he inhabited into the gloomy theater, as if the move had been choreographed into his dance all along.

Miranda adjusted two switches on the etheric projector, banishing the picture and silencing the soundtrack. As the mute celluloid continued to spool onto a take-up reel, the mage dashed from the projection booth. She nearly stumbled over a box heaped with tools and unused electronics. Overdue bills swirled about the room like dead leaves in her wake.

At the padded double-door entrance to the balcony, Miranda drew a deep breath, then pushed through. The theater seemed wrapped in cemetery stillness, but she knew better. The gate was still open. The dancer and a few others of his kind lingered on this side. She could feel them, like the power infusing the air before a thunderstorm. To see them, to hear them, she merely had to focus her mind...

"I'm singin' in the rain, just singin' in the rain..."

"Remember, you're fighting for this woman's honor, which is probably more than she ever did..."

"I always say a kiss on the hand might feel very good, but a diamond tiara lasts forever."

A host of dim, wavering phantoms filled the air — Kelly and Groucho and Monroe. Miranda recognized them all. No matter how many times their costumes or their ghostly faces melted and re-formed, they remained familiar. Most often, their hollow, whispering voices repeated snatches of dialogue recorded years, even decades, past. But the spirits were not anchored to static reality by a strip of celluloid. They sometimes moved in ways unrehearsed before any camera and spoke words not found in any script.

The monolithic studios of Hollywood's golden age had unwittingly created these weird umbroods, along with the dream realm they inhabited. Yet, unlike the fleeting, transient realms wrought by one person's fancy, Filmland — as Miranda had come to call it — seemed permanent. A pristine, comforting place, it drew strength from everyone across the globe who'd ever seen *Gone With the Wind* or *Duck Soup*, *The Maltese Falcon* or *Casablanca*.

Bela Lugosi, cold and proper in his guise as the Count, materialized at Miranda's side. An eerie half-smile quirked his black lips. *"Listen to them... children of the screen! What music they make!"*

She did not reply. Experience had taught her that the phantoms were not interested in conversation. They crossed into the mundane world for as long as the etheric projector would allow, darting about like children on a playground. Some, like Lugosi, tantalized her with brief, whispered comments. Most remained playfully aloof, entertaining her by noisily donning and shucking the cheerful facades they'd created for directors long-moldering in overpriced graves down the coast in Los Angeles. And though they were personable enough, the umbroods were adamant in their refusal to converse, as if they so loved their respite on this side of the screen that they dared not waste a moment of it.

Miranda hoped some fine-tuning of the etheric projector would solve that problem. Even after drawing the potent Quintessence from a Hollywood gem like *Singin' in the Rain*, the machine only gave the umbroods a few fleeting moments of freedom. The Talisman could open the gate, but for some reason it couldn't draw the spirits fully into static reality.

If she could offer the umbroods more time, they might cooperate with her plans. They could be useful, these familiar phantoms. If a Sleeper came to the Oasis to see a wholesome, reassuring picture, the gentle specters might step out of the film to speak with him, to coax his mind to a more agile state wherein he might find magic more acceptable. And to provide the unenlightened this escape from the profane, all Miranda need do was lure them into the dark. They would enter the old movie palace utterly asleep. After two hours, complete with cartoon and coming attraction, they would rouse and exit as potential acolytes of the Ascension.

For now, though, Miranda could only use the etheric projector to shuttle the phantoms into the Oasis for the briefest of stays, then watch helplessly as they dissipated.

The last of the current mob of specters had just vanished, melting into a puddle of mist like Margaret Hamilton at the end of *The Wizard of Oz*, when the door to the theater's lower level creaked open. The old hinges were desperately in need of oil.

"Another packed house at the Oasis." The words echoed up from the dim, empty lower level. A pitying sigh followed the sarcastic comment, which only made it that much more offensive.

Miranda muttered a mild curse, something you might hear from the lips of Frankie and Annette, or maybe Andy Hardy. She recognized the man's voice and briefly considered ducking down in the seats until he left, but her anger got the best of her. "It's a meeting of your fan club, Murnau. Looks like you're the only member."

"Ah, but you're here, too," the man said as he strolled out from beneath the balcony. "That must make you president."

Erich Murnau, junkie-thin and clad in black leather, paused in the center of the aisle. The footlights at the end of each row of seats revealed his mocking smile. "I came here to see if the place was still standing." He brushed a rope of long, stringy hair from his ice-blue eyes and looked around.

"We weathered the quake rather well. There are a few more cracks in the ceiling plaster. One of the Buddhas in the lobby fell off its perch, and the popcorn machine spewed kernels all over the concession stand. That was the worst of it." Miranda turned away. "I have to get ready for the five o'clock show, so if that's all you came to find out—"

"Actually," Erich interrupted, "I came to ask a question. Have you told that mob of drooling old conjurers at the Sons cabal to sod off yet?"

The question spun Miranda around, and a look of shocked annoyance crossed her pretty countenance. Her discomfort only widened Erich's smile.

"News of the censure is all over the street," he noted. "I've got a copy of the letter here somewhere. It's amazing how fast these things circulate."

He patted his pockets distractedly. Finally Erich unzipped his jacket and produced a folded piece of paper from the shadowed lining. He held it up with overblown theatricality; as if it were a rabbit he'd yanked out of a silk top hat.

"Disrupting an important lecture," he read, scanning the page. "Insulting a Fellow... Behavior unbecoming a Disciple *and* a young lady." Erich clicked his tongue disapprovingly. "This isn't like you at all, Mira."

"Summerlee used his standing in the Sons to have an article of mine dropped from *Paradigma*," Miranda snapped. "They'd already accepted the piece, and he had it killed!"

Again Erich Murnau reached inside his scuffed leather jacket. This time he produced a packet of two-dozen pages, typeset just as they would have appeared in the Sons' scientific journal. "*The Awakening at Twenty-four Frames per Second*. Nice title. Clever." He thumbed through the unpublished article. "So what was Summerlee's objection?"

"As senior Fellow of the Chantry, he claimed the right to see anything I put forth for publication. 'Not enough proof to support this,' he said after he read the article. 'Needs further study.'"

"Yeah, he'll study it further all right — to see if there's any ideas worth stealing." Erich held up the letter in one hand, the article in the other. "Here's what I did when Summerlee gave me a notice of censure." Twin goutts of flame devoured the pages. Chuckling, Erich brushed his hands together to rid them of ashes. "Too bad he was still writing the note when it went up. Two years, and I hear his eyebrows still haven't grown back."

The thin young man didn't wait for a reply. As casually as he had entered the theater, he strolled up the air itself to the balcony. The magic-wrought stairs he trod upon were invisible, but his footfalls resounded as if his boots were scuffing stone. "You need to break away from those ether-sniffers. Go freelance."

"Oh, the life of a rogue is obviously preferable to that of a Tradition," Miranda spat.

"Being a mercenary has its benefits," he replied. "And *not* belonging to a single Tradition is the biggest. You're learning now what being shackled to a cabal like the Sons means, all the restrictions and the political in fighting. The others are no better — Euthanatos, the Cult of Ecstasy, the Virtual Adepts. They've all got blinders. Being a rogue means I can pick my battles — and my beliefs — more carefully."

"And you can use vulgar magic all day long without caring how much Paradox you create."

Hands clasped behind his back, Erich stepped nonchalantly over the railing. He perched atop one seatback and put his booted feet up on another. "Paradox?" he repeated, then dismissed the word with the wave of one stick-fingered hand. "To create an anomaly you've got to use magic in front of a Sleeper. You believe in magic, don't you, little girl?"

"Not the kind you practice." She jerked a thumb over her shoulder. "If you're such an expert on living a mercenary's life, you'll want to loiter in front of the theater after nightfall. Some desperate young ladies work from this block. You could probably teach them a thing or two about getting the best financial return for services rendered."

Erich chuckled basely. “Money’s part of the world, too, sweetheart. So are a lot of things you and the Sons don’t want to admit exist. Hatred and rage and lust—” He reached out to stroke her face, but she swatted his hand away. “The Sleepers may not understand the Ascension, but they see their own pathetic part of the universe pretty clearly. To them, reality — the whole Tapestry — is a nightmare. You’ll never open one pair of eyes to the bigger picture until you recognize that truth yourself.”

Cobra-quick, Murnau leapt to his feet and grabbed Miranda. She struggled against him, but he was much stronger than his bony, scarecrow frame suggested. “Look,” he said, “I read your article. If these smiling, little film umbroods of yours are going to help anyone along the path to enlightenment, you’ve gotta provide them with an audience — one that has all kinds of warm, fuzzy thoughts about dead millionaire stars and the pabulum they churned out under contract for their billionaire bosses.”

“I have regular patrons, people who want to see the kind of pictures that generate the phantoms.”

Erich snorted. “I don’t see anyone here but us.”

“There was an earthquake last night,” Miranda said, but any anger that might have given her reply an edge was undercut by the self-doubt welling up in her heart. The theater had been just as empty in the days before the quake as it was now.

She lowered her eyes. “People are digging themselves out.”

“You know why you can’t draw a crowd?” Erich demanded as he spun her to face the rows of empty seats arrayed before the screen. “Cause you show crap that the Sleepers can’t understand. Musicals and beach party flicks without a single naked chick, and bloodless, so-called horror movies with genteel mad scientists and vampires in tuxedos and top hats. The films are irrelevant antiques — like the creaky old chairs you find in your great-aunt’s sitting room. They’re nice enough to look at, if you find dusty chairs intrinsically enthralling, but pretty friggin’ useless when you want someplace to park your ass.”

Erich shoved her away. “It’s Halloween tomorrow. What’ve you got scheduled?”

Scowling, Miranda rubbed her arm; a bruise was already purpling there from the man’s brutal grip. “A Lugosi double feature: *Ghost of Frankenstein* and *Mark of the Vampire*.”

“Pathetic,” Erich spat. “Like Bauhaus says: ‘Bela Lugosi’s dead.’ Let me pick some real Halloween flicks to show. I’ll have the Sleepers lined up six deep in the lobby. They’ll be knifing each other for seats.”

“I keep that sort of riff-raff out of here,” Miranda sniffed.

“Hardly the egalitarian attitude I would expect from a Son. Gang-bangers and addicts and low-lifes are entitled to Ascension just as much as eggheads and mystics, right?”

“Since when do Sleepers matter so much to you?” Miranda said, more loudly than she would have liked. “Why do you care who I let in?”

“It’s not the Sleepers I’m concerned about, it’s you.” Erich’s kind words were tainted by his annoying, pitying tone. The condescension made Miranda stammer with suppressed fury, but Erich continued, unfazed by her obvious anger. “I hate to admit this, but Summerlee’s right: You’ve got no test results to back up your claims about the film umbroods. You’ll never get those results, either. The experiment’s a wash.”

Miranda lashed out. The blow's suddenness and strength surprised Erich, and in his haste to avoid a second slap he tumbled backward over a row of seats. When he climbed warily to his feet, his pale cheek throbbed crimson. "Attacking me only proves how right I am."

"Hardly," Miranda said. "It only proves you're an annoying bastard."

"I'm willing to wager on it. On whether or not my flicks will draw a bigger crowd, that is — not on what you said about me being a bastard." Erich smirked. "I'm afraid I'll have to plead *nolo contendere* to that charge."

"Forget it. I don't want you showing trash on my projector. You can just—"

Erich held up a restraining hand. "Your precious magical View Master will remain virginal. I'll provide a projector and suitable security for the place, along with at least a half-dozen prime flicks. You don't normally advertise, so I won't either. Just word of mouth.

"And if I pack the house — something you've never done in the short time you've run this place, if I'm not mistaken — you will admit that the Sleepers are a bunch of disillusioned brutes, and the Tapestry is a lot darker than you've allowed yourself to see. If that wises you up enough to break with the Sons, so much the better."

"And if you can't fill the theater?"

Erich paused, tapping his chin as he pondered a suitable payment. "If there's a single seat left unsold when the first flick rolls, or if there's a single seat empty when the last flick's over, I'll admit you're right to put your faith in the Sleepers. In fact, I'll immediately petition the Sons for re-admittance. I think that's more than fair, considering I'm only asking you to *consider* your allegiance to the ether-sniffers."

"You wouldn't offer to rejoin the Chantry unless you'd stacked the deck."

Erich pulled back his jacket and made the sign of the cross over the breast of his ragged Thrill Kill Kult concert shirt. "Scout's honor," he mocked. Then his cynical sneer vanished as swiftly and completely as one of the film umbroods. "Honestly, Mira, I haven't set you up. My confidence comes from knowing my view of the Tapestry is a thousand times more accurate than yours."

Miranda's intellect told her to reject the wager outright, but her heart labeled any such prudence as nothing less than cowardice. "All right. We'll open the doors at seven."

"Agreed," Erich said. He held his hand out to seal the bargain, but Miranda had already turned away.

"If the theater is damaged in any way, you're paying for the repairs," she said over her shoulder as she stalked toward the exit. "And be here at least two hours before show time. I'll have some sort of oath devised by then, some way to test you. I want to be certain you haven't paid a crowd or something like that."

"That's awfully cynical of you," Erich called after her. "Good. You're starting to smarten up already."

Miranda pushed through the padded doors to the hallway, leaving Erich alone in the theater. When he was certain she'd gone, the mage leapt up onto the metal railing. Arms straight out at his sides, head thrown back, he drew a deep, open-mouthed breath.

There was some inherent power in the place. Nothing staggering, but enough to make his fingers itch and his scrotum tighten. Maybe the Oasis housed some minor well of Quintessence. He'd have to ask Miranda about that, if she came around to his way of thinking.

Shaking his head, Erich walked lightly down the conjured and still-invisible steps to the theater's lower level. No, Miranda could never be stripped of her hope for universal Ascension. She was too stupidly certain that something pure and sacred dwelt beneath the filth encrusting San Francisco and its scabrous citizens. Losing the wager would shake her confidence; maybe even force her to go Rogue. But she would never give herself over completely to the darkness. Not like Erich had.

He knew there was no sacred heart beneath the city's blighted facade. It was corrupt right to the core.

As a rogue, unhindered by the blinders the Traditions forced upon their Disciples and Apprentices, he'd discovered that the entire Tapestry of existence was woven upon a loom of pain, its threads spun from suffering and spite. Better to unravel it, to allow Entropy to swallow it all back up, than to allow the imagination-dead Sleepers and the idiot mages to continue blindly, foolishly pursuing an Ascension that would never come. And if Miranda couldn't be made to see that, she would have to be destroyed.

Her death would be something of a loss to Erich. He'd always fancied Miranda. She had some skill in magic. And even if she hadn't, he found her pretty enough to satisfy other, purely physical needs.

But then, Erich reminded himself, there's nothing to prevent me from forcing her to satisfy those needs after I've broken her will — or even after I've killed her.

Erich Murnau knew the notion should have revolted him. It would have once, before he'd bargained his soul away. Now he was a Nephandus, an agent of Entropy, a general in the legion of darkness. And the fact that he felt no disgust only galvanized his resolve to cripple Miranda's spirit before she could spread her message of hope.

And all he needed to accomplish that was a few bad films.



The nameless zombie shuffled across the screen. Moaning with the agony of the damned, the thing threw itself against the unlocked door. The woman in the room beyond squealed and braced her back against the wood. As the door slammed shut, it captured the corpse's fingertips. The bits of flesh dropped to the floor like bloody hailstones.

But the zombie was not so easily denied.

Fiercely, methodically, it set to work battering the wooden barricade to splinters. Soon the hole was large enough for the decaying hands to reach inside, to grope and claw at the woman's breasts. Rotting stumps of fingers twined in her hair. Maggot-gnawed muscles contracted, pulling her toward the spikes of shattered wood standing erect around the breach. The camera zoomed in to frame her face, and the image illuminated the dark theater in spurts of light like bursts of automatic gunfire. The woman's screams resumed a moment later. Then, with a sickening, liquid squelch, the largest splinter pierced her right eye and lodged itself in the blind, bloody socket.

A bespectacled old man in the back of the movie house sent up a triumphant cheer. Someone else shouted a foolish joke about safety goggles and woodworking. No one groaned in disgust at the impaling's realism. No one shrieked in horror at the bloodshed. They'd all witnessed worse carnage before — on the screen, in the streets, in their homes. A few had orchestrated more terrible real-life scenarios themselves.

In the projection booth overlooking the packed Oasis Theater, Miranda Peake covered her tearing eyes with her hands. It was just as Erich had predicted. The Sleepers were six deep in the lobby. Not a ticket remained unsold, not a seat stood empty. Never mind that it was Sunday night and Halloween, never mind the neighborhood's usual dangers and the chaos caused by Friday's earthquake, the crowd had come. Not even the strange fog that had settled over the Golden Gate Bridge, paralyzing traffic throughout the city, could keep them away. They'd abandoned their cars and walked, rather than miss the festival of cinematic slaughter and degradation.

Erich hadn't paid them. He hadn't compelled them magically. The test Miranda had forced upon the mage had proved the truth of that. A vague promise of blood and sex and chaos had lured the crowd to the Oasis, and now it kept them anchored to their seats like so many quadriplegics.

To Miranda's horror, she'd recognized some of her regular patrons in the mob. The trendy men in their overpriced Irish wool sweaters and the women in their gaudy Home Shopping Club jewelry howled right along with the rowdy gangsters. She'd seen these staid suburbanites weep for Shirley Temple and root for John Wayne. But it was clear now that they craved blood as much as the inner-city kids girded for Halloween with child-sized hockey masks and toy chain saws and gloves tipped with plastic finger-knives.

A rap on the projection booth door drew Miranda's attention away from the audience. Happy for the distraction, she turned to see Erich duck his head inside the noisy little room. "You busy?" he asked, but shoved the door fully open before she could speak. "There's somebody here who wants to talk to you."

A moment later, a policeman pushed past Erich. He was short, but brutishly muscled. The hard line of his mouth and the sharp crease in his trousers bespoke an unfor-giving personal discipline. "Ms. Peake?"

"Yes. I-Is there a problem?" Miranda wiped the tears from her eyes and stepped away from the ancient, clattering projector Erich had provided for the evening. Unconsciously, she positioned herself between the cop and the large box that hid her own etheric contraption.

"This is my beat." The officer surveyed the slovenly booth with an appraising eye, then turned his gaze on Miranda. His disapproval of her untidy dress manifested as a slight sneer. "I've never had reason to come in until tonight," he began. "Your friend here says that you're going to be showing these sorts of films regularly now."

"Seems likely," Erich chimed from the doorway.

The cop waited for Miranda to confirm this, but she remained silent. After an uncomfortably long pause, he nodded at her, then held something out in his left hand. Miranda stared at the rectangular, plastic box as if it were alive.

"I couldn't get a theatrical print," he said. "Usually I can. It depends on what the vice squad confiscates, of course. This was just a slow week."

Miranda finally took the box. It was a black videocassette case, a title printed on its spine in Japanese.

“Your friend says you might be able to use this anyway,” the cop continued. “Consider it a get-acquainted gift. We can discuss my usual rates next time.”

With military precision, the policeman turned and marched from the booth. Erich waved to him as he went by, but the stone-faced cop ignored the young man.

“He insisted on handing the print over to ‘the proprietor,’” Erich noted once the officer had gone. In response to Miranda’s puzzled stare he added, “I put out word that we were looking for some special movies, ones even I couldn’t locate. I didn’t even dare to hope someone would scare up that little treasure you’re holding. It’s a Japanese ‘pink’ flick, hard-core S & M, real rough stuff. I’m surprised Joe Friday didn’t keep the tape for home use. Must mean he’s already duped a copy.”

Erich gestured at the cassette. “Think you might be persuaded to burn a little Juice to fix the flick’s format?” He shrugged and untangled an arcane-looking circuit tester from a box of junk electronics. “If magic’s out, maybe you can jury-rig something to convert it the old-fashioned way. Looks like you’ve got enough hardware in here to do it... Damn!”

Smiling broadly, the mage drew a pair of plastic glasses from the box. “If I’d known you had some of these, I would have brought *3-D House of Slave Chicks*.” He held the colored lenses up to his eyes, then set the glasses on Miranda’s desk. “So you think you can have the pink film ready to run after *Faces of Death*? It’ll be 2 a.m. by then, and most of the younger tykes will have scampered off to roll closing-time drunks.”

“Fine,” Miranda said flatly. Any chore that might take her mind off the revolting films and the even more revolting spectators was welcome.

Erich left without another word, without even a victorious grin. He didn’t need to bring up the wager. The dispirited look in Miranda’s face and the defeated slouch of her shoulders revealed her imminent surrender just as surely as if she’d been tying a white cloth to a stick. The Sleepers wanted trash, not magic. The gibbering, lunatic mob filling the Oasis was proof enough of that, even for a romantic like herself.

At first, Miranda refused to waste one scintilla of Quintessence transferring the tape to celluloid. She set about gutting an old VCR and an editing machine to gather a few essentials for this new piece of hardware. But she gave up quickly. The dingy ceremonies wrapped around her spirit had dampened even her love of tinkering.

Instead, she broke open the cassette and began to thread the tape through the pinched thumb and forefinger of her left hand. Digging deep within herself for the energy, she transmuted the tape inch by horrible inch into a 70-millimeter print, complete with THX soundtrack. She refused to look at a single frame, afraid of what she might find there.

It was tedious work, and her fingers throbbed painfully before she’d transformed half the movie’s length. As she toiled, her mind wandered from the terrible reality around her to the clean and genial streets of the Filmland dream realm. Naturally, then, she dismissed the faint song echoing through the booth as nothing more than a happy memory welling up to soothe her troubled soul.

“I’m singin’ in the rain, just singin’ in the rain...”

But the song only grew louder. As other voices picked up the familiar tune, Miranda paused to listen more closely. To her astonishment, she realized that the music originated not in her memory, but in the theater itself.

Miranda dashed from the projection booth before another word was chorused. As she ran, she prayed desperately that her umbroods had returned to lead the Sleepers out of this self-inflicted nightmare. A small part of her spirit rallied at the thought; here, finally, was proof that the Tapestry was forged of light, not darkness.

That hopeful spark died in Miranda the moment she burst through the balcony's padded double-doors.

Faces of Death had concluded, and the movie screen hung blank. A haze of anarchy loomed over the place. Vicious fights raged in a dozen places, with fists and bludgeons and knives landing blow after blow. In the back stalls, couples copulated like crazed beasts. Spilled beer and blood and semen swirled together on the floor in foul rivulets. The air was thick with screams and groans, but the eerie, keening sound of the show tune lilted over the cacophony.

The white-jumpsuited leader of the chorus frolicked across the stage at the theater's head. He was busy re-enacting a scene from his favorite film, if his carefully patterned Halloween garb was any indication of his interests. In time with the tune, he bowed, tipped his bowler appreciatively — and planted a jackboot in the face of the man lying before him. To his right, illuminated by the light from a burning trashcan, his three *droogs* tore the clothes off a struggling woman in preparation for a little of the old “in-out, in-out.” Her shrieks made one thing clear: She wasn't a willing part of the stage show.

“Stop it!” Miranda screamed. Her outburst only brought laughter from the seats nearest her and a slick-fingered hand groping up her skirt from behind. She sprinted forward a half-dozen steps to escape the assault.

Almost unconsciously, the mage reached out with her power for the theater's sound system. The wires crossed and recrossed, until they could pick up and transmit only one specific sound: her voice. “I said stop it!” she boomed in rumbling stereo, the command loud enough to draw trickles of blood from the ears of those closest to the speakers. “All of you! Get out of here!”

The scenario from *A Clockwork Orange* playing out on the stage ended; the woman snatched up the tattered remnants of her clothing and fled. An incomplete, wavering hush descended upon the other patrons, the same sort of half-quiet that settles over a theater in that instant after the lights go down. Miranda walked to the edge of the balcony.

Just before she spoke, she regained wits enough to cup a hand before her mouth and pretend to be speaking into a microphone. No use encouraging Paradox with a blatant use of vulgar magic before such a Tapestry-blind throng. “The projector is broken,” she began, only slightly more calm. “We won't be able to fix it tonight, so you all might as well go home.”

A hand clamped down on her shoulder and turned her around. “Are you insane?” Erich hissed. “They'll riot!”

As if one cued, the fights on the lower floor resumed. Angry shouts came from all quarters. Somewhere, metal whined in protest as a seat was ripped from the concrete floor. A woman leapt onto the stage and kicked the burning trashcan into the mob. Flaming debris rained over the first four rows.

“You’ve won, Erich,” Miranda said. When she heard her own bitter words echo back at her from the speakers, she dropped her control of the sound system. “I concede. They’re animals. They’ve got the world they deserve. Get them out of here before they destroy the place!”

Erich put two fingers to his lips and whistled. The sound was answered by identical shrills from all around the theater. For an instant, the chaos gripping the crowd intensified. Then it became clear that some organized force was breaking up the mob and herding each separate cluster toward a different exit.

Hulking thugs made up the majority of Erich’s brute squad. And from her vantage point, Miranda thought she saw the flash of large, bloodstained blades — and not any stage props, either — in the hands of the bouncers who took it upon themselves to handle the most violent men and women in the mob.

Sometime during the scuffle, Miranda collapsed into an empty seat. For a time she was vaguely aware of Erich standing over her, barking orders. Then she was alone. The mob had gone, and the machete-wielding brutes with it. Even Erich had vanished.

Numbly, Miranda stood and surveyed the ruins of the night. The first few rows of seats were a smoking wreck, patterned black and white with ash and fire retardant. The discarded extinguishers littered the sooty floor before the screen like spent shells. Blocks of seats had been torn out or toppled in other parts of the theater. Ropes of synthetic padding bulged like spilled intestines from slashed and savaged cushions. Someone had started to spray-paint the symbol for anarchy on the movie screen, but the graffiti remained incomplete; Erich’s goons or the crush of the crowd had swept the tagger away before he could finish.

Miranda stared at that symbol for a time, futilely attempting to conjure memories of the beautiful people and the breathtaking vistas it had supplanted. Finally, her eyes began to play tricks on her. The ragged, dripping lines appeared to shiver. She started to turn away, but a glimpse of movement from the stage froze her in place.

The painted lines — or, more precisely, the screen beneath them — were bulging. The silver-white sheet stretched outward, like a barricade of translucent rubber. Slowly, the amorphous bulge became the imprint of a hand, each finger the height of a man. Other hands pressed against the screen, and torsos, and faces caught in silent, open-mouthed screams.

A cold finger of fear traced a line up Miranda’s spine, settling at the nape of her neck. She shuddered.

Yes, she had definitely heard it.

Beneath the seeming silence in the Oasis hissed a low, slithering murmur of voices. Their words worked into her ears like tiny insects; by the time she’d realized they were there, it was too late to stop them from burrowing into her mind.

“Do you know why the pathetic umbroods you conjured wouldn’t talk to you?” a smooth, cultured voice asked. *“They were afraid you would discover the truth about our happy little home.”*

Miranda gripped the balcony rail. “The truth?”

“Yes,” the voice lulled. *“But we aren’t afraid of the truth. If you want, we can show you the dream realm’s true face. We can take you behind the facade.”*

“Show me,” Miranda said.

“*There’s a price,*” cautioned the voice. “*There’s always a price for knowledge.*”

“Show me.”

The screen burst open. Through the gap Miranda saw a familiar, rain-slicked city street, with its cozy brownstones and smiling, singing passers-by. As the pedestrians rushed along in the perfectly orchestrated downpour, the buildings collapsed one by one. They were nothing more than flats, useless as shelter from the storm, but heavy enough to crush the happy citizens just the same.

Miranda didn’t scream when she saw what lay behind those facades, or even when the gray-fleshed arms reached out from the shattered screen and tangled their rotting finger-stumps in her hair.

“Show me everything,” she whispered as they drew her face toward the jagged, silver-white splinters spiking up around the breach.



Erich Murnau returned to the Oasis Theater at dawn. He’d spent the last few hours watching an enjoyable show put on by the gangsters he’d hired as security. The young toughs had chased the worst rioters out of the movie palace and herded a dozen or so into an abandoned warehouse for a deadly game of cat and mouse. But the sunrise had signaled the game’s end, and sent the thugs hurrying off to other, less strenuous pastimes.

Now Erich stood on the theater’s balcony, surveying the destruction. The place was an utter shambles. Only the screen had been spared. Somehow, the monolithic silver-white sheet stood unblemished. It reminded him of a photograph he’d seen of St. Paul’s during the Blitz: The cathedral’s dome rose defiantly above a sea of black smoke as London, reduced to glorious, flaming rubble by the Luftwaffe, burned around it. Only after a moment did the mage realize the comparison made him vaguely uncomfortable.

“I have something for you... *sweetheart.*”

Erich turned to find a pale face framed in the small projection window overlooking the theater. “Mira? I pounded on the door to the booth and shouted for you. Didn’t you hear me?”

She giggled rapidly. “I was working on your present.”

Miranda’s voice was softer, seductive. In fact, her whole demeanor had changed. The uncomfortable feeling in Erich’s gut transformed into a full-fledged gnawing dread. His stomach twinged unpleasantly. “Er, what happened to you?” He pointed to the bloody bandage wrapped around her head and the right side of her face.

“I got something in my eye,” Miranda said, then giggled again. “It hurt... a lot.” She disappeared from the window for a moment. The house lights went down, and a projector whirred to life.

“Sit down, Erich,” Miranda said through the speaker system. “I spliced together a loop from the flicks you left — those and a few other bits of film I got from some new friends of mine. Maybe we can use it between features, once we get the Oasis cleaned up and running again. Anyway, I think it shows how much my experience tonight changed the way I see things.”

There was no title, only a short leader that counted down to the first grotesque image. Erich had no trouble recognizing the earliest clips:

Heads exploded in Technicolor splendor, then melted into anatomical close-ups of porn stars rutting disinterestedly. Documentary footage of pathetic “real-life” cannibals merged with scenes of greasepaint zombies — blind Templars in moth-eaten robes — pursuing bikini-girls around a phantom galleon. A young Japanese man convinced that he was part machine writhed in pain as he shoved a length of metal pipe into the open, gaping wound in his thigh. A woman stared wide-eyed as someone sliced her cornea with a straight razor, a sacrifice to the cause of Art.

In the balcony, Erich stifled a yawn and considered leaving, or at least going back to the projection booth to talk to Miranda. She’d obviously suffered a breakdown. The only question he had now was how completely she’d snapped.

But the next scene to play across the pristine screen riveted Erich in place. It was footage the Nephandus had heard about, but never actually seen:

The veteran actor slogged across the soundstage rice paddy, an Amer-Asian child tucked under each arm. He was only pretending to be in a war zone. The malfunctioning helicopter that crashed down on him in a blaze of killing shrapnel proved him wrong...

The Brat Pack leading man hammed it up for the camera, in a bedroom scene not so unlike others he’d done in countless teen exploitation flicks. Only this time it was for real, and the girl in his embrace wasn’t old enough to drive...

The perfectly pumped action star burst through the door, ready to do battle with a gang of stunt thugs. The role might have been his ticket to the big time — a superhero for Generation X, a dead man fighting for the living in a lurid nightmare city. Sadly, the guns weren’t harmless props that day, and the young actor hadn’t the supernatural powers to return from the grave to avenge himself against the key grip and his union flunkies...

Erich slid forward to the edge of his seat, trying to discern the real blood from the corn syrup and food coloring spattering the actors. He didn’t dare take his eyes off the screen for fear of missing some marvelous new atrocity. “Christ, Miranda!” the mage shouted. “Where did you get this footage?”

“I told you, from some friends,” Miranda cooed in Erich’s ear. “This isn’t even a fraction of the things they showed me.”

Murnau gave her the briefest of glances as she stepped over the row of seats to take the spot next to him. “How much did this stuff cost you?”

“Nothing,” she giggled. “And everything. I promised to let them spend some time in the Oasis now and then. They’re all here, waiting to meet you,” Miranda added. She ran an ice-cold finger from his jaw line up to his eye, then pointed toward the darkened lower level. “Down there. You were too busy watching the flick to notice them come in.”

The movie’s first half concluded, and the screen blared white with pure, uninterrupted light. “Go on and say hello,” Miranda prompted. “This is the intermission. You’ve got a minute before the big finale.”

Squinting against the glare, Erich stood and peered over the balcony railing. The seats below were crowded with monstrosities. Children gutted in snuff films huddled next to straitjacketed psychotics. Perfectly tanned men and women with unwavering smiles

and grotesquely huge genitals stroked the chitinous shells of drooling, multi-jawed aliens. As if they could feel Erich's eyes upon them, the silent, infernal creatures turned as one and met his gaze. They regarded the mage for a moment. Then the nightmare mob donned 3-D glasses and turned back toward the blank screen.

"Silly me," Miranda said airily. "I forgot to give you your glasses. You'll need them for the next part of the production." She held out a pair of cheap, plastic 3-D glasses. Wires snaked along the frames, and five or six small antennae bristled up from the bridge. "The modifications help them to work with my etheric projector."

Erich slapped her hand away. "I don't think so," he said darkly. "Not until you explain what the hell's going on here."

"Movie magic," Miranda said, her voice suddenly edged with steel. "The stuff you tried to take away from me."

Rough hands grabbed Erich from behind and slammed him into a seat. He tried to muster a defense, something to drive the swarming, pummeling fists away, but it was no use. The blows landed too fast. Any thoughts of resistance or magic were knocked out of his head almost as soon as they blossomed there.

Quickly, the glasses were crammed onto the mage's face. The bases of the antennae wires dug bloody furrows as they slid up the bridge of his nose. Pins on the inside of the lenses pricked his eyes and his eyelids, making it impossible for him to blink. Two decaying hands clamped to either side of his face and twisted his head so he would face the screen. The violence of the movement cracked Erich's neck. Showers of maggots rained from his assailant's decaying wrists.

A barrage of images flashed across the movie screen. At first, Erich thought himself safe from whatever weird assault Miranda had planned, since the scenes were passing too swiftly for him to comprehend. But his mind could register the images much faster than it could unpack that information. After a moment, the compressed scenes began to play out in the mage's head, slowly, so he could savor every sight.

The world was all smiles and laughter. A nutty professor with buckteeth and a mixing-bowl haircut transformed himself into a smarmy lounge singer. As a rubber-faced lunatic in a tutu searched for lost pets, a crowd of equally manic men and women tore up a park, looking for the treasure buried under "the big W." Stooges smashed each other with mallets, and fifty people packed themselves into a stateroom barely large enough for two. Nothing was too dark, too grim to be mocked, as hick cowboys rode falling atomic bombs like broncos and the dreaded SS danced and sang for a groovy, beatnik Hitler.

"Enjoying the show?" Miranda asked coldly. "The glasses really make it special. They help the film phantoms get a better foothold in static reality — well, actually only the cheerful ones need the assistance." She shook her head sadly. "Even the plain old projector you brought in last night was enough to open a gate for the corrupted umbroods. Their part of the dream realm is so perfect a reflection of our world that they're equally at home in either place. And if I use the etheric projector on them, they're just as solid as you and me — as you can tell by those hands holding you down."

Erich's mind reeled as the phantoms happily dismissed broken limbs and lampooned unspeakable horrors. "Stop the projector!" he shouted. "No more."

“Whatever you say, sweetheart,” Miranda cooed in her best Melanie Griffith voice. She gestured toward the projection booth. The camera went dark, and the house lights came up just a little. At the same time, the foul fingers clutching Erich loosened their grip.

The Nephandus shot to his feet, the glasses already crushed in one hand. The zombie standing right behind him — and the half-dozen more stationed on the balcony — burst into flame. Groaning, the umbroods melted down into puddles of stinking, bubbling film stock. “Now,” Erich growled, leveling a finger at Miranda. “You’re going to—”

The threat died in his throat. He blinked, then held a hand up to his eyes. The host of specters dancing before him didn’t vanish, didn’t dim. “No,” he hissed. “They’re inside my head.”

Dapper and debonair and smiling ear-to-ear, they filled his vision. There were leading men clad impeccably in top hats and stylish white tails, and cloyingly cute little girls toting striped lollipops, and fat men bumbling after their rail-thin compatriots. And to Erich’s horror, every last one of them was recounting some inspiring fable about the power of virtue and the triumph of hope.

“We poisoned Filmland years ago,” Miranda said. “Snuff films and kiddie porn and the other trash we put on celluloid darken both sides of the screen. But we haven’t destroyed the possibility of happiness in either realm. Not yet.”

Erich lashed out blindly with his power, trying to banish the phantoms and quiet the voices inside his head. Each blow he struck did more damage to him than to the umbroods. For every specter he destroyed, a dozen more sprang to ghostly life.

“We were both wrong about the Tapestry,” Miranda continued. Her hand drifted up to the bandages that covered the blackened, empty socket that had held her right eye. “But I can see things clearly now — the dark and the light. The umbroods helped me to recognize how I was overestimating the Sleepers, and how easy it must have been for the Nephandi to dupe you. You certainly weren’t much of a challenge for me. A few dead comedians, and you’re down for the count.” She chuckled. “Shirley Temple kicked your ass.”

But Erich wasn’t listening. He shrieked and clawed at his face, tearing bloody runnels into his cheeks. His pupils vanished. The color drained from his irises and trickled down his face like ice blue tears, leaving his eyes glassy white marbles. Finally, he collapsed into a seat. His colorless eyes stared straight ahead at the empty movie screen, and a thin line of spittle worked slowly down his chin.

Miranda lifted one of Erich’s arms and let it drop limply into his lap. She made her way through the padded double doors, and down to the lower level, where the mob waited patiently in the whispering dimness. “He’s all yours,” she said softly. A few of the more agile monstrosities had already scaled the walls or leapt up to the balcony by the time she’d finished that simple utterance.

The mage despised the monstrous umbroods, and pitied them, but she would not be fool enough to ignore them ever again. They were a reality, a part of the Tapestry. They might even be useful. Some Sleepers were obviously going to need rougher guides to enlightenment than Gene Kelly or Vivian Leigh.

A smile crept across Miranda's lips. An evening with the infernal specters might be just the thing to convince Professor Summerlee how wrong he'd been to have her article killed. She'd have to set up a private double feature for him as soon as possible.

Blood spattering down from the balcony drew Miranda's attention. She glanced up to find Erich's head, attached to his neck by only a few hardy sinews, dangling over the railing. It hung there for a moment before a taloned hand drew it back into the mob of umbroods. Miranda didn't dodge the shower of crimson. Instead, she held one palm up, as if testing for rain, then broke into song and cheerfully set to work cleaning the ruined theater.

Before too long, the zombies were whistling the familiar show tune right along with her.



ESCÖBAR FALLS



STEWART VON ALLTIEN

It was already too late by the time she glanced at me. She didn't quite stare. A stare wouldn't cause me so much concern. No, she looked at me as though very surprised — with delight, fear or simple astonishment, I don't know — but then she tried to look away in a manner meant not to draw my attention to her. Of course, it did just the opposite. My schooling in people-watching helps me note such slightly conscious ploys to divert someone's attention from your attention to them.

Because I interrupted the steady hustle of her bustling along the crowded sidewalk, I felt as interested in her as she strangely was in me. I had just changed the course of the remainder of her life and perhaps more profoundly the lives of everyone she would ever encounter. That's why I felt interested in her. I could not divine why she would react so to me. I purposefully dressed and appeared in a very normal, unobtrusive manner. I should have blended into the crowd, not drawn her attention from that even flow of sameness.

In any event, the responsibility of such an encounter is enormous, and all the weight of that responsibility was upon me.

When she turned away from me to disguise her interest she stopped to face a store window where she pretended to inspect the contents of the display. I could see her pupil waver at the edge of her eye, though, as she sought to ascertain whether I realized I drew her attention and what my reaction was if I was aware. I suppose she saw with surprise that I stood unmoving in the midst of chaotic foot traffic without being bowled over by the press of the crowd, which I was unconsciously diverting around myself.

Damnable magic! Even when I try not use it, and it's a promise to myself that I will not, I unconsciously do to make the nature of reality surrounding me more secure. Magic puts the natural order out of order, and while my knowledge of magic tells me that the natural order is an immense fabrication and there's really nothing amazing about the seemingly impossible things I can do, there is no way to explain that to all the people around me. More specifically, to all the people who surround me. They are now a step behind for the remainder of the day and all because they took extra time to pass around me. Such a single step can become grossly exaggerated and make the likelihood of catastrophe ever greater. One step means missing a walk light at an intersection. Which means a missed train in the subway. And here they are mugged, raped, or killed when otherwise they would have made the subway ride home.

Does this sound silly? Overwrought? It's not. There are serious repercussions for even the smallest chance event, like an extra step to pass around someone standing still in your path, though to call them "chance" is an oversight, for that "chance" part is misunderstood and needs correcting. I've found that anything, absolutely everything, is one step removed from inevitable. And that "one step" is too often a chance event.

It's because my thinking was as involved as this that I was motionless on the sidewalk. The woman apparently realized that something was wrong with me and the wrong concerned her, so she made her move. It wasn't a sudden move, but was a calculated one. Turning from the display window, she wove through the flow of people toward a pay phone near the curb.

As she moved I did too, and I was sensible enough to push my way toward the storefronts and out of the press of the crowd that was buffeting and crushing me since the moment I stopped redirecting people around me. From a position of relative safety at the entrance to a high-priced electronics store, I watched the woman closely. I observed that

she was young, perhaps in her mid-twenties, and dressed very nicely. Her black slacks looked new and comfortable, and an attractive blue, black and white plaid vest partially covered her off-white blouse. It became a young professional's outfit with the small pager snapped to her belt.

She hurried a little too much at the last moment, though, or maybe it was because she lost sight of me and craned her neck around to locate me again, and the quarter her trembling fingers pulled from her small purse missed the coin slot and fell. It rattled once off the face of the phone and then disappeared.

I worried for just a second that I unconsciously used magic again to keep the phone call from being placed, because her failure to insert the coin is just the simple kind of "chance" or coincidental way that mages like myself could alter the flow of reality. My control is better than that—this was a "real" coincidence. Strange that it should fall in my favor. They never seem to.

Such events are dramatic temptations to me. It was obvious she wanted to make a call. A slight touch of magic, even a simple adjustment to true reality, that truth beyond where the woman operated, could have helped, but as I've said, I don't do that anymore. Besides, I was already the cause of too much disruption in her life this hot afternoon; I was not going to heap outright intervention atop my already chance encounter.

She was a little frantic now, though she calmed when she again saw me standing at the storefront. Our gazes briefly met and when hers quizzically softened a bit I became even more intrigued. I realized she must be intent on her need or interest in me to withstand my intense look. My expression, even in repose, has always been very stern and uncompromising, so I think I would normally have seemed very threatening to her, though I'm sure there's nothing about my posture or size that would intimidate anyone.

After she pulled herself together she turned to the phone again and hurriedly looked for the dropped quarter. It was no wonder she couldn't see it. The quarter was at the base of the pay-phone between the pole and the cracked concrete where it stood almost upright. She scanned the ground for a hint of reflection from the overhead sun, but caught none. So she looked around the phone itself — on the black lip that was the bottom of the open-faced black box enclosing the phone, and even in the coin return slot.

She tried the phone again in vain hope that the quarter had fallen into the slot and not out of it as she thought. That was one way I could fix things, but I didn't. She slammed the headset onto the jack when she heard no dial tone. She closed her eyes, sighed and gripped her fists into tight, frustrated wads, but then she took a deep breath to help regain her composure and slipped a now loose and seeking hand into her pocket for other change. She grimaced but pulled out the remaining coins anyway. I see a penny and a shiny nickel. So shiny I can see the year: 1986. I feel my mind wandering to that year, but I remain attentive to the present.

This jolt back to the present clears my thoughts and makes me wonder even more whom she's calling and why. Perhaps a man who resembles me has been haunting her dreams. Maybe she's a casting agent and I'm the perfect match for a part in the movie. Maybe she seeks her father who orphaned her at birth after her mother died and has mistaken me for him.

What is she putting into motion and how will it affect other people?

I could help her, but should I? Any number of innocuous seeming coincidences could save the moment. I could simply give the quarter to her, but that would be just as immoral as working magic. It's changing reality without using magic, but conscious decision is still what shapes the future. Is there really a difference?

I caught myself absently rubbing my long, tangled hair as I considered this. I pretend there is a difference. I must or I would never even be able to walk the streets. I must make myself a part of reality, but I no longer allow myself to bend it to my will. That's going too far.

Maybe it was best that she didn't make the call anyway. I couldn't accept the responsibility of disastrous results if her future went awry because she used the phone. After all, she was calling on my account and seeing this event curtailed probably suited me best in the long run, but it was her fate that fascinated me for the moment. I could see a number of possible futures unfold...

Perhaps if she lingered at the street-side pay phone a car would swerve out of traffic as she spoke and crush her between its steely fender and the brick storefronts behind her. As I watched I could see this happen. She reaches down for the quarter I conveniently cause to roll to her feet with a soft clink so she'll look down again at all. A squeal of tires alarms her and causes her head to jerk up quickly as she begins to stand. A scream escapes her throat as an emerald black sedan sways across the center line, cruises unimpeded through a gap in the two lanes of oncoming traffic, and hurtles directly toward her. The car rebounds slightly off the phone pole but mostly slips past to strike the woman full on the chest. She's suspended in the air, seemingly attached to the car hood like a grotesque ornament, and ruptures when her flailing body impacts the brick wall.

Or maybe a gas main will burst in the ground beneath the pay phone and the region around the phone, and certainly the phone itself, will become a conflagration of fiery stonework, combusting flesh and blazing metal. Am I to be accountable for delaying her here to be swept into that inferno?

Conceivably, gunmen could drive by at this moment. While she dallies making her damnable phone call, juvenile gang members could turn onto this main thoroughfare and make her a random target for their puerile projectile playing.

She would be dead because of me, and I will not be the cause of such an event again!

Despite all of this danger she negligently still wants to make her call. If she would just leave now then none of these things would happen to her. Doesn't she realize the danger she's in? I want to go warn her. To frighten her away. That too would be interfering, but what will she do now that she cannot call from the street?

Too many possibilities! Tragedy here is too probable. I need to escape her, but she's watching me intently. The foot traffic has died down a bit so we each have a better view of the other again. She still holds the handful of change. She's counting it to be sure, but I can see from here that there is not enough silver to make up the twenty-five cents even in smaller denominations.

She looks really heartbroken, and she seems to be on the verge of approaching me this very moment so I decide it's time to act. I can't stand it any longer. I could walk away, but I know she'll follow. I'm going to have to use magic to escape. It will be best for everyone. My disappearance after her intense interest will send ripples through her life for some time to come, but I fear for anyone who associates with me for too long.

I worry that as a mage who has run afoul of Paradox, reality has somehow marked me and made me a locus for events mundanes, people like her who are unaware of the magic around them, would regard as bizarre. In other words, long term association with me could only result in exaggerated tragedies much like how taking an extra step results in a subway mugging.

I concentrate for a moment to work magic. I need to disappear, but to do so literally means challenging the paradigm of reality that rules on this downtown street. So, I work harder and weave a more complicated effect that creates the same result. Through my Will I must intrude my knowledge of truer reality over the simple framework operating around me.

From the perspective of the victim of my magic, just the young woman in this case, I will appear to disappear a split-second from now. I have put the actual means of this occurring in the hands of reality. I wove my desire into the fabric of reality by spinning the invisible threads that connect all things, and especially at this moment those that connect the woman to me, and now wait for it to unfold in a manner consistent with the laws of this location. The problem is, I don't know exactly how my magic will effectuate—that's up to reality.

If I cared to personify reality I could do it much as humans have done to Mother Nature or the Garou have with their many spirits. I see it as an uncaring yet unmalevolent force. Reality does what it must to maintain itself when a mage such as myself enforces his will upon it. It doesn't concern itself with what comes afterward, just as mages such as myself have done for millennia.

The means reality chooses is inevitably innocuous, for it chooses the smoothest means to the end a mage insists upon, but it seems to me that there is always the chance of catastrophe. Fortunately, this time it effectuates smoothly.

She's still stepping toward me when the phone behind her rings. She pauses, but only for an instant before turning to answer it. I guess she wanted it too badly to pass up any chance to use it and reflex has taken over. Before she can turn around again, I'll be gone.

I'll have disappeared.



As I carefully hurry down the street, I think how odd it is to be the one followed and not vice versa. Odd because I do not have my own life now. I only live the lives of other people. Well, that and the permutations of their lives. I construct the paths of people's lives based on decisions they made or refused to make. Thanks to my intimate relationship with the temporal realities beyond this one, I have time enough for everyone.

The first few years following 1986 were different, though, because I became fixated with certain individuals. I am certain I once spent over a year following a garbage truck on its rounds. The immeasurable permutations of what could have happened in countless lives because of what people discarded were endlessly engrossing. I eventually got a hold of myself and nursed myself back to at least this state of health, such as it is.

I spoke of temptations earlier and this woman is becoming one such as I have been able to avoid for many years now. I wonder what more harm I have done to her life. Who was on the phone she answered?

I feel increasingly indebted to the woman. I worry so much about how I affect others that I forget they can affect me as well. However, I know better than to attempt to repay that debt. The chaos I cause would only increase. I am not part of a system that tends towards order.

My mind is running too fast now. If I don't compose myself soon then I will continue to make mistakes. Ahead I see a flashing neon display. It advertises a bar of some sort, but I require no further invitation. I enter.

I could, of course, simply create my own food with magic, but I don't consciously work magic anymore unless I feel absolutely pressed into it as just now on the street. It's wrong. Have I said this already?

My past has made me a firm believer of this. Experts say there were forty-five flaws that could have caused the incident that makes me question my every move, but I know it was my fault.

It paralyzes me still and it sent me spinning into Quiet, this state of insanity and confusion to which only a mage too long juggling the contradictory forces, laws and theories of the universe can succumb. Quiet can be escaped, though I've failed thus far. The truth of an insanity, though, like the new paradigm any person presumed insane by his peers concocts for himself, becomes undeniable. The new paradigm, the one in which I currently exist, where I speculate my action or inaction to be the root of any misery I see, became so real that I cannot now escape it. This is despite my knowledge that this world view is as foolish and untenable as the fragile one most humans accept only because it's what their five senses describe to them.

I try to rely mainly on those senses now myself. The bar is the typical sort I recall from a decade ago. Like everything else modern, though, it's sleeker, as if the design was actually a forethought, and not just a result of the owner filling a given space. Everything is in just the right place. There are a few wooden booths of the old sort, though the backs are not high enough to prevent viewing a neighbor ahead or behind you, but tables are mostly new. The chairs surrounding them will require replacement in a few years.

Most of the patrons cluster around the bar, but I pay little attention to them. I sit in a booth and throw open the menu. Perhaps the waitresses will ignore me as long as the menu is open. I need another moment to calm down and gather my thoughts.

My previous avocation was the alteration of this reality they cherish so highly. I altered it toward the ends and with all the careful thoughtfulness my past acquaintances among the Progenitors, the Convention of mages to which I belonged, have for decades, but when the tragedy occurred, when my awful oversight opened my eyes to the misery I have caused countless times, my Will fled me and with my Will so went my magic. My eyes also opened to the wrongs of the Technocracy, a larger group with which my Progenitors forms along with the other four groups—Iteration X, New World Order, Void Engineers and the Syndicate.

It's no wonder that Ascension, the quest to enlighten all humans to the nature of reality, continues to elude us all. We so passionately pursue this end that we have little care for the smaller picture, the reality from which we all descend. Certainly, there are mages who claim to watch this level of reality as well, but only I, I think, have found exactly how infinitesimal the picture truly is. To guard against degrading the good of the reality humanity has attained means more than avoiding vulgar magic,

or magic the effectuates in the full and disbelieving view of unenlightened mundanes. No, to guard against regression in the battle for Ascension means achieving a coincidental magical effect—one that becomes hidden in events that seem natural—but then guaranteeing the coincidental chain breaks. How to do that without working more magic baffles me.

This wouldn't be such a concern if the coincidental effect didn't spiral out of control to create events even grosser than the original. This, I expect, is why I succumbed to Quiet.

I imagine that a person so aware of his insanity should be able to awaken from it and return to a pattern of thought and action consistent with who he truly is and what he understands, but that's not the case. The severity of my error and the obvious nature of the events I should have altered so the tragedy did not occur continue to recycle through my thoughts.

Any more thoughts of self-reproach grind to a swift conclusion when the young woman from the pay phone suddenly walks into the establishment. She seems tired and thwarted, so I guess that she neither followed nor yet sees me.

I'm sure I would detect it if someone was using magic against me, so I dismiss that as possible explanation for the chance of the young woman entering here. I silently sit and watch as she goes to the bar counter and breathlessly asks for some change and the location of the pay phone. She must have been bustling around trying to locate me. The bartender drops four quarters in her hand, takes her bill, and points to the back of the building. I sit between that conversation and the back of the building.

A woman in the booth ahead of me sits looking in my direction as well. She's paused with a glass of water at her lips—I think my sudden coming to life startled her. I only watch her out of the corner of my eye, for I direct my attention squarely on the young woman at the bar counter, but the woman in the booth sets the glass down without taking a drink and part of my mind spins stories about her potential fate. Now she has less fluid in her body than if not for my interference. The results could be catastrophic. What if this is her last meal before while tonight flying to a tropical destination her plane goes down and she's stranded on a deserted island in the midst of nowhere? Would that drink she wanted translate into the few more drops of fluid in her body that would keep her alive or at least not brain damaged until rescuers found her? Ridiculous to consider, I know, yet I cannot slow the formulation of such thoughts.

I sit before a dead woman, but I maintain my attention on the young woman who seems to now be on my trail, for in her I am facing an unknown, a potentially lethal situation. She may be a Technomancer, a blind and artless pseudo-mage of the type I used to be who seeks to consolidate reality to only an unchanging state where change, and hence the ultimate goal of the mages, Ascension, becomes by definition an impossibility.

When I worked magic on her earlier I noted nothing about her threads that would make me believe she is a mage, but some of the most effective servants of the Technocracy disentangled themselves from the tapestry in many ways, which perhaps only validates my paranoid theory of her threat.

Maybe the Progenitors have finally solved the mystery of my disappearance from their labs years ago. I was able to cover my trail and intentions very well, but they still

work magic, or their perverted brand of it anyway, and as I do not that gives them a decided advantage over me. This woman could be a first contact sent to warn me of my impending apprehension.

Such enforcers are not uncommon among the Technocracy, especially the group known as the New World Order that has their so-called Men-in-Black, but the magical tactic of the group is what galls me the most. Though they have only begun to popularize it now, some years ago a mage in the ranks of the Technocracy even created the so-called Butterfly Effect to describe just what I encountered in 1986 for myself. The theory is a monstrous, and to my mind obvious, means of pinning down even this disastrous working of reality to their command.

Perhaps I should feel relieved that at least they are aware of it, but since the day I left the fold of Technocracy, I could see from the outside how they limit the dynamic potential of Earth by claiming their woefully inadequate cosmology as truth. This is at the expense of the wealth of ideologies available from hundreds of other mages who live in dozens of different paradigms. I can only feel ill at the thought of their methods.

An intuitive feeling of this young woman's connection to my past leaves me completely cold. Intuition is a powerful thing for mages. She's followed me this far so there is little need for continued subterfuge. She's probably come to punish me for my crime. My carelessness years ago put the Void Engineers' plans for the moon and the subsequent domination of the fey folk there in jeopardy. If there was any good in what happened then it was the temporary dismantling of what those Technomancers sell to the masses as the "space program."

I'll let her make her way toward me again. Her magic is working faultlessly, though I must say her act of surprise on the street earlier was a surprisingly low-tech ploy. If she's an enforcer then I would expect to see more technology, though she does have that beeper. On the other hand, she has successfully cornered me.

She turns and takes only one step toward the back of the bar before she sees me and pulls up short. She smiles and then continues to move in my direction. She hesitates as she nears me and I decide it's best to keep her as off-balance as possible. I spill the whole story.

"You too would wander insanelly, Miss, if you considered for even a moment the eventual results of everything you ever do. I fled the Convention when my eyes opened to the witless carnage I was producing. It's so simple in hindsight, but believe me, it's taken years to piece together since I felt my threads tugging at me that fateful January morning. So many options. Each event spawned so many new ones or slightly altered countless others, that it took years to follow all the leads and discover how my magic, and likewise the magic of many of my unknowing contemporaries, went amiss."

I kept the bombardment of explanation at full pace, "Pentex was going behind our backs by approaching Iteration X front organizations for a mechanical option to the biological solutions we presented. They did this despite our readiness to enter Replication Phase with delivery of the first clones within a few months. I learned of the meeting independently and had to act without consultation to stymie the proceedings."

She lost her composure even more as she lowered to sit on the bench opposite mine in the large wooden booth. I think she succeeded in sitting when it became reflex. She looked extremely perplexed. I pressed on, feeling safe to blurt this out in public because

I knew the beeper she wore must be a conversation filtration instrument, a high-tech, or magical if you will, device that would turn my words into ones more palatable for ears other than those of the speaker and anyone who wore a filter.

“It’s because of the means I used to disrupt the meeting that the explosion occurred at all. More important than my initial decision to act and how to act, though, was my fundamental disregard for the long-term consequences of my methods. As I mentioned, one change that I orchestrated resulted in exaggerated effects as more time passed. It’s much as how the delay of taking one step extra can result in a mugging or even death.

“The Pentex stooge had to run a gauntlet of office drones in order to gain access to the managers with any true connection to the mages of Iteration X mages. It’s perhaps likely that the Pentex man didn’t even realize what he would soon discover after news of his inquiries made it farther up the hierarchy of the company, but it would happen eventually. So it was here, early in the process, that I struck, for I knew it would be easier now than after an open dialogue between Pentex and the mages.

“I was prepared to fight reality to make my magic work, but like a responsible member of the Conventions of the Technocracy, I worked harder to attain a coincidental effect. I was successful. The effect actuated as a broken alarm clock. There was one drone who was the point man for the deal. He was the only one prepared for the meeting, so consequently it was his alarm that didn’t sound in the morning and he woke only when a co-worker phoned in desperation. Over the phone the drone gave some garbled instructions on how to attempt to delay and/or entertain the Pentex businessman. In the end the businessman became frustrated and stormed out of the office before the meeting even took place.

“It all sounds okay so far, right? At first I was proud of my work, but how ingenuous I was to think that any level of care practicing mages relied upon in working magic was enough! Frankly, I didn’t consider the repercussions of my magic—of what else might happen because I intruded on the normal course of events. Well, that tugging of the threads told me something had gone awry.

“It was this: the drone still tried to reach the office in time, but that necessitated a high-speed race not safe for the best drivers, let alone a panicked fool about to lose what would have been the deal of lifetime. Everyone died in the ensuing accident, including a NASA ground crew technician’s wife. From there it’s straightforward. He received a call about the accident at just the wrong time and so set into motion the event that caused my flight from our less-than-noble ranks.”

She barely managed a whisper, but muttered, “One extra step... death?”

She seemed completely confused. She tried again, “What...?” but trailed off into silence.

I realized then that I had made an incredible error. She was no Technomancer with a conversation filter.

She laughed, “My oh my, Doctor! To think I thought my father was exaggerating how strange you are! And a mind-reader on top of that! Surely you don’t know me, but here you are explaining, I suppose, why you left the lab under such odd circumstances.”

I could only sit dumbly. Fortunately she would think me simply insane, but goodness it felt good to finally express so much of my recent past to someone else. I evidently needed to share it badly. Despite my mistake, my debt to this woman is increasing.

She spoke again after a brief pause to collect herself. “I have so many questions to ask you, Doctor, but I admit first that I wonder what exactly you’re confessing to. Does it have something to do with why you disappeared from the lab? Was I correct in that regard, at least? Did that meeting have something to do with your research funding?” There was an excitement in her hazel eyes that I had never seen before. She was having fun! She seemed keenly and authentically interested in what I had to say. She pressed her elbows onto the table and leaned forward conspiratorially.

In contrast, I was slouching in the booth. The innocence of her curiosity set me at ease, though, and I sat up straighter to make myself more presentable. I could see she wanted me to continue, but I recalled something else. I could only croak it, “Doctor?”

She laughed. “Yes! I can’t believe it’s really you after all my father’s said, but I’m sure it is or I’m making a bigger fool of myself than you are.” Her smile after that remark was too friendly, too genuine to allow me to take offense.

She continued, “You are Dr. Hammelstein, right?”

The juxtaposition between my awful past and this unexpectedly cozy present made me uncomfortable. As kind and apparently non-threatening as the young woman was, I couldn’t keep my mind off 1986.

“Challenger exploded,” I said flatly.

Her smile washed away. “What?”

I recited the next words like litany, so engraved were they in my mind from countless recitations to myself. She didn’t interrupt. “The accident was on January 19th, the day parts cannibalized from the Space Shuttle Columbia, shuttle mission 61-C, arrived at the Kennedy shuttle landing facility. Technicians, among whom the poor husband was one, were just setting to work, unfortunately, that’s when the call from the hospital came in. Moments sooner and the technician wouldn’t yet be installing the external hatch handle, but chance saw fit to make things otherwise.

“In his hurry to leave, the technician applied the last of three external hatch fasteners without care and so stripped the threads. This handle allows access to the pressured cabin wherein the seven deathly-fated astronauts, or six plus one teacher, would twice recline later that month.

“Because the fastener was stripped, a delay resulted for the launch on January 27th when the external handle did come loose easily after all seven passengers were in place inside the shuttle. This process took several hours instead of the split-moment it should because of the stripped third fastener. And because of the several hour delay, the launch window elapsed and the launch was re-scheduled for the next day.

“When the Space Shuttle Challenger launched as shuttle mission 51-L the next day, January 28, 1986, it exploded 73 seconds into flight. The entire crew, Christa McAuliffe, Greg Jarvis, Ron McNair, Ellison Onizuka, Judy Resnik, Dick Scobee and Mike Smith, vaporized.”

Her smile was still missing and she seemed concerned, but she had the advantage of not believing what I told her was the truth. “I guess you weren’t talking about leaving the lab.”

I said, “No.” Then, “I suspect you are Harry Kimble’s daughter.”

The smile was back. “That’s right! You’re still in that garbled brain after all, Doctor.”

“That’s whom you were calling on the street?”

“Two for two. He’s talked incessantly about you my entire life, so I knew it had to be you when I saw that white... well it’s gray now, huh?...strip of hair over your left brow. Father always said you rubbed your hair along that stripe and that you’d worn the color right out, so it turned white. He also says you must be the most brilliant scientist who ever lived. I believe it now. You’re as mad as any good scientist should be.”

It’s nice to remember Harry, but her infectious smile is warming me the most; however, I had cold truth to reveal yet. I knew she would get it out of me because I wanted to tell her. She is being so friendly and understanding, though not comprehending, which is another advantage.

Conveniently, she gave me the opening to continue, “So you think you caused the Challenger explosion because you messed up some guy’s office appointment? I didn’t follow the muddled details, but that’s the gist of what I remember.”

“Essentially, yes. Because of the stripped threads, the launch slipped to the next day when it was too cold for a safe launch. The cold caused a seal to crack and that crack became an explosion. The seal—”

“Thanks, but spare the technical details,” she interrupted. “I think you’d lose me again. I really just want to ask you some questions. Father has been doing his best to duplicate the remarkable work you did when you worked in the lab next to him back in the seventies. I need to call him so I can find out what to ask. Or, maybe—”

“I won’t speak with him myself, I’m afraid. However, I admit that speaking to you has been incredibly unburdening for me.”

“I can tell. Your expression has gone from frightened to melancholy to now when you actually have a bit of grin. It’s a scary grin, though, because it makes you look as crazy as I think you are. It’s too bad that you won’t talk to Father.”

“Sorry.”

She spoke hesitatingly, as if saying it with much authority would mean she believes what I told her, “Well, you left for good reasons, I guess. Father knew something happened suddenly because you left all your journals and notebooks. When the company was cleaning your space after you’d been missing for a while, he took the journals. I don’t remember much about them, but I do remember something about test-tube babies. You had a complete procedure you’d written sometime in the sixties, but no one else completed the procedure until like 1978 or something. He built a lab in the basement of the house where I think he has worked independently to duplicate your work. He’s not been successful, and I think that upsets him because he always says your experiments seem perfectly designed.”

That’s because he doesn’t have an Avatar, the “soul” that would make him a mage, and I do, but I couldn’t tell her that. Then I spoke confidently, fondly remembering those early days before my formal induction into the ranks of the Progenitors and feeling pride for the first time in years in the fact that I was still a mage even though I made a terrible mistake, “I can make many unbelievable things happen.” At least I learned from that mistake.

Her smile showed pretty teeth. “Yeah? Show me something.”

I knew I had to start slowly, so I scanned around the bar looking for something innoc-

uous to affect. I found a suitable foil on the wall behind the bar counter where sturdy metal brackets held a large color television. The incessant babble of sports-casters described the action of a soccer game that was in progress. The people in the bar looked reasonably interested, and I noted this must be because the United States was playing at the moment.

With new found confidence I said, "I guarantee that the U.S. team will score a goal within the next minute."

She was incredulous, "Score first in a game against Columbia? I doubt it. And what can you do from here anyway?"

"You asked for an example..." I trailed off as I concentrated on my magic. I refused to remain paralyzed any longer. Besides, the U.S. team was in scoring position. What harm could possibly come of an American scoring a goal right now?

"Just wait," I suggested.

The United States was pressing an attack. I could feel my magic lance out from my body, seeking shape within an appropriate form. It would not do for the ball to suddenly fly out of control, swirl through several loops and go bouncing of its own accord into the goal. If I was to work magic again then I must be under control.

Suddenly there was an opening and an American player passed from the left across the front of the goal. The goalie was reacting in good time, though, to cover the best angle any attacking player would have, but I felt my magic suddenly crystallize so I knew a player would instantly make a spectacular shot.

That's not quite what happened. A Colombian defender shot out a leg to intercept the cross, but his timing was off, or rather my magic made it be off. Miss Kimble fell out of her seat in astonishment when Escobar scored that own-goal.

Author's Postscript, July 2, 2000, six years after this story was first written:

<http://sports.yahoo.com/soccer/world/news/cnnsi/20000701/escobar039smemo.html>



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